

Ethics and Practical Reason

Edited by

GARRETT CULLITY

and

BERYS GAUT

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ETHICS AND PRACTICAL REASON

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CONTENTS

Introduction	I
GARRETT CULLITY AND BERYS GAUT	
1. Deciding How to Decide	29
J. DAVID VELLEMAN	
2. On the Hypothetical and Non-Hypothetical in Reasoning about Belief and Action	53
PETER RAILTON	
3. Humean Doubts about the Practical Justification of Morality	81
JAMES DREIER	
4. Practical Theory	101
GARRETT CULLITY	
5. Moral Judgement and Reasons for Action	125
ROBERT AUDI	
6. The Structure of Practical Reason	161
BERYS GAUT	
7. Practical Reason Divided: Aquinas and his Critics	189
T. H. IRWIN	
8. The Normativity of Instrumental Reason	215
CHRISTINE M. KORSGAARD	
9. Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy	255
DAVID O. BRINK	
10. A Theory of Freedom and Responsibility	293
MICHAEL SMITH	
11. Reason and Responsibility	321
R. JAY WALLACE	
12. Reasons and Reason	345
JOHN SKORUPSKI	
13. The Amoralist	369
JOSEPH RAZ	

<i>Contributors</i>	399
<i>Bibliography</i>	400
<i>Index</i>	413

Introduction

GARRETT CULLITY AND BERYS GAUT

1. *Three Poles in Theorizing about Practical Reason*

What ought I to do, how ought I to live? These are the central questions of moral thought; explaining the questions, and delimiting the range of acceptable answers, the tasks of moral philosophy. If so, the connection between morality and practical reason is already a close one: if one reads ‘ought’-remarks, as many people do, as remarks about reasons, then our questions are questions about what one has reason to do, and call directly for a theory of practical reason. On this view, morality is a subdomain of practical reason. Maybe there is a way of reading these questions—as containing the moral ‘ought’, some will say—for which the relation is less close. There are some uses of ‘ought’—in stating rules of etiquette, for example—which make it intelligible to ask ‘Why should I do what I ought (in this sense) to do?’ Maybe morality supplies such a sense.¹ On this view, moral answers to the opening questions will not always and for everyone supply reasons to act; but of course, it is precisely because of this that it will be important to specify the circumstances in which, and the agents for which, they do so. A developed moral outlook must at least be grounded in a satisfactory account of practical reasons, even if we do not hold that the former is contained in the latter.

The practical reasons that answer ‘Why should I do that’ are normative reasons—at least, they answer those root ‘Why should I do that?’ questions that contain a *should* for which ‘Why do what I should do?’ no longer makes sense. Normative reasons are those providing a justification of the actions for which they are reasons.

In saying this, though, there is a distinction to be made. Suppose your doctor tells you to take a certain medicine, but this happens to be a mistake, and it will harm you. What should you do? It is clear enough that given what you are justified in believing, you are justified in taking the medicine. There is a clear sense in which *that your doctor has told you to do so* is a

¹ See Philippa Foot, ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’, repr. in her *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 157–73.

normative reason to take the medicine. However, there is an equally clear sense in which *that it will harm you* is a normative reason not to take it. We might call this the distinction between subjective and objective normative reasons, respectively. The relation between the two is clear enough: I have a subjective normative reason to ϕ whenever I am justified in believing that I have an objective normative reason to ϕ . It is also clear that in seeking an account of normative practical reasons, it is objective normative reasons that will be our primary concern: from this an account of subjective ones will follow. Notice, however, that an account of practical *rationality* must be given in terms of subjective reasons: one is practically rational to the extent to which one is guided by one's subjective normative reasons. In the example just described, doing what you have most objective reason to do would be irrational.

