

TRANSFORMATION FROM EXTERNALISM TO INTERNALISM: THE POSSIBILITY OF EXTERNAL REASONS IN MORAL CULTIVATION

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DESIREs ARE COMMONLY considered to be the prerequisite for one's reason for action. Indeed, in everyday conversations, people often give reason or justification for their action by uttering the statement, "Because I want to." Although it is clear that desires can provide some reasons for actions, further arguments are needed to substantiate the conclusion that desires are the exclusive reasons for action. In "Internal and External Reasons," Bernard Williams takes on the task of showing that only reasons whose existence is based on the agent's desires, aims, or other "motives" can be considered reasons for actions. This kind of reason is what Williams called internal reasons; on the other hand, the kind of reason that is independent of one's desires is called external reasons. Williams argues that an external reason statement, even if it can explain one's action, fails to offer rational support for it; therefore, external "reasons" do not exist. Williams contends that desire, which is to be fulfilled by one's action, is a necessary condition for one to have a reason to act. However, it seems that Williams' claim regarding internal reasons as the only source of motivation fails to account for the kind of reason for action that characterizes the beginning of moral cultivation as conceptualized by the Chinese Confucian thinker, Xunzi. This paper intends to show that external reasons may be capable of motivating one to act in the beginning of one's process of moral cultivation; the external reasons are replaced by internal reasons only when one has successfully internalized the Confucian *li*, or rituals.

Williams offers two ways of reading sentences of the forms "*P* [an agent] has a reason to *A* [act]" or "There is a reason for *P* to *A*." The first is the internalist reading, which states that in order for *P* to have a reason to *A*, *P* must have some motive or desire which will be furthered by *P*'s *A*'ing. The second, externalist reading precludes the necessary condition that a motive or desire must exist prior to *P*'s *A*'ing. Specifically, the internalist interpretation asserts that *P* has a reason to *A* if and only if *P* has some element present in his subjective motivational set, or the agent's *S*, and the satisfaction of which will be served by his *A*'ing. An externalist interpretation, on the other hand, does not assert that the

presence of any element of *S* is necessary for *P* to have a reason to *A*. Hence, an internal reason statement is falsified by the absence of some appropriate motive or desire but an external reason statement is not. Williams offers no precise definition for what he calls the “subjective motivational set,” but he mentions that although *S* includes primarily desires, it may also “contain such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects... embodying commitments of the agent” (Williams 1991:105).

Reasons, according to Williams, have two general features. The first criterion of reason is expressed by Williams in the following passage: “If something can be a reason for action, then it could be someone’s reason for acting on a particular occasion, and it would then figure in an explanation of that action” (106). Furthermore, reasons must reflect the agent’s rationality or play a role in rational deliberation. Williams asserts that something is a reason only if it explains one’s action and provides rational support for such an action. However, even under the internal reason conception, one may act even though there is no reason for her to act, as in the case when her element in *S* that gives rise to a “reason” is based on false belief, or one may fail to act even though there is a reason for her to act, as in the case when she is ignorant of a certain action that will further an element of her *S*.

The process of deliberation is key in giving rise to internal reasons. According to Williams, in this process of deliberative reasoning, internal reason statements can be discovered; however, deliberation entails more than “the mere discovery that some course of action is the causal means to an end... practical reasoning is that leading to the conclusion that one has reason to *A* because *A*’ing would be the most convenient, economical, pleasant, etc. way of satisfying some element in *S*, and this is controlled by other elements in *S*, if not necessarily in a very clear or determinate way” (104). Therefore, the mere recognition that some course of action is a means to a desired end is not in itself a deliberative process; deliberation entails one’s evaluation about the ability of certain action to satisfy some elements in one’s *S*. Other forms of rationalization that are present in deliberation include combining satisfactions of various elements in *S* by time-ordering and using one’s imagination to envision the consequences of satisfying certain elements in one’s *S*. Therefore, the process of deliberation can have all sorts of effects on *S*: “[T]he deliberative process can add new actions for which there are internal reasons, just as it can also add new internal reasons for given actions... [furthermore,] the deliberative process can also subtract elements from *S*” (Williams 104). Thus, Williams’ conception of an agent’s motivational set, *S*, is neither statically given nor narrowly defined.

