

REASON AND PRACTICAL-REGRET

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Abstract: Christine Korsgaard argues that a practical reason (that is, a reason that counts in favor of an action) must motivate the agent to whom it applies, but only insofar as the agent is rational. She calls this requirement for practical reasons the *internalism requirement*. I will argue that the internalism requirement, as Korsgaard applies it, is a trivial requirement because it does not rule out any theories of practical reason. We should therefore consider a different requirement of practical reasons that actually rules out implausible theories of practical reason and helps explicate our concept of practical rationality. I suggest that practical reasons are such that they inspire what I call *practical-regret*, not under conditions of full rationality, but under counter-factual conditions of (1) psychological normalcy and (2) an agent's failure to comply with a reason. My paper will attempt to explain what practical-regret is, why it matters for our concept of practical reason, and why the eliciting conditions for practical-regret are normalcy, rather than perfect rationality. I will end my paper by showing how certain kinds of practical reasons, which the internalism requirement could not rule out, can be ruled out by my practical-regret requirement.

KORSGAARD ON THE INTERNALISM REQUIREMENT

Philosophers who write on practical reason typically acknowledge two possible senses of the term "reason": internal and external. Internal reasons characteristically depend on some fact about our internal motivational states (our desires, aims, etc.). External reasons do not depend on any such facts. External reasons are often taken to be facts about what actions are prudentially good for an agent. They are also sometimes taken to be the type of reasons that ground our objective moral requirements. It should be noted that even among externalists, there is fantastic diversity in opinion about what an external reason is and what external reasons we have.

Some philosophers, like Bernard Williams, reject all externalist views of practical reason for failing what Christine Korsgaard calls the *internalism requirement*. The internalism requirement is the requirement that "practical reason-claims, if they are to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating rational persons."¹ The internalism requirement seems to present a problem for certain externalist theorists who believe that reasons for action are independent of our internal motivational states. For most externalists, it is possible for an agent to have an objectively binding² reason to do something she cannot be motivated to do. On most externalist views, external reasons will fail to motivate individuals who lack particular subjective ends or desires. Because external reasons lack the motivational efficacy that rational considerations are supposed to have according

¹ Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," in *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 83, no. 1, (1986): 11.

² A norm (rational, ethical, legal) is objectively binding if it applies to an agent independently of the agent's own mental states.

to the internalism requirement, Williams concludes that external reasons do not exist. Only motivationally efficacious internal reasons are allowed on Williams' view.³

Korsgaard observes, however, that the internalism requirement, as Williams applies it, poses a problem for even the least controversial kinds of internal reasons. She asks us to consider means-end reasons, which directly depend on our subjective ends. Suppose I have a means-end reason to go for a run because running is a means to losing weight. Even though I want to lose weight, I might nevertheless be unmotivated by my means-end reason to run. Just as it is possible for a rich person to be unmotivated by an external moral reason to give to the poor, so too is it possible for me to be unmotivated by a means-end reason to run. Indeed, any plausible theory of practical reason provides practical reason claims that may fail to motivate a fully informed agent. As Korsgaard puts it, "true irrationality" must be possible.⁴ Since the possibility of true irrationality ostensibly does rule out internal reasons, neither should it rule out external reasons.

Korsgaard observes that, according to a plausible reading of the internalism requirement, a reason need not motivate every agent. Rather, it merely has to motivate a *rational* agent. But different theories of practical reason typically idealize rational agents in different ways. Thus, Korsgaard believes that normative theorizing about practical reason can yield conclusions about what rational procedures humans are capable of (rather than attempting, as Williams does, to arrive at normative conclusions from empirical claims about how particular humans reason).⁵ That is to say, if *a priori* moral philosophy yields the conclusion that an agent has reason to act altruistically, that means that there must be some "deliberative route" (to use Williams' language) from the agent's current motivations to the motivations that would cause altruistic action. A descriptive fact about human psychology can therefore be derived from a normative fact about rationality.

Because of these considerations, Korsgaard thinks that the real debate over external reasons is not a debate over whether external reasons can motivate agents. Instead, it is a question of whether a given theory of practical reason (be it internalist or externalist) has the most theoretical points in its favor. On Korsgaard's view it looks like the debate will be won through moral philosophy, not through psychological investigation.

THE PRACTICAL-REGRET REQUIREMENT

Korsgaard may be right in her interpretation of the internalism requirement, but I think she is mistaken to assume that, simply because the internalism requirement places no limits on what can count as a practical reason, *a posteriori* facts about human psychology do not serve as basic explanatory considerations for what reasons are. Even though Williams does not successfully articulate his reservations about external reasons, the intuition remains that facts about the reasons I have (or do not have) for action depend, in some sense, on certain facts about my particular psychology. It seems clear to me that some kinds of reason-claims properly take into account normal human psychology while others simply do not. My goal, in this paper, is to propose a way to clarify this intuition in the form of a "practical-regret requirement" on practical reason claims. The internalism

³ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Rational Action*, ed. by Ross Harrison (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 101-113.