Normative reasons of both these kinds answer 'Why should I do that?' Talk of reasons for action can also apply to a further sort of consideration, the sort offered in response to the question, 'Why did she do that?' Reasons cited in answering this question are explanatory, but not necessarily normative; for the consideration that shows why she did what she did may not succeed in showing why she *should* have done it—we don't always do what we should. Normally, when we ask this explanatory question, we are asking what motivated the agent to act;² but there remain two ways in which this question can be taken, and accordingly, two kinds of entity that can be cited in response. A first kind of answer cites the consideration the agent regards as a normative reason for the action she has performed—what is sometimes called 'the agent's reason' for it.³ As a response to the explanatory question, however, this style of answer will be elliptical. An 'agent's reason' is itself a consideration that someone recognizes; it can only be her *recognition* of that consideration that can contribute to an explanation of what she does. If what we are seeking is a non-elliptical motivational explanation of an action, what we will need to cite instead are those psychological states of an agent that constitute her being motivated to perform it. Citing these provides the second kind of answer to the question what motivated the agent to act as she did.⁴

Now although, as we have seen, explanatory practical reasons and normative ones are logically independent, there is widespread agreement on a certain conceptual connection between them. To begin with, on any credible view, it must be allowed that the explanation of an action may lie in the agent's awareness of the normative reasons he has for performing it. At

² That is, we are not normally looking for the sort of explanatory answer that cites e.g. his childhood deprivation as the explanation of why he did what he did.

³ See e.g. Stephen L. Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 32; Donald Davidson, 'Intending', in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 84.

⁴ The phrase 'motivating reasons' has been prominently applied to both kinds of entity. Thomas Nagel first applied it to what we are calling agents' reasons—see *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton:

least sometimes, we are right about our reasons, and respond rationally to them; when this is the case, the explanation of our actions will take this form. More significantly, it seems that the explanation of an action can only ever fail to take this form in so far as an agent is either irrational or misinformed about his reasons. This follows from our earlier remarks about rationality. It seems to be analytic that a rational agent is guided by what he is justified in believing to be his normative reasons. Might an agent have normative reasons that he could never be justified in believing he had? Such a possibility is not worth considering, for ‘reasons’ of this sort would be considerations it would never make sense to act on. If not, it seems we must say this: a normative reason for me to ϕ must be a consideration my awareness of which would motivate me to ϕ if I were thinking about it fully rationally and with full knowledge.

This way of spelling out the ‘internalism’ requirement on normative practical reasons—the conceptual connection between normative reasons and motivation—is common ground to contemporary theorizing about practical reason.⁵ As we shall see, however, it can be combined with widely diverging views about what full rationality consists in to yield widely diverging accounts of our reasons. What follows is a summary guide to the issues dividing contemporary theories of practical reason, within which to place the contributions to this volume. The history of moral philosophy invites us to think of that discussion as arranged around three prominent poles, the neo-Humean, the Aristotelian, and the Kantian. We can bring out the main points of contrast by considering three issues.

The first of these issues concerns the relation of the normative reasons an agent has to the motivational states he actually tends to have. The characteristically neo-Humean view is that all normative reasons are *hypothetical*—that they depend on the agent’s actual motivational tendencies. This view is typically generated by combining the doctrine of internalism about normative practical reasons with a distinctive picture of the motivational explanation of action drawn from Hume. This picture characterizes all motivation, and hence all motivational explanation, as depending on the existence of motivational states which are themselves neither rational nor irrational. Desires are the most obvious examples of such states, and one

Univ. Press, 1970), 15—but it is now widely used to refer to motivational explanations in terms of psychological states—e.g. by Michael Smith, ‘The Humean Theory of Motivation’, *Mind*, 96 (1987), 36–61, and *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), ch. 4.

⁵ The common ground is the conceptual connection itself—not the use of the words ‘internal’ and ‘internalism’ in relation to it. Thus for example the recent debate between John McDowell and Bernard Williams over whether all reasons are ‘internal’ is not a disagreement over the claim in the text, but over whether all reasons are *hypothetical*, in the sense we go on to identify. See John McDowell, ‘Might there be External Reasons?’, in J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1995), 68–85; Bernard Williams, ‘Replies’, in Altham and Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics*, 186–94.