Williams claims that only internal reasons can motivate or provide reasons for action because, “no external reason statement could by itself offer an explanation for anyone’s [intentional] action... something else [a psychological link or belief] is needed besides the truth of the external statement to explain action” (106). Since an external reason statement can be true independent of the agent’s motivations, it cannot explain an agent’s (intentional) actions because nothing can explain an intentional action except something that motivates him to act. Therefore, the only way an external reason can explain an action is when there is a belief that connects the external reason with the action. However, once this additional factor becomes a necessary condition for an external reason to fulfill the explanatory criterion, the “putative external reason” by itself fails to satisfy the requirement of sound deliberation by the agent: a new element in the agent’s motivation set has been added. In addition, even if a new element of *S* is added by the external reason statement, it is not arrived at through a sound deliberative route since the new element bears no relation with the existing elements in *S*. Therefore, Williams concludes, external “reason,” according to the strict definition of the word, does not exist.

Williams points to the story of Owen Wingrave to illustrate his argument. Coming from a lineage of military honors, Owen’s parents urge him to join the military to uphold family pride and tradition even though everything in Owen’s *S* is against military life. Owen’s subjective motivational set consists of desires for a kind of life that is contrary to what his parents want, yet his father adamantly asserts that there is a reason for Owen to join the army.

The type of reason Owen’s father offers is an external one. According to Owen’s father, family honor and tradition are supposed to be reasons for Owen to join the military regardless of Owen’s personal wishes. However, Williams argues that this external reason statement cannot be reason for Owen to act. He suggests that even though the moving rhetoric provided by Owen’s parents, which contains the external reason statement, may explain Owen’s action of joining the army, the validity of the external reason is independent of whether Owen is actually motivated to do so or not. This leads Williams to conclude that if Owen eventually joins the army, it is because “he believes of some determinant consideration that it constitutes a reason for him to [act]” (107). It is only when Owen has become a man who believes that considerations of family honor constitute reasons for action will Owen join the army. At this point, Owen has become a man with a certain disposition to action. Hence, the crucial factor in this transformation is that Owen comes to believe the external reason statement. Once he develops the belief that continuing family honor is a reason for him to enlist, he

has acquired an appropriate element in his motivational set that constitutes an internal reason for him to act. Therefore, Williams asserts that some additional factor, namely a psychological link, is needed to explain Owen's action if he decides to do as his father urges him to do and join the army.

Williams intends to show that, from the story of Owen Wingrave, external reason by itself, even if it can explain one's action, fails to provide the necessary motivation for an action: "If [Owen] comes to believe [the external reason], he will be motivated to act; so coming to believe it must, essentially, involve acquiring a new motivation" (109). However, Williams objects to the possibility of acquiring this new motivation by a sound deliberate process because, "there is no motivation [elements in *S*] for the agent to deliberate from, to reach this new motivation" (109). Owen has no existing elements in his motivational set that can rationally justify or connect to his decision of joining the army; thus, Williams argues, it is impossible for him to acquire such motivation to act from a sound deliberative route. Since new internal motivation must be derived solely from existing elements of *S*, it is impossible for one to deliberate rationally based on external reasons. Therefore, even if an external reason statement can explain Owen's action, the action cannot be rationally supported. As such, external reasons cannot motivate one to act rationally.

Nevertheless, various elements of Owen's story, such as his parents' moving rhetoric, appeal to tradition, and Owen's opposing inclinations, resonate with certain characteristics involved in the process of moral cultivation as envisioned by Xunzi. In the Confucian tradition, virtue is something to be learned by an individual through an arduous and on-going process. For Xunzi, specifically, moral cultivation is necessary to transform one's character. Since human nature is full of desires that, if pursued without constraint, would lead to chaos and social dysfunction, rituals, *li*, are created to curb such destructive manifestation. Therefore, in order to achieve a harmonious society and to restrain people's "perverse words and deeds," people must follow a set of ritual proprieties that is created by the sages. In many ways, Xunzi envisions a state of nature that is similar to the Hobbesian picture: people are by nature consumed by selfish desires and the uncontrolled satisfaction of which would inevitably lead to chaos and strife. However, the Hobbesian picture regarding human nature is a static one: an internal transformation of character is, according to Hobbes, impossible; therefore, the state plays a permanent and imperative role in the curbing of people's desires. Xunzi, on the other hand, believes that people can become virtuous despite their natural selfish desires. Such character transformation is facilitated by a regimented adherence to the

