



Moral Rationalism

Morality and reasons for action

Much of the literature that we have covered has been concerned with two questions about morality and reasons for action.

Q1: Is it part of the concept of a moral reason that such reasons (if there are any) have rational authority over us whatever our ends or desires happen to be?

Q2: Do any reasons have rational authority over us whatever our ends or desires happen to be?

Williams' attack on 'external reasons' seems to suggest that the answer to Q2 is 'No'. We have seen already that Mackie seems to side with Williams. Mackie also seems to think that the answer to Q1 is 'Yes', so Mackie thinks that our moral thought rests on a mistaken presupposition. Foot thinks that the answer to Q1 might well be 'No'. Foot and Mackie disagree about how moral claims should be interpreted. For his part, Brink seems to think that the answer to both questions is 'Yes'.

Williams on internal and external reasons

- Williams defends the thesis that all reasons are "internal reasons". If we can truthfully say "She has a reason to X", it follows that "She has some motive that would be furthered by her X-ing". Thus, if she happens to have no motive, end, or desire that would be served by her X-ing, then she would have no reason to X.
- Strictly speaking, Williams does allow that we have reasons that would not further any motive we actually have, provided that it is a motive that we either do have or could have if we came to have it by means of some sound deliberative route from elements of our subjective motivational set (i.e., our beliefs (which fit the facts) and desires).
- An external reason is understood as a reason that someone has and would continue to have even if it served none of her motives. That is, it might further some end, but it would not further one of her ends and would not bring about anything that she cared about. Williams thinks that there are no such reasons.

Internal reasons and moral rationalism

The moral rationalist believes that every rational agent has reasons to act on moral reasons. Is moral rationalism in tension with the internal reasons thesis? Perhaps. Consider the following argument:

P1: If morality says that you ought to X under such and such circumstances, anyone under those circumstances has a reason to X. [Moral rationalism]

P2: If you have reason to X, X-ing would either serve some motive that you have or a motive that you could have given the elements of your subjective motivational set. [Internal reasons thesis]

P3: Morality says, say, that you have reason to refrain from robbing others, to help those less fortunate than you, to keep your promises, etc. [Assumption]

C: Every rational agent has some motive or could have some motive derived from elements of her subjective motivational set that would be served by refraining from robbing others, assisting others at her own expense, keeping promises, etc.

Is the argument's conclusion at all plausible? I think not. The moral rationalist's claim is not that morality gives us overriding reason (although some think this), but some reason. So, while the conclusion shouldn't be taken to say that everyone always has overriding reason to do what morality says and that this would best serve every agent's interests, it still isn't clear why we should think that every bank robber has some motive well-served if he refrains from robbing, ever skinflint has some motive that would be well-served if he were more generous, and every one of us has some motive that would be served if we were to keep our promises. (If you disagree, try to identify desires and motives that would be served when these agents do morality's bidding).

What's wrong with external reasons?

1. Williams thinks that reasons for action have an explanatory dimension, "this explanatory dimension is very important ... If there are reasons for action, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action". Nothing could be a reason unless it could motivate the agent who engages in sound deliberation. Thus, for Williams, R is a reason of yours to X only if R could figure in an explanation of your X-ing (if we assume that you had deliberated soundly).

2. Next, if R is not included in your subjective motivational set and cannot be derived from that subjective motivational set by means of some sound deliberation, R could not figure in an explanation of your X-ing.

3. Thus, there are no external reasons since such reasons are by definition reasons that would be reasons even if they were not included in your subjective motivational set and not something that we could derive from that set by means of sound deliberation.



Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives

- Kant distinguished between categorical and hypothetical imperatives. HIs are conditional on the agent's ends. CIs are not conditional on the agent's ends. Instead, they are binding on us whatever our ends happen to be. Assuming all such imperatives give us reasons, Williams' argument gives us some reason to be skeptical of CIs.
- Foot thinks that there is an ambiguity in the notion of a categorical reason. In one sense, they apply to us independently of what our aims and interests are. In one sense, they provide some reason for action that a rational subject must take account of. These are not the same thing, as the case of etiquette shows. (To paraphrase Foot, someone who does not heed morality's demands might be accused of villainy, but not inconsistency.)
- If Foot is right, the question as to whether morality demands something and the question as to whether a rational agent has a reason to do that thing ought to be distinguished. Thus, the discovery that not every rational person has a reason to do what morality requires is not one that undermines morality (in the way that Mackie suggested). So, even if we take Williams' argument at face value, morality might remain intact.



