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VALUE REALISM AND THE INTERNALISM/EXTERNALISM
DEBATE

I. INTRODUCTION

In much recent literature, the debate over Bernard Williams' influential account of "internalism" about reasons has reached an apparent stalemate. Williams defends a well-known internalist account of reasons where, in order for something to be a true reason for action, it must be related to what Williams terms the agent's "subjective motivational set" or *S*, thus making reasons in some sense necessarily relative to each individual agent's psychological make-up. Many important critics of Williams' views, however, raise at least two standard objections: first, that internalism leads to a radical agent-relativity about reasons, thereby impugning the alleged normativity of practical judgments; and second, that internalism unjustifiably excludes *a priori* what may be described as a more "realist" viewpoint according to which reasons for action can exist totally independent of any particular agent's contingent motivations.¹ A basic worry arises here: Does this internalist/externalist debate amount to a mere terminological dispute? In general, it appears that internalists simply choose to define "reasons" in such a way that they must be necessarily associated with what an agent has motivation to do, whereas externalists instead define "reasons" as referring to certain alleged realist truths about values that may exist entirely apart from an agent's motivations.

In this paper, I propose a new framework for the general debate. My aim is to defend a novel account of internalism that at least allows for the possibility of a more "realist" conception of reasons – thus avoiding simply begging the question (as Williams himself seems to do) against many recent externalist thinkers like Hampton, Scanlon, McDowell, and Parfit – while still somehow retaining a deep connection between reasons to act and an agent's motivations. What is crucial to observe here is that Williams' internalism



Philosophical Studies 117: 231–258, 2004.

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relies upon two logically independent premises: on the one hand, a negative “skeptical” thesis denying we have any reason to believe that values – and the reasons associated with them – exist in any realist way independent of individual agents; and on the other hand, a positive “subjectivist” thesis controversially maintaining that all reasons for action are instead in some sense necessarily related to each particular agent’s subjective motivations.²

Must internalists affirm *both* these premises? I believe one can and in fact should reject Williams’ widely-disputed “subjectivist” thesis. Rather, by endorsing only Williams’ former premise, we are able to formulate a more modest “skeptical” version of internalism which, unlike Williams’ explicitly “subjectivist internalism”, at least *allows for* the externalist view that values exist in a realist way totally independent of us. We suspend judgment, however, about whether any such values do exist – where significantly, as will be discussed below, an individual agent’s motivations somehow play a constitutive role in terms of assessing what values she even has reason to affirm.

Such so-called “skeptical internalism” has several advantages over Williams’ own view. As we will see, it not only helps us to bypass the current terminological deadlock, but also allows us to better focus upon what may be the most crucial difference between internalism and externalism, which rests not so much in how each camp chooses to define *what a reason is*, but rather in how they understand *the nature of rational disagreement itself*. This specific worry constitutes perhaps the main crux of the entire internalist/externalist debate, and I argue that, in the end, skeptical internalism provides a much more satisfying analysis of the underlying ethical import of such rational disagreement than either of its two main rivals, externalism or Williams’ own subjectivist account of internalism.

This present essay has three main parts. First, in §§II–III, I discuss Williams’ internalism and several important objections to it. Second, in §IV, I sketch out some of the main differences between skeptical internalism and Williams’ subjectivist formulation of internalism, attempting to show why the former is much preferable to Williams’ own views when dealing with externalist criticisms. Third, in §§V–VI, I consider how skeptical internalism

bears specifically upon how to understand the true nature of our rational disagreements – and how best *not* to resolve them.

II. WILLIAMS' INTERNALISM

In several important articles, Bernard Williams outlines his influential internalist account of reasons.³ According to Williams, we can understand all reasons to Φ (where " Φ " here denotes some action verb) as subject to two very different interpretations. On an internalist view, for something to count as a genuine reason to Φ for some agent A, A must have "... some motive which will be served or furthered by his Φ -ing, and if this turns out not to be so, the sentence is false" (IER, p. 101). That is, reasons to act must be related to a particular agent's "subjective motivational set" or S, which importantly, for Williams, consists not just of mere brute desires such as thirst or hunger, but a wide range of possible elements including "... dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent" (IER, p. 105).

On an externalist view, however, what an agent has a genuine reason to do need not be related at all to her specific motivations. Rather, reasons to Φ may hold as valid for an agent regardless of whether or not she presently is, or even ever will be, motivated to Φ . Williams illustrates this externalist view by his example of Owen Wingrave. Imagine a person, Owen Wingrave, who belongs to a family that takes great pride in its long history of distinguished military service. His family members insist that Owen has a reason to join the army as well, even though Owen himself in fact despises everything that military life stands for. Can we claim that a reason may truly exist for Owen to join the military, despite the fact that he lacks any motivation whatsoever to do so? The externalist answers "yes". As Williams emphasizes, "The whole point of external reasons statements is that they can be true independently of the agent's motivations" (IER, p. 107). This same premise is spelled out further in an explicitly moral context where Williams discusses the case of a husband who badly mistreats his wife. Williams observes:

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 that the external theorist wants me to say, that the man *has a reason* to be nicer. (IROB, p. 39, emphasis added)

Regardless of whether that husband lacks all motivation to treat his wife well, externalism maintains that a reason – presumably a moral one here – nevertheless exists for him to do so. The husband just fails to recognize it.

Williams denies the reality of all such reasons. That is, he rejects the idea that a reason totally independent of an agent's S can exist and somehow normatively override an agent's own motivational set. However, Williams does still allow for rational appraisal of an agent's motivations. A reason is false for the agent, even if based upon her S, if she cannot arrive at it *via* what Williams terms a "sound deliberative route". Although much overlooked, Williams in fact identifies *two* separate normative constraints upon reasons for action here, a distinction that will play a crucial role later on when analyzing different criticisms of Williams' view. For Williams, we must avoid both (a) "procedural error", where certain procedures of practical reasoning that we engage in are, in some sense, invalid ones, and (b) "factual error", where we base our reasons upon a false belief.

First, an alleged reason to act might be unsound due to the faulty exercise of an agent's "rational deliberative processes". In an advance over what Williams identifies as a "sub-Humean model", practical reasoning is *not* just limited to merely logical means-end rationality, but covers an intentionally wide spectrum of possibilities. As Williams insists, "Practical reasoning is a heuristic process and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion" (IER, p. 110). Procedural errors in this sense include not just making an invalid inference when planning a course of action, but presumably also such defects as lack of sufficient imagination, or else neglect of relevant options, in decision-making procedures; failure to recognize proper transitivity relationships among one's ordering of values; a lack of full coherence among all one's values; and so forth.⁴

Second, an alleged reason to act might be unsound because we are mistaken about the basic facts of a given situation. Consider Williams' well-known gin/petrol example. I have a strong desire for a gin and tonic, and I think I have reason to mix this liquid with tonic in order to make myself a drink. I drink, but the substance is petrol, not gin. Does any genuine reason exist for me to drink in this case? No procedural errors seem to be present. For instance, I apparently do not make any faulty inferences about what I should do. Given that I have a desire to drink gin and tonic, as well as the (mistaken) belief that I am actually mixing gin with tonic, it follows that I ought to drink.