⁴ Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," 14.

⁵ Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," 101-113.

requirement does not rule anything out, so if we want to use psychological considerations to limit what can be properly considered a reason (which I believe Williams rightly intuited), we must improve upon the internalism requirement in two ways.

First, our requirement should not idealize agents in terms of perfect rationality as the internalism requirement does. Instead, it should require an agent to respond to rational considerations under conditions of psychological normalcy. To make this switch is, naturally, to invite debate about what “normalcy” means. Yet, I think there is an available account of normalcy (to be discussed later in this essay) that (a) is non-normative and (b) explains our talk about what normal people are like in naturalistic terms. Why talk about the psychology of a normal person rather than an ideally rational one? First, there are a number of well-documented problems with idealizing in terms of full rationality that I will not discuss here.⁶ My greater concern, however, is that if our requirement for practical reason idealizes in terms of full rationality, it misses the point of why people mistrust certain kinds of externalist views. When Bernard Williams claims that there is no “sound deliberative route” through which external reasons can motivate an agent, he is not asserting that the externalist’s conception of a fully rational agent will fail to be motivated. He is saying that an agent with a psychology *that we would find familiar* will not be motivated (no matter what deliberative route she takes). Since much of our discourse about reasons and practical-regret stems from our discourse about how normal people make and reflect upon decisions, we must therefore think of a requirement on practical reason that idealizes in terms of normalcy.

Of course, there is no guarantee that a normal person will always be motivated to act rationally, even on a means-end view of rationality and, as Korsgaard observes, this fact should not keep us from counting means-end reasons as reasons. I therefore propose that we stop asking whether an agent will be motivated by the rational consideration posited by a reason-claim and instead investigate the broader psychological efficacy of a rational consideration, which, in normal people, is not limited to motivation. There are rational considerations that may fail to motivate a normal person but in light of which a normal person will still have a psychological response. I therefore recommend that we broaden the psychological requirement to allow, when motivation is absent, for a particular psychological response, which I will call *practical-regret*. This *practical-regret* response has different eliciting conditions than motivation does in situations relevant to assessing the internalism requirement. For a reason-claim to pass the practical-regret requirement, practical-regret must be a response not to the reason, but to one’s failure to act on a reason.

I will explain with an example. I have spent much of my life desiring to be an advanced jazz pianist. At the same time, I have always been well aware that if I spent an hour every day doing the right kind of practice, I would eventually achieve my desired goal. Unfortunately, I have never been sufficiently motivated to sustain this routine for more than a week - even though I have a strong means-end reason to do so (and in this case no equally strong reason not to do so). Although I am not motivated by the consideration that rigorously practicing piano is a means to my ends, I nevertheless experience a regretful response when I realize I have failed to take the correct means to my ends. This

⁶ For more discussion of the conditional fallacy, see Robert N. Johnson, “Internal Reasons and the Conditional Fallacy,” in *Philosophical Quarterly* 50, (1999): 53-71.

example is meant to show how (1) a normal person can sometimes fail to be motivated by a means-end reason and (2) a normal person can be expected to experience practical-regret when he or she realizes this fact. All this seems clear to me from introspection: When I realize that whatever I am motivated to do is an ineffective way of pursuing one or more of my subjective aims or desires, the emotional response I feel, insofar as I meet the conditions of normalcy, is an aversive, *regretful* affective response, which fits within the category of responses I call practical-regret.

Using practical-regret as the test for reason claims allows us to count means-end reasons as providing reasons for action. And, as we will see later in this paper, the practical-regret test allows us to rule out some reason claims that Williams wants to rule out, such as reasons provided by objective moral requirements. But why think that practical-regret has anything to do with practical reason, aside from letting us draw an arbitrary line between practical reasons claims internalists want to accept and claims they want to reject? When we reflect on the rationality of our actions, it seems to me that our evaluations of irrationality are necessarily linked to our feelings of practical-regret under normal conditions. It is hard to imagine a psychologically normal person who both (a) sincerely believes she acted against one or more of her reasons at some point in time and (b) does not experience any practical-regret in the slightest. Indeed, if someone claims not to experience practical-regret upon acting against a reason, then I think it is worth asking whether that person truly believes that she had that reason in the first place.

The most immediate explanation, I think, is to say that our concept of a reason is conceptually related to the practical-regret response, and to go a step further, that examining our talk about this response can help to illuminate the social origin of our concept of practical reason. It seems plausible that the purpose of at least some of our talk about reasons is to discuss courses of action that a normal, fully informed agent would or would not regret taking. When we chastise people for acting against a reason, we often say things like "I bet you regret not taking French." And when a fully informed, normal person denies having any regrets (say because they don't care about speaking French), then we start to wonder whether they had a reason not to take French after all (or whether they truly appreciate their *raison d'être*).