Morality as a system of categorical imperatives

Brink thinks Kant intended to defend three claims in defending the idea that moral requirements are categorical:

(a) Inescapability: Their application to an agent does not depend upon what the agent's interests or inclinations are (i.e., "Morality requires her to X" does not entail "X-ing serves one of her interests).

(b) Authority: It is pro tanto irrational to fail to act in accordance with moral requirements that are categorical imperatives.

(c) Supremacy: Moral requirements always override any reasons the agent has to perform actions that would prevent her from meeting her moral requirements.

Notice that these are claims about what morality requirements or categorical imperatives are like if there are any. It is a further question as to whether there are such requirements or imperatives. (Kant thought that there were.)

A puzzle

1. Moral requirements include impartial other-regarding obligations that do not apply to agents by virtue of their aims or interests.
2. Moral requirements provide overriding reasons for action (i.e., it is on balance irrational to act contrary to moral requirements).
3. Rational action is action that achieves the agent's interests or aims.
4. Fulfilling other-regarding obligations need not advance the agent's aims or interests.

Each seems plausible, but they cannot all be true. The Kantian view (which is decidedly rationalist) rejects (3) and with it the idea that the rational thing for someone to do is determined by facts about the aims and interests she happens to have. The challenge this view faces is in explaining how we could have reasons to act in ways that are contrary to our own interests and how it could be rational to respond to such reasons.

Do moral reasons have rational authority?

- Kant thought that the inescapability of moral requirements explained their authority. Remember that inescapability has to do with the fact that a requirement applies to you regardless of what your ends/interests are. They apply to you insofar as you have the capacities for identifying reasons and governing your actions by deliberating about what to do in light of these reasons rather than simply being compelled to act by your strongest desires (in the way that lower animals are often thought to be).
- Kant held that your duties are what a rational agent could consistently will (i.e., he thinks that your duty is to act in accordance with the categorical imperative that states that you must act only on maxims which you can at the same time will to be a universal law of nature). Rational agents, Brink suggests, will all value rational agency and being governed by it. If this is so, then we must treat ourselves and other rational agents as ends unto themselves as the ground of what we value in our own agency is found in other agents as well.
- How does the authority of moral reasons fall out of this? Brink says, "if some requirements apply to me in virtue of those very features that make me a responsible agent, capable of practical deliberation and subject to reasons for action, then these requirements presumably give me reason to act, such that failure to fulfil those requirements is pro tanto irrational."

Inescapability and authority

- Brink's argument is a difficult one, so let me try to explain how it works. He wants to derive from the thesis that moral requirements are inescapable (i.e., they apply to us even if conforming to them does not further our interests) the further claim that they are authoritative (i.e., it would be irrational not to accord them some weight in deliberation even when it would not further our interests to conform to them). When you want to derive one thesis from another, you get to assume the first thesis is correct and see what follows. (It should also be noted that everyone seems to agree that moral requirements are inescapable. The real debate is as to whether they are authoritative. As such, you wouldn't want to deny Brink his starting point. And, moreover, you wouldn't want to deny him his appeal to Kantian moral principles like the categorical imperative since the anti-rationalist view does not depend upon any substantive moral commitments.)
- Brink's suggestion is that the inescapability thesis is true because the content of our moral principles is determined by what a rational agent would will (and rational agents only will that which they can consistently will). Since the content of our moral principles instruct us to act in ways that manifest respect for the capacity to rationally deliberate about what to do and set ends for ourselves, they tell us that moral reasons are reasons to act in ways that show respect for rational agency. At this point it seems that the authority thesis is undeniable since that thesis simply says that you should accord moral reasons some weight. To deny the authority thesis at this stage is to say that a perfectly rational agent could accord moral reasons no weight even though these reasons tell the agent how to properly respond to the value of rational agency. If, however, you think that the rational agent cannot fail to be moved to act in ways that show respect for rational agency, we have our argument for the authority thesis.