subject of much discussion is whether all such states must be at least partly constituted by an element properly describable as a desire.⁶ At least on the linguistic face of it, it looks as though there is a great variety of states— aspirations, enthusiasms, attachments, thoughts about what one ought to do — which are states of motivation but which we ordinarily distinguish from desires. However that may be, if it is true that all motivational explanation relies on the presence of arational motivational states, then this will apply just as much to a motivational explanation that cites normative reasons as to any other. If my normative reasons must be capable of entering into motivational explanations of my actions, provided I am thinking about them fully rationally and knowledgeably, then a consideration can only be a normative reason for me if I am the sort of person who would possess appropriate motivational states if he were thinking fully rationally and knowledgeably. And if, as it seems to Humeans, the motivational states I would be in if I were thinking fully rationally and knowledgeably depend on my actual motivational tendencies, then we must look to the nature of an agent's arational motivational tendencies to determine the character of his reasons. However, the Kantian and the Aristotelian, by contrast, hold that there are normative reasons that apply to us in virtue of the nature of free rational agency and of specifically human nature, respectively— independently of our contingent motivational natures. They believe in non-hypothetical, or *categorical*, reasons.

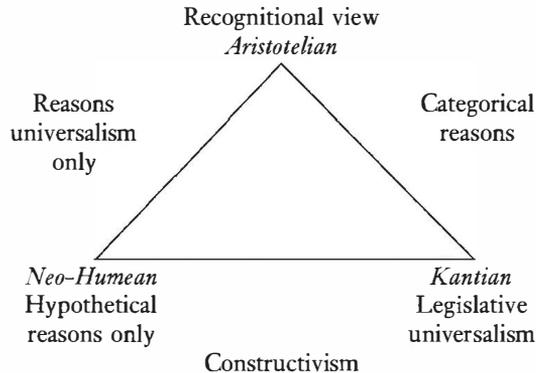
A second issue that a theory of practical reason must address is that of the relation between what an agent has a normative reason to do and what it would be good for her to do— between practical reason and value. A common view, and one that is common to the neo-Humean, Aristotelian, and Kantian poles, is that an agent has a normative reason to ϕ if and only if it would be good, all else equal, for her to ϕ . But notice the room this leaves for an important disagreement. Distinctive of Aristotelianism is its *recognitionist* view of the relation between value and practical reason, according to which the role of the faculty of practical reason is to recognize whether an action is valuable, where the action's being valuable is constituted independently of rational choice. On a *constructivist* view of the relation between value and practical reason, by contrast, an action's being valuable is held to be constituted by its being the object of rational choice (given full information). This conception is found in Kant in an especially pure form, but neo-Humeans are also naturally characterized as constructivists in this sense. For a generic conception of value shared by most Humeans characterizes the valuable for an agent as whatever that agent would value under conditions of rational reflection (with different versions adding their

⁶ See e.g. G. F. Schueler, *Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

own further specification of those conditions). If the psychological state of valuing is elucidated by its connection with choice, the neo-Humean is a constructivist.

Our first two issues concerned the relation of my reasons to my motivation, and their relation to my values. The third concerns the relation of my reasons to everyone else's. Given that A has reason to ϕ in circumstances C, is it an a priori requirement that any rational agent has reason to ϕ in C (where the agent's circumstances are construed as including her psychological states)? While this has sometimes been denied,⁷ we take it that all three poles endorse this *reasons universalist* view. The important point of difference is over the central Kantian doctrine that a further requirement—the requirement of *legislative universalism*—governs practical reason. Not only must a rational agent judge that any other rational agent in her circumstances has reason to ϕ , she must also be able to *will* as a universal law that every other rational agent in her circumstances ϕ s. This, Kantians claim, goes beyond mere reasons-universalism in eliminating the possibility of a rational egoist, who judges that any agent has reasons to promote that agent's own interests, while preferring other agents not to act on those reasons.

This gives us a genuinely three-cornered relationship between the neo-Humean, Aristotelian, and Kantian poles, with each pair opposed to the central characteristic of the third. We arrive at the following simple picture:



We have here three oppositions:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Recognitional view | vs Constructivism |
| Hypothetical reasons only | vs Categorical reasons |
| Legislative universalism | vs Reasons universalism only. |

The first element in each case is endorsed by one of the three poles, while its contrary is shared by the other two.