Confucian *li*. The initial stages of moral cultivation consist of following the *li* even though they may counter one's innate desire. As Xunzi's use of imagery implies, the process of moral cultivation is "unnatural" and externally enforced: "Thus, if wood is pressed against a straightening board, it can be made straight; if metal is put to the grindstone, it can be sharpened; and if the refined person studies widely and each day examines himself, his wisdom will become clear and his conduct without fault" (Watson15). People's desires and conducts are reformed, like the straightening of warped board and the sharpening of dull metal, by the process of learning through conscious activity. As Jonathan Schofer argues, in the Xunzean process of moral cultivation, "[c]orrect emotional responses are products of focused practice; they are not expansions or extensions of spontaneous desires" (Schofer 121). Xunzi believes that an important component characterizing the initial stages of moral cultivation is that people can override their desires through that of which they approve. David Wong explains this aspect of the Xunzean moral cultivation:

The beginner in moral cultivation can make herself do what she does not yet desire to do through approving of an action. Such action would include submission to rites and the dictates of righteousness, and would if practiced rigorously and consistently, result in the transformation of the desires themselves. Ultimately, the mind's power over desire results not just in overriding them but in retraining them. (207)

In some ways, the beginning stage of the Xunzean model of moral cultivation is a kind of habituation. Xunzi's beginner follows the *li*, as prescribed by traditions, in guiding his actions even though he might not delight in what he is doing. This is, indeed, the difference between "approval" and "desire" according to Xunzi. Approval, *ke*, is the power of the mind to direct action regardless of the given desires at any given time. While some philosophers have attempted to compare Xunzi's notion of approval with practical reason, much uncertainty still lies in this interpretation. However, one conclusion can be drawn about the notion of approval or *ke*: approval and desires are separate and, according to Xunzi, one has a higher motivational value than the other.

In the beginning stages of the Xunzean moral cultivation, one seems to be motivated by external reasons. In the Xunzean picture, one submits to the rules of propriety or the *li*, even though his desires are contrary to what the *li* dictate. Through an immersion in Confucian texts and ritual practice, one comes to decide to embark on a path of moral learning. However, the initial choice of following the *li* is not entirely voluntary; the rituals and rules of propriety are so prevalent and perva-

sive in the society that one is born immediately into them. Before the beginner becomes conscious of the presence of the external moral shaping, she would, hopefully, have transformed some of her desires so that she could recognize the harmonious correspondence between her trained desires and the conception of the good that is prescribed by the *li*. Such recognition will encourage one to continue engaging in Confucian cultivation. This recognition, perhaps, is what Xunzi means by “approval.” Judging from this aspect of the Xunzean model of cultivation, it is unlikely that Xunzi would require one to act according to desires, since those are the specific targets that the *li* restrain and reshape. Therefore, in this case, the Xunzean person initially acts according to the *li* without even being consciously aware of them or having any desire to act according to them. This initial conformity to the *li* resembles Owen’s succumbing to his parents’ moving rhetoric. Both the Xunzean beginner and Owen, had he been persuaded by his parent’s rhetoric, act on reasons that are independent of, or even contrary to, their desires. Therefore, it appears that, during the initial stage of moral cultivation, Williams’ internal requirement need not be satisfied.