However, while my conclusion may be logically valid, my reason for action is still unsound insofar as it rests upon a false premise. Thus, Williams concludes that I indeed have no reason to drink in this hypothetical situation, stating:

A member of S, D, will not give a reason for Φ -ing if either the existence of D is dependent on false belief, or A's belief in the relevance of Φ -ing to the satisfaction of D is false. (IER, p. 103)

That is, my belief that this substance is gin may serve as an *explanation* for why I actually do drink the petrol. But for Williams, it cannot be a true reason for action, since, due to factual error, it is not related to what in an explicitly *rational* or *normative* sense, I have genuine reason to do (IER, pp. 102-103).

III. CRITICISMS OF WILLIAMS' INTERNALISM

We can classify Williams' main critics into at least two different camps, where, in an interesting way, each can be respectively viewed as attacking as inadequate one or other of Williams' two "normative constraints" upon internal reasons mentioned above. I want to discuss first, alternative "internalist" theories like those defended by Thomas Nagel and Christine Korsgaard, and second, explicitly "externalist" criticisms of Williams advanced in particular by John McDowell, T.M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit.

A. We can view positions like those defended by Thomas Nagel and Christine Korsgaard as mainly opposed to (a), that is, to Williams'

account of the “rational deliberative process”.⁵ Williams’ account of practical reason is an avowedly formal and minimalistic one. Even though, as noted earlier, Williams does not restrict practical reason to merely logical means-ends rationality, he still nevertheless remains fundamentally skeptical about whether practical reasoning by itself can entail any specifically *moral* concerns.

We can read Nagel and Korsgaard as a critique of Williams’ skepticism about the underlying moral dimension of practical reason. For Nagel, an agent suffers from a kind of radical “solipsism” if she does not adopt a point of view according to which she regards herself in an impartial way as just “one person among others” – a moral conception that she finds somehow “inescapable”.⁶ Similarly, for Korsgaard, even the moral egoist must recognize, on pain of rational inconsistency, that by valuing his own “humanity” (including the particular ends he undertakes) as important, he thus has reason to recognize the “humanity” of other persons as equally valuable.⁷ Like Williams, both Nagel and Korsgaard endorse the basic internalist thesis that all true reasons for action must be, in some sense, related to an agent’s motivational set.⁸ However, they defend an explicitly more “substantive” account of practical reason: one yielding specific moral content. That is, Nagel and Korsgaard both contend, *contra* Williams, that moral concerns are somehow either “built into”, or necessarily “result from,” any fully consistent and proper employment of practical reasoning in relation to our S. Williams’ reply to this strategy is a straightforward one. As he writes in IROB,

Somebody may say that every rational deliberator is committed to constraints of morality as much as to the requirements of truth or sound reasoning. But if this is so, then the constraints of morality are part of everybody’s S, and every correct moral reason will be an internal reason. But *there has to be an argument for that conclusion*. Someone who claims that the constraints of rationality are themselves built into the notion of what it is to be a rational deliberator cannot get that conclusion for nothing. (p. 37, emphasis added)

In this paper, I want to set aside this first set of objections, which is arguably best construed more as a “family dispute” about how far to extend Williams’ internalist account of practical reasoning – that is, whether or not it should entail specifically moral reasons – than as an externalist criticism of it.⁹

B. Second, I think it is best to regard several recent criticisms offered by John McDowell, T.M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit as instead opposed to (b), that is, Williams' account of what kinds of "facts" we can even be mistaken *about*. As we have seen, Williams asserts that an alleged reason to act is unsound if based upon a false belief with respect to what we might call only the *theoretical truths* of a given situation – that is, facts about the physical states of affairs associated with a specific course of action. Thus, Williams allows that we might have false beliefs about the theoretical truth, say, that there is petrol in a bottle, rather than gin. But can't we also have a mistaken belief about what we might call the *practical truths* of a given situation? Underlying the basic externalist challenge seems to be the "realist" endorsement of a set of "practical truths" that provide us with genuine reasons to act – whose existence does not depend upon any specific individual *agent*, any more so than the "theoretical truth" that there is petrol in a bottle depends upon any specific individual *knower*.

In his article "Might There Be External Reasons?", McDowell argues for the possibility that we might come to acquire a new motivation to act in a non-rational way, like conversion or moral habituation, where we concede that the reasons associated with this newly-acquired motivation are ones we recognize we should have "had all along" (MER, p. 74), and thus, in the relevant sense, external. McDowell elaborates his account of values along broadly Aristotelian lines, where what we have reason to do rests upon what we would be motivated to do, granted, say, we receive a good moral education like that of an Aristotelian *phronimos*. For McDowell, conceiving of values in this way avoids two main errors: (a) a "reductionistic" psychologism (which McDowell accuses Williams of holding), that is, the view that all standards of value are just "fixed by the agent's motivations as they stand" such that there is no possibility for "transcendence of the mere facts of individual psychology" (MER, p. 77); and (b) a dubious metaphysics, in which "values or obligations are set over against our subjectivity, *as independent of it as the shapes and sizes of things*" (MER, p. 73, emphasis added). That is, the values of somebody like a *phronimos* represent a kind of universal practical truth, a norm that the agent would admit she should have always been in conformity with, and which she comes

to acquire in a quite ordinary non-metaphysical way: namely, a good moral upbringing.

In the appendix to *What We Owe to Each Other* entitled “Williams on Internal and External Reasons”, Scanlon likewise contends that reasons should be regarded as independent of any individual agent’s S. In particular, Scanlon focuses upon potential difficulties that arise for internalism because of Williams’ admittance of “dispositions of evaluation” within an agent’s S: that is, “. . . dispositions (perhaps as yet unnoticed) to respond to various experiences, exercises of imagination, and processes of analytical reflection” (WIER, p. 369). As Scanlon explains, such dispositions are:

. . . not just tendencies to feel approval or disapproval but, at least, tendencies to think that approval or disapproval is *merited* or *in order* because of certain features of the objects evaluated. (WIER, p. 367)

Scanlon asks us to imagine a scenario in which two people are deciding upon a particular way of life, say, one that values “the ideal of personal honor”. Suppose they have different reactions – Y is moved by the ideal, but Z is not. Does it follow that Z has no genuine reasons at all with respect to this ideal? Scanlon writes:

If the conception of honor that I favor leaves you cold, you may not have reason to adopt it. But if it is a worthwhile conception then you do have reason not to scorn it and reason not to mock those who take it seriously. If you fail to see that you have such reasons, and would still fail to see this even after the most complete process of imaginative reflection you could manage, this indicates a kind of deficiency on your part – moral narrow-mindedness, we might call it. By contrast, a comparable failure to be sufficiently moved by this ideal to adopt it indicates no such deficiency – just normal subjective variation. (WIER, p. 370)

It is important to observe here that for Scanlon, Z is fully entitled *not* to be moved by such an ideal. This is just to acknowledge, as Scanlon puts it, “normal subjective variation” between different agent’s preferences.