⁷ For the view that there could be two rational agents in the same circumstances, one of whom has reason to ϕ while the other has no reason to ϕ , see David Wiggins, 'Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgements', in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 139–84 esp. sects. 14–16, and Peter Winch, 'The Universalizability of Moral Judgements', repr. in his *Ethics and Action* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 151–70.

This is the background against which recent theorizing about practical reason has been conducted. In what follows, we articulate in greater detail the central issues of contention, outline the strategies to be pursued in addressing them, and introduce the present volume's contributions.

2. *The Humean Challenge*

We have characterized the neo-Humean pole in theorizing about practical reasons in terms of the thesis that an agent's normative reasons are relative to her actual motivational tendencies. And we have sketched the way in which proponents of this view typically draw on a characteristic claim concerning the desiderative ingredient in motivation. But while Hume himself certainly provides the inspiration for this view,⁸ it contains some significant departures from his own position. First, it abandons Hume's claim that passions, which he conceives of as feelings, are an ingredient in all motivation, replacing it with a more defensible claim concerning desires, which one can have at a time without feeling them at that time. This is not a major revision, though. Neo-Humeans still take their cue in arguing for the desiderative claim from Hume's characterization of passions as 'original existences' (p. 415), reinterpreting this in terms of the characteristic 'world-to-mind direction of fit' of desires. They are goal-directed states rather than truth-directed states, and this is what fits them to play a role in motivation—indeed, makes motivation unintelligible without them.⁹

The more significant departure concerns Hume's scepticism about normative practical reasons. Given his understanding of reason as aiming at the truth, it is impossible for the non-truth-directed states essential to motivation to be contrary to reason (pp. 415–16). This is not to say that our being motivated to perform an action can never display irrationality, for it can be produced by irrational beliefs,¹⁰ but according to the picture Hume himself offers us, criticisms of irrationality are only ever criticisms of theoretical irrationality: if the beliefs giving rise to my motivational states have themselves been formed rationally, there is no *further* criticism of irrationality that can be directed at my being motivated as I am. He puts the point as provocatively as he can:

'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to choose my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me. 'Tis

⁸ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), II. iii. 3. Page references in the text are to this edition.

⁹ See Smith, 'The Humean Theory of Motivation', and *The Moral Problem*, ch. 4. For criticism, see G. F. Schueler, 'Desires, Pro-Attitudes and Directions of Fit', *Mind*, 100 (1991), 277–81, and *Desire*.

¹⁰ This involves another amendment to Hume, who talks of *false* beliefs in this connection (p. 416).

as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than the latter. (p. 416)

For Hume, then, although actions can be said to be irrational, in virtue of their being based on irrational beliefs, there is no content to give to the notion of a normative reason *for* action. Hume himself, therefore, cannot be located at our neo-Humean pole: on his view, there are no normative practical reasons, hypothetical or categorical.

But Hume's scepticism about normative practical reasons is unconvincing. For one thing, it is based on a premiss—the characterization of reason as confined to aiming at the truth—which simply assumes what is at issue. And beyond this, a non-sceptical view promises to make better sense of some of our considered judgements concerning rationality: first, that we can be assailed by impulses or urges that are themselves irrational, without having arrived at them as ways of satisfying further desires; and secondly, that there can be cases of what Christine Korsgaard calls 'true practical irrationality'.¹¹ The sort of aberration of instrumental reasoning that Hume covers is the derivation of a desire from a desire for an end in combination with an irrational belief about the means to its satisfaction; but what he cannot accommodate is the irrationality that might be involved in an agent's being motivated to achieve an end, rationally believing that performing a certain action is the best means to achieving it, but failing to be motivated by this to perform it.¹² The objection does not require that this is a common occurrence, or even that it has ever occurred. Rather, it seems obvious that it could be irrational if it did occur, but Hume's scepticism will not allow him to say so.

However, there is a recognizably neo-Humean yet non-sceptical position that commands a considerable measure of current support. Its variants standardly involve the combination we noted in Section 1, taking the internalist connection between normative practical reasons and motivation and adding a desiderative account of the latter. According to internalism, in order for a consideration to amount to a reason for me to ϕ , it must be the case that my awareness of it could belong to a motivating explanation of my ϕ -ing if I were deliberating rationally and knowledgeably. But in order for there to be a motivating explanation of my ϕ -ing, it must be the case (given the Humeanism about motivation) that I have an appropriate desire. And if we add a further characteristic assumption—that the desires I would have if I were deliberating in this way depend on my actual desiderative nature—then all normative reasons are conditional on the agent's possession of suitable desires.