In the Xunzean model of moral development, not until the beginner has properly reflected on his externally dictated actions or until he has “internalized” the *li*, will he learn to take pleasure in virtuous action for its own sake. When one learns to naturally delight in doing virtuous acts in their own right, one is considered a graduate of moral education and has become a Xunzean sage. At this stage, approval and desire, for Xunzi, have finally become one and the same. It is at this stage that the Xunzean perfected person acts according to her internal moral desires. Therefore, internal reasons do play a role in the Xunzean picture of moral development. Xunzi regards actions that are motivated by reasons that stem from one’s desire to be virtuous as ideal. Nevertheless, he recognizes that in the beginning of moral cultivation, external reasons are, and should be, capable of motivating one to act, albeit the action does not further, or even conflicts with, one’s desires. Hence, it seems that the Xunzean account of moral cultivation implies a sort of external reasons that is capable of motivating the beginner to act even in the absence of a desire to be virtuous. External factors, such as the set of ritual propriety, seem to be able to explain one’s virtuous action and to provide a rational basis for it’s deliberation. Moreover, Xunzi claims that the external factors are, indeed, reasons. For Xunzi, the beginner has prudential reasons to be motivated by the *li*: they lead to the optimal satisfaction of one’s long-term desires. (These long-term desires may not be present in the agent’s subjective motivational set at the time of action, hence the prudential reasons are external; this issue will be discussed later.) However, in order to satisfy this prudential interest, peo-

ple have to curb their fulfillment of immediate desires that might lead to conflict with others. The goal of moral training is to instill rational judgment in people so that they will perform moral actions regardless of their appetites, desires, or emotions. In this sense, Xunzi would oppose the internal reason requirement during the initial stages of moral cultivation. If the process of moral cultivation does indeed involve externally-motivated behavior, it would seem that the Xunzean account of moral motivation serves as an objection to Williams' claim about the impossibility of an agent being caused to act by an external reason.

Williams would argue that the beginners in moral cultivation are not motivated by external "reasons," for those external considerations fail to bring about rationally deliberated motivations. Similar to the case of Owen Wingrave, external considerations such as a set of rules cannot by themselves explain one's action because they are independent of the agent's motivations. Nothing can explain an agent's intentional actions except something that internally motivates him so to act. Therefore, the *li*, by themselves, cannot explain one's action. Moreover, in order for external reason to motivate, an agent must deliberate, but "there is no motivation [element of *S*] for the agent to deliberate from, to reach this new motivation" (Williams 109). The beginners in the moral cultivation program are, as Williams would argue, irrational. Since an internal desire is necessary for a person to have a rational explanation for his action (i.e., a motivation) one who blindly engages in actions that are not endorsed by any existing desires (such as in abiding by rules that conflict with one's desires) is, according to Williams, acting irrationally. Williams' internalist argument against the possibility of external reasons, thus, consists of two parts: (1) in order for an external reason statement to motivate (to explain action), a new element must be introduced to be included in the agent's *S*, and (2) this new motivation must be, through a sound deliberative route, derived from some existing element in the agent's *S*; otherwise, the agent is acting irrationally.

In response to Williams' objections, Xunzi would argue that there are reasons for a beginner to conform to the *li* regardless of his desires. The *li*, as devised by the sages, provide the best way to bring human needs and desires into a harmonious balance with nature's capacity to produce goods (Ivanhoe 315). In order to understand this kind of motivation, it is important to distinguish two kinds of perspectives: the perspective of the sage and the perspective of the Xunzean beginner. From the point of view of the sage, people do have a kind of reason, which is similar to (but not the same as) Williams' internal reason, to follow the *li* for it provides for the best way to satisfy one's long-term desires. Even though the desire of being virtuous may not be an existing element in one's motivational set, people do have reasons to be so motivated by

the *li* since they offer the best way to satisfy one's prudential desires. From the sage's perspective, the prudential reasons to follow the *li* become "internal" because of a special kind of insight. Under this "god's eye view," Xunzi's conception of moral motivation is close to Williams'. However, from the point of view of the beginner, his actions are motivated solely because of the commands of the *li* and the agent does not necessarily recognize the long-term benefits the *li* provide: "Xunzi believes that the process of re-formation is a long, arduous process in which people do not fully understand why they do what they do, or what they are trying to become, until they are far into the process" (Schofer 133). Hence, the beginners, unaware of the prudential benefits, have no reason (in the Williams' sense) to be motivated to follow the *li*. From the perspective of the beginner, Xunzi's view of moral cultivation opposes Williams' conception of internalist requirement more profoundly.