Nevertheless, insofar as that same agent is evaluatively disposed to take a very narrow-minded attitude towards such an ideal, we may regard him as having a reason to react in a better way. We might put the point by saying that Z’s “dispositions of evaluation” are somehow “defective” in this case, despite the fact that, “because of his deficiencies, he cannot see this” (WIER, p. 371). And what if

this same agent “. . . fails and *would continue to fail* to see anything to be said” for this ideal? (WIER, p. 371, emphasis added). *Contra* Williams, Scanlon does not think this necessarily means Z can have no reason to behave differently. Rather, it could just entail that Z’s “dispositions of evaluation” are fundamentally deficient ones.

Implicit in Scanlon’s assertion that an individual agent’s dispositions of evaluation could be inherently *defective* is the idea that there exist *non-defective dispositions*, presumably owned by people who react in a less narrow-minded way in such cases – people whose “normal” (as opposed to “defective”) reactions constitute a norm that other agents like Z should conform to, akin to McDowell’s idea of a *phronimos*. That is, for both McDowell and Scanlon, there appear to exist normative facts related to a type of “ideal agent”, which presupposes belief in an objective normative standard of human nature in general to which *all* persons – even those who are in some sense “defective” or have not yet received a “good moral upbringing” – ought to conform.¹⁰

Parfit approaches the overall debate, however, in a quite different manner. He draws a fundamental contrast between two different types of reasons: normative and motivating reasons. Normative reasons depend upon the “substantive” matter of getting all the relevant facts correct, regardless of whether we are ever motivated to act in accord with them. Motivating reasons are instead related to the merely “procedural” matter of not violating any epistemic duties, something that can be realized even if we are, in the end, ultimately mistaken about what we believe. For Parfit, only normative reasons offer a valid answer to the question: “What do we have most reason to want, and do?” (RM, p. 99).

And what type of “facts” ground such normative reasons? Parfit defends what he calls a “non-reductive normative realism” about values. That is, Parfit maintains that “normative facts” exist, in an externalist sense, entirely independent of our motivations, and that they cannot be reduced to any non-normative facts about, say, what we might happen to desire (RM, p. 109). As Parfit later declares, normative externalism defends the view that:

Some acts really are worth achieving. There are facts about these aims which give us reasons to want to achieve them. (RM, p. 129)

It is instructive to note here that although Parfit himself often speaks of endorsing a kind of “substantive rationality”, his overall strategy is *not*, like Nagel or Korsgaard, to provide an argument proving why practical reason by itself must necessarily entail moral concerns. Rather, normative facts about what we have to reason to value (including moral ones) are somehow just features “built into” the world we live in. As Parfit explains:

... the most important reasons are not merely, or mainly, reasons for acting. They are also reasons for having the desires on which we act. These are reasons to want *some thing*, for its own sake, which *are provided by facts about this thing*. Such reasons we call *value-based*. (RM, p. 128, former emphasis added)

In the end, Parfit defends the view that there simply exist “irreducibly normative properties or truths” dictating what we should value, based upon non-reductive “normative facts” inherent in the states of affairs themselves (RM, p. 129).¹¹

Clearly the most obvious and striking difference between the respective externalist strategies defended by McDowell and Scanlon, in contrast to Parfit, rests in their underlying metaphysical systems. Both McDowell and Scanlon, I have argued, affirm a more mundane metaphysical view – namely, the existence of a class of practical truths that depend upon a normative conception of what our human nature ought to be like, as represented by a kind of Aristotelian *phronimos* or by an ordinary (that is, a non-defective) agent’s S. In other words, they both subscribe to the idea that there could exist a *non-relativistic* or *universal* S for human beings in general to which each particular agent’s S should conform – where, if we fail to do so, we can be regarded, in an externalist sense, as simply defective or mistaken.¹²

What Parfit instead endorses is the idea that normative facts exist somehow altogether independent of *all* human motivations. Such normative facts about what we ought to value are simply inherent in particular things themselves, where they form an admittedly special class of truths. As Parfit states:

Normative concepts form a fundamental category – like, say, temporal or logical concepts. We should not expect to explain time, or logic, in non-temporal or non-logical terms. Similarly, normative truths are of a distinctive kind, which we should not expect to be like ordinary empirical truths. Nor should we expect our

knowledge of such truths, if we have any, to be like our knowledge of the world around us. (RM, p. 121)

It seems McDowell would most likely object here that Parfit's externalist critique rests upon a false dichotomy, embracing either (1) a relativistic idea of reasons like Williams' internalism or else (2) a highly implausible stark realism about values where, to repeat McDowell's formulation, "values are set over against our subjectivity, as independent of it as the shapes and sizes of things" (MER, p. 73). As McDowell concludes his discussion:

We do not need to choose between conceiving practical reason psychologistically and conceiving it as an autonomous source of motivational energy over and above the 'passions'. This should begin to suggest a proper location of practical reason which can accommodate the surely indubitable relevance of human psychology to what human beings have reason to do: the right way to think about this topic belongs between the individualistic psychologism of the internal reasons approach and the apsychologism, so to speak, of the only alternative that Williams' argumentative structure allows. (MER, p. 82)

For Parfit, however, normative and motivating reasons can exist entirely separate of one another, charges of "apsychologism" notwithstanding. Normative reasons are "provided by facts about the thing" that we are valuing, regardless of whether or not such reasons *ever* move us to act upon them (RM, p. 128).

In the end, Parfit fully admits that believing in such brute normative facts may seem to espouse what McDowell calls a "weird metaphysic" (MER, p. 73). Parfit writes: "Such alleged normative truths may seem to be metaphysically mysterious, or inconsistent with a scientific world view" (RM, p. 129). Nevertheless, he remains unmoved by such objections, presumably accepting this as just the way "things really are".

IV. A "SKEPTICAL" ACCOUNT OF INTERNALISM

Williams' internalism defends the view that any reasons for action must be related to each individual agent's particular S. Common to all the externalist criticisms of Williams' view we have discussed thus far is the charge that internalists overlook the possibility that certain "practical truths" about what we have reason to value

may exist totally independent of any individual agent's S. What is important to stress here is that, in an interesting way, both sides appear to simply beg the question.¹³ In IER, Williams flatly asserts:

Can we define a notion of rationality where the action rational for A is in no way relative to A's existing motivations? No. (p. 112)

His externalist critics insist, on the other hand, that we *can* define "reasons" so – as related either (a) to a sort of non-relativistic or universal S that all agents ought to have (McDowell, Scanlon) or else (b) to normative facts just inherent in the particular things we value (Parfit). It is tempting to see this overall internalist/externalist debate as reducing to a mere terminological quibble over how exactly to define what a "reason" is.¹⁴

I think, however, we should resist this temptation. Williams' claim that "... external reasons statements, when definitely isolated as such, are false, or incoherent, or really something else misleadingly expressed" (IER, p. 111) is in fact amenable to two very different interpretations. On what I call Williams' own "subjectivist internalism":

Subjectivist Internalism: An agent has a reason to Φ only insofar as there exists a sound deliberative route from her subjective motivational set to Φ -ing, and since everybody (as a matter of mere empirical fact) presumably has a different set of motivations, each agent respectively has a different overall set of reasons for action relative to her or his S. In principle, the only true reasons possible are those that are somehow related to a particular agent's existing S.