¹¹ Christine M. Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', *Journal of Philosophy*, 83 (1986), 12.

¹² This *might* be involved, but it needn't: discovering that *this* is what my end requires may make it rational to abandon it.

Perhaps the most frequent (though not the only)¹³ ground on which neo-Humeans make this further assumption is through sharing Hume's own view that an agent's ultimate desires—those she possesses for no further reason—are not subject to rational criticism.¹⁴ A neo-Humean who endorses this further claim possesses an *instrumental conception* of practical reason, according to which what one has a reason to do is what promotes the satisfaction of one's ultimate desires.¹⁵

In claiming that all normative reasons are hypothetical, neo-Humeans are not committed to holding that the content of an agent's reasons must always contain reference to her own desires. If they did, this would create difficulties. Surely, the consideration I *regard* as the normative reason for me to help someone will often seem to be that he needs it rather than that he needs it and that I want to help people who need it; we would be owed an explanation of the nature of this consistent mistake. But the neo-Humean does not need to allege any mistake here: the claim is that his needing it counts as a reason for me to help only *because* I have appropriate desires. There is no incompatibility. The claim is not that a reference to desires enters the *content* of one's reasons, but that desires are *conditions for the presence* of those reasons.

It is this latter claim, though, that is the subject of Thomas Nagel's influential and widely studied attack in *The Possibility of Altruism*, which targets the Humean account of motivation on which the claim draws. Some critics of the Humean account object that there are motivational states—deontic beliefs, beliefs about what one ought to do, being the usual candidates—that are not partly constituted by desires. Nagel, on the contrary, accepts the principle that such critics are attacking, that 'all motivation implies the presence of desire'.¹⁶ However, he points out that this does not entail that the presence of an agent's reasons is conditional upon the antecedent presence of suitable desires.¹⁷ After all, in all those frequent cases where a desire on which I act is itself a desire for which I regard myself as having a reason, my reason for that desire will be identical to my reason for the action. That is, there will be a single consideration, say R, my regarding which as a normative reason for ϕ -ing will be what explains *both* my ϕ -ing

¹³ Williams, as we shall see, does not support the assumption in this way.

¹⁴ See Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), app. 1, p. 293 (consideration V).

¹⁵ Adding to this instrumental conception the further claim that all agents' ultimate desires are self-interested produces the 'economic conception' of practical reason.

¹⁶ '[W]hatever may be the motivation for someone's intentional pursuit of a goal, it becomes in virtue of his pursuit *ipso facto* appropriate to ascribe to him a desire for that goal' (*The Possibility of Altruism*, 29).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 5. A reminder: our use of the phrases 'agent's reason' and 'my reason' corresponds to Nagel's own use of 'motivating reason', to refer to the consideration the agent regards as a normative reason for an action or desire.

and my wanting to ϕ . And if so, R's occupying this status can hardly itself depend on my already wanting to ϕ . Therefore, in such cases, the desire to ϕ cannot itself be a condition on R's counting as my reason to ϕ . On Nagel's view, there is a sense in which the remark, 'All intentional action is motivated by desire' is true—the motivation of action is *constituted* by desire. His concern, though, is to point out that it does not follow from this that the remark is true when read as maintaining that desires must be invoked when *explaining* the motivation of action. Where my motivation can be explained by my regarding myself as having a reason, we have not yet seen why desires must be held to be components in the explanation.

The argument offered for the Humean account of motivation was that the motivational explanation of action is a species of teleological explanation; and that any teleological state of an agent must be conceived of desideratively. Nagel seemingly accepts this argument;¹⁸ but is essentially observing that a Humean theory of the genesis of motivation doesn't follow from it. When a teleological explanation of action is given, what is *explained*—the motivation to act—is a desire; but the teleological character of such explanation does not show that desires must figure in the explanans.