The critical question for Williams is, then, whether the future desire, which is unbeknownst to the agent, can still be considered an internal reason. It is certain that when the Xunzean beginner initially follows the *li*, she is doing something that is contrary to her present desires since the *li* are designed to restrict their satisfaction. It seems that even if the overall satisfaction of one's desires, albeit they are not the present desires, does play a role in moral cultivation, Williams would still argue that such deliberation is irrational. The prudential considerations are aimed toward the satisfaction of future desires, which is based on the vision that by following the *li*, one will be able to maximally satisfy his desires in the long-run. Hence, the prudential considerations cannot be qualified as internal reasons, because, according to Williams, internal reasons for actions mean that the statement, "*P* has a reason to *A*" implies "*P* could reach the conclusion to *A* by a sound deliberative route [from the motivations s/he presently has]" (Williams 1989: 1). Since the prudential considerations do not entail the presence of "present desires" to be fulfilled in a convenient, economical, and efficient manner, one who acts according to prudential reasons is not deliberating rationally. Therefore, Williams would conclude that the Xunzean beginner, even from the perspective of the sage, does not have reasons to act according to the *li*. This seems to be an absurd conclusion because a person who embarks on the path of moral cultivation is irrational from both his own perspective and the perspective of the sage; this would render moral cultivation an irrational project altogether. It seems that the only way one can be rationally motivated to act morally, according to Williams, is when one already has the desires to be moral.

Such implication presents another difficulty to Williams' formulation. Nagel, in *The Possibility of Altruism*, attacks the position that "a desire of the agent must always be operative if the action is to be gen-

uinely his. Anything else, any external factor or belief adduced in explanation of the action, must on this view be connected with it through some desire which the agent has at the time, a desire which can take the action or its goal as object" (Nagel 27). In order to assert this position in regards to moral actions, as Williams' position does, one must show that moral desires are required in one's acting morally. Williams' view, according to Nagel, "eliminates the possibility of constructing ethical principles so based as requirements on action, unless one can somehow show that the appropriate underlying desires are required of us" (29). This is an evident problem for Williams because in addition to proving that external reasons are impossible, he also has to show that human beings, by nature, possess moral desires that allow them to act morally in a rational manner. If Williams fails to show the character of human nature or the nature of people's existing desires, he loses the framework from which his theory of reason and motivation derive.

Another criticism of Williams is directed to his conception of a sound deliberative route. It is questionable whether existing elements of *S* are required for the addition of new elements, as Williams has claimed. Even if internal reasons, namely motivations based on the agent's present desire, are required for acting morally, it is debatable whether the newly arrived moral motivations, as in the course of moral development, need to bear reasonable connection with the existing motivations. Xunzi would argue that this requirement is too narrow and would render his model of moral cultivation unsuccessful. Since morality is an artificial construct created by the sages, people, by nature, do not have any existing desires to be moral. By acquiring the proper education, one comes to develop new elements of *S*, those elements, in turn, lead one to behave virtuously for its own sake, which is the ultimate goal of moral cultivation. However, Williams' formulation of the internalist argument would render such acquisition of new motivation impossible by a sound deliberative route. Since the perfected person has no initial desires to be virtuous, it would be impossible to acquire new moral motivations had he deliberated correctly. Therefore, according to Williams', the Xunzean sage, who has supposedly acquired new motivations to behave morally, is, by definition, irrational. However, it is yet to be answered by Williams whether acting morally would require one to act irrationally as well.

Perhaps Williams can escape the above criticisms by suggesting a picture of human nature that is more optimistic than Xunzi's. While Xunzi does not believe in the existence of any natural moral dispositions, Williams may envision a kind of human nature that at least contains some desires for rational, moral actions. However, if Williams' conception of human nature is similar to that of Xunzi's, it would be

doubtful that he can offer any internal reasons for people to behave morally for its own sake. If Williams admits that moral cultivation cannot introduce new elements to one's motivational set independent of the existing ones, he would either have to endorse a positive picture of human nature (i.e., one that naturally contains moral desires) or an extremely pessimistic picture of people's capability of becoming good (i.e., people only act morally as a means to fulfill other desires). While Xunzi is pessimistic about the natural tendencies for people to act morally, he is optimistic about people's capability to transform their character through proper learning and strict adherence to the *li*. However, this transformation is only possible if external reasons exist and if they are capable of motivating. Therefore, Williams' account fails to offer a feasible explanation for the various elements exist in the process of moral cultivation. It is conceivable that external reason statements, "reasons" that are independent of one's desires, can play a role in motivating one to act morally.

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