Claims about external reasons are necessarily false insofar they entail an implausible psychological account about how an agent can be ever moved to act upon them.

As Williams insists, what underlies all external reasons statements is the basic belief that "if the agent rationally deliberated, then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to Φ " (IER, p. 109). But, if this is true, then, as Williams controversially argues:

... there does indeed seem great force in Hume's basic point, and it is very plausible to suppose that all external reasons statements are false. For, *ex hypothesi*, there is no motivation for the agent to deliberate *from*, to reach this new motivation. (IER, p. 109)

Williams' argument for the falsity of external reasons statements here depends upon explicit psychological criteria: that, for external reasons to be true, they must somehow be able to move an agent to Φ *via* pure rational reflection alone upon such alleged reasons. And since external reasons can presumably never thus motivate us, they turn out to be all false.

But why must we define reasons as necessarily related to each individual agent's psychology in the first place? Parfit's stark value realism seems to be a legitimate option, underscoring the fact that Williams' internalism unjustifiably disqualifies from the outset the very possibility that reasons may exist totally independent of agents' S's. And McDowell and Scanlon, who both, *contra* Parfit, still retain a genuine connection between normative reasons and our basic human psychology, nonetheless reject Williams' additional subjectivist premise that reasons must always be relativized to each particular agent's S.

Understood in a "skeptical" way, however, internalism need not presume *any* such controversial subjectivist constraints upon reasons. On what I call "skeptical internalism":

Skeptical Internalism: Reasons to Φ need not in principle be ultimately related to what each agent has a subjective motivation to do. That is, it is possible that they could refer, in a realist way, to a class of "normative facts" that provide reasons for action (equally so for all agents who find themselves in relevantly similar circumstances). But we only choose to affirm the reality of those reasons to Φ that we recognize either (a) *via* reasoning alone or (b) *via* responses that bear some relationship to our S – i.e., that move us somehow – remaining fundamentally skeptical about all other reason-claims.

Claims about external reasons are not necessarily false. Rather, we suspend judgment about their truth or falsity insofar as we do not recognize any legitimate grounds which rationally oblige us to affirm that such alleged reasons do in fact exist.

Unlike Williams' subjectivist view, a skeptical account of internalism does not restrict by fiat the class of reasons only to those related to that particular agent's motivations. For skeptical internalism, we permit that external reasons as construed in a "realist" way by thinkers like McDowell, Scanlon, and Parfit may in principle exist. We suspend judgment about whether any actually do, however, only choosing to endorse those values that we somehow come to see *via* either (a) pure reasoning alone or (b) a kind of

Aristotelian “moral perception” based upon our particular motivational responses to certain values, remaining highly skeptical of alleged “practical truths” that do not move us in any way whatsoever.

This skeptical account of internalism has at least three essential merits. First, it establishes genuine common ground for the overall debate. We are no longer disputing here primarily over the mere terminological issue of how exactly to define what a “reason” is, where reasons are just asserted (in a typically question-begging fashion) to be either necessarily related to – or else to be possibly independent of – a particular agent’s S. Rather, skeptical internalism takes up the externalist challenge head-on, by denying that we have any reasons to think that “value realism”, as affirmed by externalists, is true. Put differently, skeptical internalism arguably shifts the nature of the debate from much more of a *conceptual issue* – whether or not reasons must by definition be related to each particular agent’s S – to an explicitly *metaphysical worry* – that is, whether or not, as externalists want to insist, there exist any legitimate grounds to believe in reasons for action based upon certain alleged “practical truths” that stand entirely independent of each individual agent’s S.

Second, skeptical internalism allows us to better understand what actually takes place when we rationally disagree with one another over values. On Williams’ subjectivist account of internalism, disagreement ultimately reduces to the brute empirical fact that each agent has a different psychology and, thus, fundamentally different reasons for action relative to their specific S’s. But it is hard to see how this view avoids traditional worries about subjectivism in ethics: namely, that moral disagreement reduces to a matter of mere preference. Typically, we assume that if we differ about whether, say, we think chocolate ice cream is good – I like chocolate ice cream, and you do not – this is an entirely permissible difference of opinion. We are not even in fact truly disagreeing with each other here, but just expressing our respective desires. In Scanlon’s terminology, it amounts to an ordinary case of “normal subjective variation”. But if we disagree about how one should treat their spouse – I treat my spouse well, and you do not – we typically do *not* permit this difference.

Put differently, in many disputes about taste, most of us tend to agree that there exists no ultimate “truth of the matter” about whether, say, you should prefer chocolate to vanilla. But for moral disputes, the majority of us want to insist (and a skeptical account indeed allows for the possibility that) there really *does* exist a “truth of the matter” – a universal one binding upon all rational agents – about whether, say, you ought to treat your spouse well, with one party affirming, and the other party denying this claim.¹⁵ For Williams, however, no such truths can even exist – at least not in any universal sense – that we are commonly disagreeing about, if it turns out that each respective agent has a genuinely different S.¹⁶

Third, and lastly, this skeptical account is in fact compatible with Williams’ broader account of values. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams defends the well-known view that there exists a sharp asymmetry between theoretical and practical reason, for ethical theories do not entail the kind of necessary convergence that scientific theories do.¹⁷ This leads Williams to embrace a relativism about values between *cultures*, where values are based, in a subjectivist way, upon “the practices and sentiments” of the specific cultures that we inhabit (ELP, p. 160). Similarly, his internalist account of reasons defends a parallel kind of subjectivistic relativism – now between *agents*. As Williams writes in his reply to McDowell: “the relativity of reasons to [an] agent’s S . . . is the mark of the internalist view” (R, p. 193).

Underlying Williams’ relativistic views in ELP, however, is an obviously skeptical hypothesis – namely, that unlike theoretical truths about the world, no such practical truths about values in fact exist that could necessitate convergence. And it seems likely that a similar skepticism about the reality of independent normative facts also lurks behind his internalist agent-relativity about reasons. Indeed, in his article “The Truth in Relativism,” Williams appears to suggest not only that relativism in general is *consistent* with skepticism, but in fact *requires* it. As Williams writes there:

These considerations, if pursued, would lead us to the subject of realism. One necessary (but not sufficient) condition of there being the kind of truth I have tried to explain in relativism as applied to ethics, is that ethical realism is false
 . . .¹⁸

This blatant repudiation of realism, however, entails that Williams' fundamental dispute with externalism is *not* just over mere definitions, but rather one of deep metaphysical import.¹⁹

V. A CHALLENGE TO SKEPTICAL INTERNALISM

It is important to note that Williams himself admittedly does not formulate his internalist view as "skeptical", but rather as blatantly "anti-realist" – that realism about values, ethical or otherwise, is just *false*. But obviously, for the same reason that we rejected Williams' "subjectivism", we ought likewise to resist his explicit "anti-realist" premises. Both views equally beg the question at the outset against Williams' externalist opponents.