Thus Nagel shows that the neo-Humean argument fails as an attempt to establish the conditionality of normative reasons upon the agent's desires. He can accept the internalist claim that a consideration can only be a reason for me if it can motivate me when I am deliberating rationally and knowledgeably about it. But if the neo-Humean has shown only that desires belong to the constitution of motivation and not to its explanation, then the possibility remains open that the recognition of reasons by someone who is deliberating appropriately is itself capable of giving rise to desideratively constituted motivation, independently of the agent's prior desires.

The neo-Humean has as yet supplied no obstacle to claiming that there are certain norms of practical reason in accordance with which any agent must be motivated, on pain of irrationality. Indeed, the norm of instrumental rationality already provides us with one kind of example of this. If I am motivated to achieve a certain end, then my failure either to be motivated to pursue what I reasonably believe to be an acceptable means to it or to abandon the end will be irrational, irrespective of my desires concerning either that means or the norm itself. So just as there are categorically binding norms of theoretical rationality—if I believe propositions instantiating the premisses of the modus ponens schema, then my failure either to draw the appropriate conclusion or to abandon some of the premisses is a failure of rationality, irrespective of the question of my

¹⁸ Nagel does not give an argument for his claim that all motivation implies the presence of desire: if he rejects this one, though, it is hard to see why he should be attracted to the claim.

antecedent dispositions towards believing the proposition that instantiates the conclusion—so too there is at least one categorically binding norm of practical rationality. Concerning this instrumental norm, of course, the neo-Humean can still maintain that the reasons it supplies remain dependent upon the actual motivational states of the agent, since these are reflected in the ends to which the norm applies. But perhaps there are further norms of practical reason whose specification of reasons is not motivationally dependent in this way—norms that are not only themselves categorical, like the instrumental norm, but that go beyond it in delivering categorical *reasons*. Perhaps, for example, the fact that an action of mine would alleviate your pain is a reason for me to perform it, irrespective of my desires concerning it. Nagel famously argues just this, in the remaining chapters of *The Possibility of Altruism*. The avoidance of solipsism requires one to conceive of oneself as but one agent among others equally real, and this commits us, he argues, to accepting this and other ‘objective’ or categorical reason-generating norms as constraining what is to count as an acceptable normative practical reason.

It is fair to say that Nagel’s defence of the categorical reason-giving force of morality has not attracted many adherents. His defence of this view turns on the claim that the avoidance of a solipsistic dissociation of personal and impersonal standpoints requires the attribution of the same motivational content to impersonal and personal judgements about what one has a reason to do.¹⁹ I must be moved not only by the thought that I have a reason to ϕ , but by the thought that *this individual*, seen simply as one among many others, has a reason to ϕ . In reply, however, it may be conceded to Nagel that avoiding solipsism requires us to attribute the same *propositional* content to the two—I must agree that others’ interests give them reasons in the same sense that mine give me reasons—but not the same motivational content.²⁰

To object to Nagel in this way is not yet to show that there is no hope of defending this categorical status for morality. However, Bernard Williams is frequently read as presenting an argument with this ambition in ‘Internal and External Reasons’.²¹ His argument can be characterized as modifying in two fundamental respects the earlier neo-Humean argument, which combined a desiderative theory of motivation with a version of internalism to argue for the relativity of reasons to desires. The first of the modifications, however, is to drop the desiderative theory of motivation altogether. *However* we decide, on full consideration, to characterize those states of an agent

¹⁹ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ch. 11.

²⁰ For this objection to Nagel, see Nicholas Sturgeon, ‘Altruism, Solipsism and the Objectivity of Reasons’, *Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974), 374–402, Stephen L. Darwall, ‘Nagel’s Argument for Altruism’, *Philosophical Studies*, 25, (1974), 125–30, and Darwall, *Impartial Reason*, ch. 10.