We can formulate this conceptual link between practical-regret and practical reason as a "practical-regret requirement," which stipulates the following: *If* a reason claim is to really present an agent with a reason for action, it must be true that *if* she were a fully informed, normal person *and* were to act against the reason, then the agent would experience the practical-regret response.

A few things must be said about what I think this practical-regret response is and what it is not. It is not a belief, though it follows from the belief that we have failed to act in a certain way. It is also not a motivational state. The response can best be described as a *feeling* that is characteristically associated with certain "regretful" behaviors. As prototypes of such behavior, we might think of an athlete's reaction to losing a championship game or a motorist's response to missing a highway exit. The feeling in question is the one that causes us to slap our foreheads, "kick ourselves," and, in many cases when motivation is absent, to develop second-order desires to revise our first-order motivations.

I want to be explicit that I am not making a conceptual claim about human psychology. I am making a claim about the kind of responses that follow certain sorts of realizations *under normal conditions*. My concept of normalcy is not based on a statistical generalization, but rather on the conditions of normalcy that we, as a community of inquiry,

must treat as normal in order to converge on our understanding of human psychology. In the next section, we will see what this concept is and why it is relevant to practical reason and the practical-regret requirement.

NORMALCY

I owe my notion of normalcy almost entirely to Phillip Pettit's paper "A Theory of Normal and Ideal Conditions." According to Pettit, a set of conditions is normal (or abnormal) if and only if, by treating those conditions as normal (or abnormal), a linguistic community maximizes long-term convergence on the use of terms to refer to objects or properties.⁷ Adapting Pettit's strategy to my purpose, I believe that conditions of psychological normalcy are those psychological conditions that must be treated as normal or abnormal in order to maximize agreement in our predictions of human behavior. This account of normalcy grants us a completely naturalistic, descriptive account of normalcy, which allows us to avoid the inevitable perils of using full-rationality as the eliciting conditions for practical-regret. As I've already argued, much of our discourse about reasons has to do with actions normal people would or would not practically regret taking. With practical-regret identified as the necessary "point of contact" between rational considerations and normal human psychology, let us evaluate the practical reason claims that externalist philosophers have been known to make.

EXTERNAL REASONS

In this section, I will argue that while positive existence claims about internal reasons (that is reasons that depend on our subjective internal states) meet the requirement, some (but not all) positive existence claims about psychologically independent external reasons do not. This assertion can be demonstrated, I think, by conducting thought experiments in which we subject the normal human subject to failures of different standards of rationality and imagine her response.

In this paper, we have already run this test for means-end reasons, which means that they meet the practical-regret requirement. Now let's apply the practical-regret test to an objective moral reason. These are the kinds of external reasons Bernard Williams wants to rule out, and I believe that conceptually linking irrationality with practical-regret allows us to do just this. Some philosophers (including Korsgaard) want to claim that practical reasons ground our moral requirements. Since most of these writers want to say that moral requirements apply to us independently of our aims or desires, the practical reasons that these moral requirements provide must be independent from our aims or desires, as well. Thus, moral reasons are typically taken to be external reasons.

Imagine a landlord who makes a fortune by unscrupulously gouging her impoverished tenants. She has no concern for her tenants' well-being and no interest in earning less money, so there is no amount of procedural reasoning that will generate a desire to be generous or otherwise change her callous mind. Of course, there are externalists who would say that she still has a reason to lower the rent because it is the right thing to do. Yet suppose that one of those externalists were to rationally persuade the landlord of a reason

⁷ Philip Pettit, "A Theory of Normal and Ideal Conditions," in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 96, no. 1 (1999): 21-44.

claim that states that she has a (moral) reason to lower her rents. If the landlord is a normal callous person, we might suppose that despite coming to believe that she has a moral reason to lower her rents, she will still not lower her rents. As Korsgaard acknowledges, there may be a gap between understanding a reason and being motivated by it.⁸ Furthermore, it strikes me the landlord will *not* have experienced practical-regret in response to gauging her tenants *despite* being persuaded of the externalist's reason claim. Because the eliciting conditions of the practical-regret requirement are met, but the practical-regret response does not occur, the moral reason therefore does not pass the practical-regret test, and, on my view, it should not be taken as really providing a reason for action.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that practical reason is conceptually linked to the “practical-regret response” and that this link can be formulated in the practical-regret requirement. The practical-regret requirement helps us to see how practical reasons are dependent on the particular psychology of the agent to whom they apply—provided certain counter-factual conditions hold. Armed with this requirement, philosophers who are skeptical of certain claims about “objective” or “external” reasons have grounds to reject some of these claims as failing to fit in with our talk about reason and practical-regret. If such rational norms exist, they are not, as Korsgaard seems to imply, conceptually continuous with our practical-regret-related reasons. They must be another sort of norm altogether.

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⁸ Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reason,” 17.