In this penultimate section, I want to defend "skepticism" about external reasons understood in a more traditional sense. Our so-called "skeptical internalist" does not dogmatically assert that alleged normative facts do not exist. Instead, she simply suspends judgment on such matters, insisting that externalists demonstrate why she should regard their claims about reasons as superior to her own. Understanding the challenge this way allows us to focus upon what is arguably the most central difference between externalists and internalists – namely, their rival views about the nature of rational disagreement. The basic worry is this: What exactly is an external reasons theorist like Scanlon, McDowell or Parfit claiming when he insists that somebody like, say, a typical amoralist has a reason to do something – for instance, that I have a "reason" to treat my spouse better – even though I remain wholly unmoved to do so?²⁰

If I endorse what we might call "practical skepticism", I suspend judgment about the reality of this specific value. Within my present S, I presumably have no patterns of emotional reaction, loyalties, or commitments broadly construed that would move me to accept this reason as true. I might even admit here that traditional morality demands that I do this action. Being an amoralist, however, I maintain I have no underlying commitments to moral itself. Furthermore, in skeptical fashion, nothing in my basic perception of the world leads me to believe in the existence of this alleged external reason. In short, I do not see any grounds at all for believing that a reason exists for me to treat my spouse better.

Yet the externalist maintains that such a reason does still exist. And he wants to claim that I am “irrational” insofar as I do not affirm that moral reason – or perhaps less controversially, that my deliberative route is somehow defective or that I lack a proper moral upbringing, etc.²¹ But what evidence does he adduce in support of his claim? The externalist cannot charge me with logical inconsistency. Nor can he criticize me for any conflicts between, say, my values and my beliefs. For instance, I do not at the same time affirm that I value treating my spouse well and then deny I have any reasons to treat my spouse better. I simply claim I have neither motivation nor reason to do so. Lastly, the externalist cannot fault me for not recognizing the alleged reality of this external reason, *since this is precisely what is in dispute*. So what kind of error is the externalist accusing me of committing here?

It seems that the externalist’s only real complaint against me is that I am skeptical about the existence of this reason. But consider what a concrete exchange between a skeptical internalist and an externalist opponent might even be like. The externalist says to the skeptical internalist, “You have a reason to treat your spouse better.” She responds, “I’m skeptical of the reality of such a reason, for nothing at all in my perception of the world or in my present motivations entails that I should affirm this reason as true.” To this, the only available externalist rejoinder seems to be, “But a reason to treat your spouse *does* exist, based on the existence of some non-relativistic S to which all agents ought to conform or upon normative facts which are just out there, regardless of whether you presently fail – and will *always* continue to fail – to see them. And you wrongly fall short of ‘substantive rationality’ insofar as you do not admit the reality of such practical truths.” This answer, however, is hardly a compelling one. It seems the skeptical internalist is perfectly entitled to retort here, “You, the externalist, haven’t given me any proof at all to rationally persuade me that this reason exists. You’ve only asserted that it does.”

Indeed, this basic externalist strategy should remind us of another well-known reply to the skeptic, namely, G.E. Moore’s notorious critique of “theoretical skepticism”. As Moore writes in his famous “proof” of the existence of the external world:

I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, "Here is one hand," and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, "and here is another." And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.²²

Moore's refutation of the theoretical skeptic is generally regarded as a quite dismal one. I see no reason, however, why the externalist's challenge to the "practical skeptic" is any more successful.²³ The defender of external reasons (or of an external world) offers no convincing proof at all to show the skeptic why she is wrong. Our skeptical internalist is not guilty of any "procedural error" here. And insofar as the externalist accuses her of "factual error", it is clear that this is a totally question-begging claim, since it is precisely the reality of such external reasons that the skeptical internalist is undertaking to challenge.

In the end, it seems that the externalist's entire case against the skeptical internalist amounts to a form of sheer "browbeating". As Scanlon himself instructively explains this idea in *WIER*:

[T]here is the fact that it does seem to be browbeating to insist that a person has a reason when he denies this, and when he truly could not see the force of the considerations in question no matter how hard he tried. It *is* browbeating to go on saying this in such a case. It is generally browbeating in any argument to repeat in a more insistent tone the very point that your opponent has already denied, without offering any new reason for accepting it. But from the fact that it would be browbeating to go on saying something in such a context it does not follow that the thing is not true. (*WIER*, pp. 371–372)

Akin to G.E. Moore, the externalist just "repeats in a more insistent tone" what his rival is denying – namely, that such external reasons do exist – although no "new reasons" has been offered here in support of this claim.

In fact, it seems that for all rational disagreements between two parties who espouse fundamentally different systems of practical beliefs (or even arguably fundamentally different systems of theoretical beliefs), any accusation of "error" reduces to mere dogmatic Moorean assertions on *both sides* insisting upon their rightness.²⁴ Such claims about external reasons (or an external world) might, as Scanlon rightly observes, ultimately be true, but

no non-question-begging evidence has been – or perhaps can be – offered to support them.

VI. CONCLUSION

So where does “skeptical internalism” leave us? It grants to the externalist the metaphysical possibility that reasons may exist in a realist way independent of each individual agent’s S. But it remains distinctively “internalist” in a deep epistemological sense, insofar as the grounds for why an agent ought to accept a certain reason are themselves based, in large part, upon that agent’s own S. We suspend judgment about any reason for which we do not find adequate grounds for belief. And external reasons obviously fall into this category. First, we do not recognize alleged external reasons *via* basic reasoning processes or as perhaps revealed by some mysterious faculty of intuition. That is, in Scanlon’s terms, we simply “fail to see” *via* rational reflection alone that such external reasons exist. And second, we are not acquainted with these external reasons *via* a kind of Aristotelian moral perception based upon our S, where, akin to the well-brought up *phronimos*, our dispositional responses themselves provide us with at least *prima facie* justificatory evidence for belief.

But this last option opens up an interesting and typically overlooked strategy for externalists to persuade the skeptical internalist about the validity of their claims. Recall that on his broader account of “value realism”, McDowell argues that our basic perception of values – that is, our epistemological access to reasons themselves – depends in some way upon our S, or what McDowell terms our “evaluative responses” relative to our unique human sensibility.²⁵ McDowell defends here a well-known analogy between perception of values and perception of colors. Unlike objective primary qualities like shape and size, whose existence is wholly independent of the way in which we humans perceive them, both colors and values are in some sense necessarily “subjective” – that is, their existence depends upon their ability to give rise to certain dispositional states in the subject herself.²⁶

Colors give rise to states of consciousness of, say, redness. By contrast, however, practical reasons elicit from us more explicitly

normative motivational responses, for instance, the moral perception “X merits being done”. Thus, for McDowell, what a specific agent has actual reason to do is accessible to her primarily *via* how such alleged values affect her *motivational dispositions*, in a parallel way that colors are accessible to an observer *via* how such properties affect her *sensory dispositions*. But what McDowell has failed to notice, as argued for earlier, are the deeply skeptical implications lurking behind this picture – that is, if an agent remains wholly unmoved by a so-called external reason, if it fails to elicit from the agent’s subjective dispositions any meritorious evaluative response at all, then there seems to be very compelling grounds to be skeptical whether such an external reason even exists.