²¹ Bernard Williams, ‘Internal and External Reasons’, in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1981), 101–13.

which are states of being motivated,²² Williams argues that the normative practical reasons of any agent will be relative to those states. The second modification is to argue beyond the broad internalism of the earlier argument to a slightly narrower claim. According to internalism as spelt out so far, the potentially explanatory role of normative reasons shows that reasons must be capable of motivating rational agents for whom they are reasons. Williams's opponent—someone who believes that the status of a consideration as a reason can be independent of its relation to the agent's actual motivational states—must be claiming, as Nagel does, that the recognition of reasons can itself give rise to a new motivation, independently of the other motivational tendencies the agent may happen to have. However, simply for that recognition to give rise to motivation will not be enough to satisfy our requirement on the explanatory potential of the recognition of reasons. The new motivation must be produced by the agent's being rightly orientated in relation to his reasons, acting *for* them and not just *in accordance with* them: the motivation must be normatively guided and not just an eccentric causal consequence of the agent's state of normative awareness.²³ And if right orientation to reasons is a matter of rational deliberation and relevant knowledge, then internalism about normative practical reasons can be reformulated as follows:

R is a normative reason for A to ϕ only if rational deliberation and relevant knowledge could rationally guide A to be motivated by R to ϕ .

If rational deliberation consists in the activities he mentions—instrumental and constitutive reasoning about the attainment of ends, the harmonization or ranking of competing ends, and an imaginative engagement with the prospect of their realization²⁴—then it looks as though the motivational states that result from such deliberation will depend on those that are brought to it. A theory of normative practical reasons that characterizes some of them as categorical must then be saying that there is a kind of rational deliberation that will rationally guide the appropriate motivation whatever the agent's motivational dispositions may have been before he engaged in it. And as Williams puts it, 'I see no reason to suppose that these conditions could possibly be met.'²⁵

Williams's argument should not, however, be read as an attempt to show the impossibility of categorical reasons. If this were the attempt, it would have failed; for neither an Aristotelian nor a Kantian response has been ruled out. The Aristotelian response is that what right orientation towards one's reasons involves, in addition to the deliberative activities Williams recognizes, is the further capacity to recognize what is truly valuable, for

²² Such states he calls members of the agent's 'subjective motivational set'.

²³ 'Internal and External Reasons', 108–9.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 104.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 109.

which good upbringing is a precondition.²⁶ And the Kantian response is that Williams's argument cannot establish the non-existence of norms generating categorical reasons, for any such norms would themselves constitute additional constraints on the deliberation qualifying as *rational*.²⁷ Williams's own theory recognizes the categorical status of the instrumental norm, as any sensible theory must; in doing so, he incorporates it into his account of the conditions an agent must satisfy if he is to count as deliberating rationally. The issue between Williams and his opponents is whether there are further norms of practical reason which not only categorically apply to rational deliberation, but which also generate categorical reasons. But if there are, they will also have the status of constraints on what qualifies as rational deliberation. Williams's argument cannot demonstrate the non-existence of such norms: if this were the attempt, it would be employing a conception of rational deliberation that simply presupposes this conclusion.

But this is not the aim of Williams's argument. What it does successfully show is that the onus lies with the proponent of categorical reasons to argue for their existence.²⁸ Given the uncontroversial relevance of the activities he mentions to our judgements of the kinds of people who count as practically rational, a convincing argument must be mounted for placing further requirements on someone's counting as such.

A concern with this Humean challenge is at the heart of this volume. How can there be categorical reasons, and specifically, categorical *moral* reasons? In the broadest terms, the two main avenues of response to consider are these. First, one might advocate an account of value which makes what is good for an agent independent of that agent's motivational states, and derive from this an account of reasons which attributes to them a similar independence. Or, secondly, one might argue that the nature of rationality itself commits us to the recognition of categorical reasons. The two most fully developed and influential attempts to pursue these avenues are those of Aristotle and Kant, respectively. In the next two sections, we outline the main contours of those two attempts, explain why it should be thought that they stand to be improved on, and briefly describe some prominent current strategies for doing so.

3. *The Aristotelian Response*

For Aristotelians, as for neo-Humeans and Kantians, an action is the appropriate object of rational and fully informed choice for an agent if and

²⁶ See McDowell, 'Might there be External Reasons?'

²⁷ See Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason', 19–23.

²⁸ Cf. Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', in his *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1995), 37 and n. 3; 44.