Or *are* there? Consider for the case of secondary qualities a scenario where a person fails to see that a certain object is, say, red, although *everybody else says that it is so*. For the observer, there may indeed be no grounds from her own personal vantage point for why she should accept that the object is truly red, since she has no sensory dispositional response that incline her to see it that way at all. But if we abandon this overly individualistic epistemology, most of us would clearly admit that she does have a reason to believe that the object is red – namely, the perceptual testimony of other observers. Unfortunately, due to her presumed color blindness, she fails to recognize the truth that others around her generally affirm.

It seems plausible that a person like Williams’ abusive husband may be in an exactly parallel situation. He finds himself denying *what everybody else around him believes*, namely, the reality of certain values, say, of respect or of kindness, which give him reasons to treat his wife better. We might admit that nothing in his subjective motivational set enables him to recognize the fact that such values exist. But, if he acknowledges the neglected idea of what we might call “moral testimony”, this at least gives him good grounds for thinking that he may perhaps be mistaken, that he in some sense suffers from “value blindness” and cannot see the practical truth that others around him generally affirm.

But it is important to see just how far this argument goes. It may be that Williams’ abusive husband does not even acknowledge the force of testimony in either theoretical or practical matters, or that he is inclined to think testimony is legitimate for scientific issues,

but irrelevant when dealing with ethical issues – and so this appeal to moral testimony might still remain a fully external reason for the skeptical internalist. Even worse for externalism, if such an agent *could* be rationally swayed by the testimony of others on this matter, then it seems this would just indicate that she would have had, on Williams's terms, an *internal reason* to believe after all, granted the existence of a sound deliberative route between this reason and the commitment to testimony already present in her S.²⁷ Perhaps most interestingly, we must recognize that, even if we accept testimony as providing valid grounds for belief, there are two radically different ways we can interpret this scenario. As discussed above, it may be the case that our skeptical internalist suffers from basic "value blindness", and that her position is simply the result of her inability to perceive certain values independent of herself, as attested to by the moral testimony of other agents.

But there is another possibility here. At the end of the day, it might turn out to be case that she in fact "sees" everything perfectly well, and that it is the majority, and not she, who are blind to or ignorant of certain values. One can easily imagine a scenario where an agent does not find any value in military honor, or attacks the wrongness of racist attitudes, or even affirms certain Nietzschean ideals universally rejected by everybody else, in which she alone is making true value judgments, and it is all those around her who are mistaken. That is, even if we affirm moral testimony as providing good epistemic grounds for adopting certain reasons, there always exist at least two possibilities for how to analyze such fundamental value conflicts: (1) that the agent herself is simply "value blind"; or (2) that she represents what we might call a "moral visionary", where she alone sees values for how they truly are.²⁸

Understood in this way, skeptical internalism seems again the best course to adopt. In cases of irresolvable rational disagreement, it seems to be a futile strategy, *ala* the externalist, to just dogmatically assert the rightness of our own position, declaring all others to be "substantively irrational" or "deficient". Rather, it seems best to maintain a healthy skepticism about certain reason claims unless we somehow come to see the force of them ourselves. Nonetheless, we should try to remain open to the "moral testimony" of other agents, leaving it a genuinely open question whether it is the majority, or

the individual, who are suffering from a kind of “value blindness”, thereby admitting the fallibility as well as the potential need for reform of even our most deeply-held value judgments.²⁹

NOTES

¹ For the first criticism, see, for example, Michael Smith, “Internal Reasons”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995), pp. 109–131 and David Velleman, “The Possibility of Practical Reason”, *Ethics* 106 (1996), pp. 694–726. For the second criticism, see, for example, John McDowell, “Might There Be External Reasons?” [MER], pp. 68–85, in Altham and Harrison (1995); Derek Parfit, “Reasons and Motivation” [RM], in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1997), pp. 99–130; Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), in particular the appendix entitled “Williams on Internal and External Reasons” [WIER], pp. 363–373; and Jean Hampton, *The Authority of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. Chs. 2 and 3. I discuss McDowell, Scanlon, and Parfit in detail below, §III B. (For a brief treatment of the relationship between Parfit’s and Hampton’s views, see n. 11, below.)

² Technically speaking, Williams’ negative thesis is perhaps best construed more as a blatantly ‘anti-realist’, rather than merely ‘skeptical’, attitude about values. Nonetheless, as argued below in §§IV–V, developing internalism along merely skeptical (as opposed to more robust anti-realist) lines is not only in large part consistent with Williams’ overall ethical position, but also helps to avoid certain question-begging assumptions to which internalism need not be committed. For more detailed discussion about how Williams’ particular brand of subjectivism seems to presuppose his skeptical and/or anti-realist views, see §IV, esp. n. 18, below.

³ See Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons” [IER], reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–113; “Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame” [IROB], pp. 35–45, reprinted in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); “Replies” [“Replies”], pp. 185–224, esp. pp. 186–194, in *World, Mind and Ethics*, J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harisson (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and “Postscript: Some Further Notes on Internal and External Reasons” [“Postscript”], in E. Millgram (ed.), *Varieties of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

⁴ Williams himself does not spell out all the possible errors that might occur, but we can infer this partial list of procedural errors from his discussion of the many different ways in which practical reasoning goes beyond mere means-end rationality. Cf. IER, where Williams writes:

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 attached most weight to (which, importantly, does not imply that there is some one commodity of which they provide varying amounts); or again, finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment. (p. 104)

What is most important to notice here is that all these different procedures of rational deliberation are still intended to represent a very “minimal” notion of practical reason, one that does not necessarily entail specifically moral concerns. For further discussion of these matters, see §III A below.

⁵ See Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* [PA] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Christine Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reason” [SPR], reprinted in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996(a)), pp. 311–334; and Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* [SN] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996(b)). Of course, this is a retrospective reading about a potential way in which Nagel might respond to Williams. Korsgaard, on the other hand, discusses Williams’ internalist views specifically in SPR, esp. pp. 325–329.

⁶ Cf. here Nagel (1970), Ch. IV, where, in his overall discussion about how a moral conception of ourselves somehow constitutes “particularly deep features of our make-up” that “we cannot alter” (p. 22), Nagel asserts: “The more central and unavoidable is the conception of oneself on which the possibility of moral motivation can be shown to depend, the closer we have come to demonstrating that the demands of ethics are inescapable” (pp. 18–19). For Nagel’s specific arguments in defense of altruism in PA, see esp. Chs. IX–XIII.

⁷ For Korsgaard’s specific arguments in (1996b) in defense of altruism, and in particular about the so-called publicity of reasons, see SN, esp. 4.2.7–4.2.12, pp. 140–145.

⁸ For textual evidence in support of the claim that both thinkers insist upon a necessary relationship of moral reasons to an agent’s subjective motivational set or S, see Nagel (1970), Ch. IV, where he writes: “What can be asserted with some confidence is that in so far as rational requirements, practical or theoretical, represent conditions on belief and action, such necessity as may attend to them is not logical but *natural or psychological* (p. 22, emphasis added)”; and Korsgaard’s discussion in SPR, where she straightforwardly claims: “Something in us must make us capable of being motivated by [practical reasons], and this something will be a part of the subjective motivational set. Williams seems to think that this is a reason for doubting that pure practical reasons exist, whereas what seems to follow from the internalism requirement is this: if we can be motivated by considerations stemming from pure practical reason, then that capacity belongs to the subjective motivational set of every rational being” (pp. 327–328).

⁹ See Williams, IROB, p. 44, fn. 3, who agrees with this interpretation of Korsgaard. But cf. Velleman (1996), who writes: “In denying the dependence of reasons on inclinations, she qualifies as an externalist, in Williams’ terminology” (p. 697). I think this misreads Korsgaard’s views. She does not *deny* that

reasons are somehow based upon our inclinations, but rather seems to interpret this claim simply to mean that moral reasons are necessarily built into, or universally present within, every agent's subjective motivational set, as argued in SPR, p. 328 (discussed in n. 7, above).

¹⁰ Cf. Williams' characterization of McDowell's particular line of criticism in "Postscript": "[One important version of externalist criticism] is very broadly speaking Aristotelian, and constructs a truth condition for externalist claims in terms of the reasons that would be recognized by an ideal, 'well brought up,' or at least improved, agent – an agent, that is to say, for whom these would indeed be internal reasons" (p. 94). Williams, however, does not characterize this as a "realist" approach although most externalists we discuss, especially McDowell, are content to do so – cf. §VI, below. Indeed, it is notable that Williams entirely sidesteps the issue of value realism when identifying what he takes as three of the most prominent criticisms against his internalist position. See "Postscript", pp. 93–94.

¹¹ It is interesting to compare Parfit's strategy with the one endorsed by Jean Hampton (1998), esp. Ch. 3, pp. 74–80, who locates "non-reductive normative facts" *within* our S, in terms of the principles of logical reasoning themselves (what we might call "facts about internal reasons"), as opposed to Parfit's strategy to locate them *outside* of our S, in terms of normative facts to value things inherent in the things themselves (what we might call "facts about external reason").

¹² In his reply to Parfit's discussion, John Broome in "Reasons and Motivation", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 71 (1997), pp. 131–146, esp. pp. 141–146, also suggests that we can normatively judge an agent based upon what he assumes is "... simply a feature of most people's psychology that they are disposed to do what they believe they ought to do," which he explicitly terms a 'natural disposition' for 'general practical rationality' (p. 141), thereby insisting like both Scanlon and McDowell (and *contra* Parfit) that reasons to act are linked in some sense to what, granted our general human nature, we have motivation to do.

¹³ Brad Hooker in "Williams' Argument Against External Reasons", *Analysis* 47 (1987), pp. 42–44, argues that Williams' internalism faces a two-horned dilemma of being either (1) question-begging or (2) impotent. I agree that Williams' internalism as presently formulated is indeed question-begging (although, *pace* Hooker, I argue here that this applies equally so to externalist views.) I disagree, however, that, in order to avoid begging the question against externalists, Williams' internalism must necessarily lapse into a kind of "impotence" – but *only if* we construe it in a skeptical, as opposed to subjectivist, fashion. For further discussion, see §§V–VI, below.

¹⁴ Pekka Väyrynen has helpfully suggested to me that it seems wrong to accuse externalists and internalists as operating with different ideas about what a reason is, since they would both presumably accept a general account of reasons endorsing something like "considerations that favor certain actions as performed by the agent in question at a specified time". What I am arguing here is that they have different conceptions, rather than concepts, of reason, which Williams seems to make explicit in his reply to McDowell, in which he writes that, for

externalists, "... statements of the type (R) [i.e., A has a reason to Φ] do not relate actions to persons, but types of action to types of circumstances, and they are most revealingly expressed in the form 'in circumstances X, there is reason to Φ ' (p. 190). That is, Williams claims that he and externalists are clearly operating with different conceptions of what it means to be a reason: Williams endorses that the proper conception of a reason necessarily involves content which is distinctively about A, that is, that particular agent's S, whereas externalists accept a more impersonal account of reasons, one not necessarily relative to any particular agent.

¹⁵ This discussion is obviously meant to parallel J.L. Mackie's well-known critique of "subjectivism" in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Publishing, 1977), esp. pp. 42–26, in particular his idea that subjectivism fails to capture the true phenomenological nature of our moral disagreements. One important difference between Mackie's account and mine is that I do not go on to make the substantive assertion that such values do not, or cannot exist, since they are somehow "metaphysically queer" – cf. §V, below.

¹⁶ As noted earlier, this conclusion of course needs to presuppose (as Williams himself does) that arguments like those defended by Nagel and Korsgaard purporting to demonstrate that moral claims follow from considerations of practical reasoning alone, which would establish moral truths as universally valid, all fail. Thanks to Pekka Väyrynen for his criticisms that helped me to clarify this point.

¹⁷ See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [ELP] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), esp. Chs. 8–9.

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism", p. 143, in Williams (1981), pp. 132–143. Both Ulrike Heuer and Pekka Väyrynen have instructively suggested to me that Williams arguably could accept value realism (and the reality of such values as being nasty, selfish, brutal, etc.), but yet claim that we can imagine a scenario in which such values do not figure into an explanation for why the agent acts since they are not connected in any relevant way with his motivations, and thus these values would *still* not count as reasons.

While this is certainly a logically consistent position to hold, I do not think, however, Williams himself would endorse it. Williams's own particular brand of subjectivism, or his belief in "a relativity of the reasons statement to the agent's subjective motivational set" (IER, p. 102), clearly seems to rely upon his overall belief in a basic asymmetry between fact and value. As Williams argues in ELP, values, and the ethical reasons associated with them, while in a limited way indeed able to "track" certain objective features of the world – at least in the case of "thick" ethical concepts like nasty, brutal, chivalrous etc. – still fail to play a role in what Williams sees as a purely "impersonal" or "absolute conception of the world". If they did possess this agent-independent status, like scientific truths arguably do, then presumably such objective "ethical truths" would be able to command rational assent in exactly the same way as objective "scientific truths" – though for Williams, of course, values fail to achieve such full-blooded objectivity due to lack of the relevant kind of convergence.

Thus, I think that Williams consistently maintains, as expressed in this quote, that ethical relativism – which presumably also includes the special case of “relativity of reasons” to agents’s subjective motivations associated with subjectivistic internalism – must presuppose the *falsity* of an “objectivist” or “realist” account of both values and reasons. [See also Williams’s discussion in *Morality* (Harper Row: New York, 1972), esp. Chs. 2–4, where he likewise argues that belief in subjectivism explicitly assumes the denial of realism, that is, the idea that moral thinking “mirrors something” truly objective about the world (p. 37).]

¹⁹ I am grateful to Jon Rick for drawing my attention to the need to make explicit that these three worries raised about Williams’s subjectivist account of internalism do *not* amount to a refutation of his views, but are simply meant to argue that skepticism understood in a more skeptical fashion leads to the possibility of a more direct as well as constructive engagement with the externalist (as well as the possibility of preserving certain common-sense intuitions about moral disagreement) that Williams’s internalism fails to achieve.

²⁰ Notice that my construal of the amoralist here differs somewhat from more traditional accounts, combining elements of *both* (1) the picture of the amoralist as defended by David Brink in *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), as somebody who accepts the validity of certain reasons, but remains motivationally unmoved by them, as well as (2) the picture of the amoralist defended by Joseph Raz in “The Amoralist”, pp. 369–398, in *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), as somebody who disbelieves certain fundamental moral claims. My amoralist both lacks any motivational response to alleged moral truths (ala Brink) while going a step further and actually disbelieving that any such moral claims are even true (ala Raz).

²¹ Note that Williams himself now admits that it was wrong for him to presuppose that an externalist must insist upon referring to somebody who violates external reasons as “irrational”. See “Replies”, p. 192, as well as his explicit withdrawal of this claim in “Postscript”: “I say in the article reprinted here [“Internal and External Reasons”] that the externalist wants, specifically, to be able to say that someone who resists a correct externalist claim is *irrational*. I accept that this is too strong” (p. 92).

²² G.E. Moore, “Proof of an External World”, p. 144, as republished in his *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 126–148. Also compare Moore’s related article “A Defence of Common Sense”, republished in the same volume, pp. 32–59, where he writes: “But do I really *know* all the propositions in (1) to be true? Isn’t it possible that merely believe them? Or know them to be highly probable? In answer to this question, I think I have nothing better to say than that it seems to me that I *do* know them, with certainty” (p. 43).

²³ It is important to stress here, however, a fundamental *disanalogy* between the Moorean theoretical skeptic and how Williams pictures what we are calling here a practical skeptic. Unlike skepticism about the external world, the internalist envisioned by Williams does not deny the reality of all values – his skeptic is a merely “local”, and opposed to “global” one, and in this sense, then, is perhaps

more relevant and challenging. That is, Williams' internalist does not reject *all* values as false; he just remains skeptical about certain alleged systems of values – say, ones related to a phronimos or a more tolerantly-minded person, or ones that highly value military life and family honor, etc. We might see tackling global practical skepticism as perhaps just a sterile intellectual exercise. But dealing with more local skepticism about particular systems of values that different people espouse – especially within a pluralistic society – is, I contend, a real challenge that we constantly confront in our ordinary daily lives.

²⁴ It is important to stress here that skeptical internalism does *not* make the dogmatic claim that skepticism somehow proves that internalism is *superior* to externalism. Rather, it simply recommends that, in the face of a lack of evidence for a certain external reason, given one's own inability to see any grounds at all for this alleged reason, the agent is fully entitled, in skeptical fashion, to suspend judgment and that persisting criticisms of this skeptical position made by the externalist simply amount to mere "browbeating" in dogmatic defense of the alleged rightness of the externalist's views. I am grateful to a criticism raised by Joseph Raz for drawing my attention to the need to fully clarify this point. See also n. 28 below for a related caveat.

²⁵ See John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities", reprinted in *Essays on Moral Realism*, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (ed.), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 166–180; "Two Sorts of Naturalism", pp. 149–179, in *Virtues and Reasons: Essays in Honor of Philippa Foot* Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and his Lindley Lectures, "Projection and Truth in Ethics", reprinted in *Moral Discourse and Practice*, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton (eds.), pp. 215–225.

²⁶ It is important to stress that McDowell acknowledges two different senses of the term 'subjective', a negative sense in which subjective is equated with a kind of 'projective error', as 'merely subjective' and hence false; and subjective in the more blameless sense that it necessarily relates to the human subject, although such judgments – whether about colors or about values – are capable of veridicality. See McDowell (1988), esp. pp. 170ff.

²⁷ I am grateful to Simon Rippon for drawing my attention to this interesting consequence, in addition to many other instructive criticisms about this concluding section.

²⁸ There are two important qualifications here. First, as noted, it must be stressed that other interpretations of the nature of such rational disagreements are available. In the end, we might even choose to adopt an explicitly "anti-realist" approach like either (a) Mackie's "error theory" account, which claims that *all* parties involved are mistaken; or (b) Williams' own "subjectivist" account of reasons. Indeed, as noted above in n. 19, skeptical internalism does *not* foreclose on the possibility that Williams may be correct. Rather, its aim is simply to reformulate the present internalism debate in such a way that it need not, *contra* Williams, reject from the outset an externalist affirmation of value realism, or even the possibility that there may exist reasons we remain blind to that no amount of

reasoning could presently get us to see. This not only allows for the ongoing potential revisability of our skeptical doubts in light of future evidence, a feature that seems difficult to incorporate into externalist views like those defended by McDowell, Scanlon, and Parfit, but also helps to steer the debate towards the real interest of this paper: namely, a more direct engagement with, and in-depth analysis of, the externalist's flawed dogmatic argumentative strategy. Thanks to several criticisms raised by Steven Hendley, Jon Rick, and Simon Rippon which forced me to clarify what exactly is being claimed here.

Second, this paper obviously has been able to deal in only a very cursory fashion with this broad and relatively unexplored issue of so-called "moral testimony". One interesting refinement has been suggested to me by John Brunero, who observes that, in the case of both colors as well as values, one might be able to offer a kind of causal account about how moral beliefs come about in order to help judge the relative merits of claims about such alleged "blindness". For instance, in the case of color blindness, one might be able to point to certain mitigating circumstances that make people in general fail to see their error – e.g., they all happen to be wearing glasses which distort their vision, etc. And the same might occur in cases of value blindness. We might explain why people fail to see things a certain way because of, for example, the way they have been traditionally brought up, where the community as a whole might approach certain issues with certain 'moral blinders' that similarly distort their vision, etc. And where such a broader explanatory account is lacking, this might perhaps cast doubt upon whether one has good grounds for one's claim to be a moral visionary. Much more work, of course, can be done in terms of identifying the potential analogies/disanalogies between perceptual and moral testimony, as well as the broader resources in general moral testimony might be able to provide to moral theorizing.

²⁹ I would like to thank audiences at both the 2003 11th Annual Harvard/MIT Philosophy Graduate Student Conference as well as 2003 Pacific APA Division Meeting for very insightful comments, in particular the panelists involved at each session: Martin O'Neill (Harvard/MIT) and Ulrike Heuer and David Copp (Pacific APA Division). I have also benefited from discussions with Arik Ben-Avi, John Brunero, Steven Hendley, Amy Meselson, Joseph Raz, Jon Rick, Simon Rippon, David Shainok, Pekka Väyrynen, and David Wollach, as well as numerous instructive criticisms offered by Thomas Pogge that have helped me to sharpen the argumentative structure of the overall paper.

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