

Part IB, Paper 3, Question 5

'An agent has a reason to F just in case she would desire herself to F if she were fully rational.' Discuss

The claim in question is that only internal reasons exist, and that there are no counter examples of reasons to F existing in cases where there is no rational route from an agent's present mental state to desiring to F. It shall be argued that this claim is false, on the grounds that such counter examples do exist.

An internalist may make the following characterisation of reasons. Reasons must meet two requirements: the explanatory requirement and the deliberative requirement. The explanatory requirement is the claim that a reason must be able to form part of an agent's explanation for action. Assuming an account of explanation as taking a belief and desire as reasons to produce an action, it follows that a reason must be able to motivate action, in conjunction with other beliefs and desires. The deliberative requirement is the claim that a reason must be either in an agent's "subjective motivational set" (S) – their beliefs, desires, dispositions to act and think, etc – or there must be a rational deliberative route from their current S to the inclusion of the acknowledgement of the reason in their S. Such reasons are "internal", and include the type of reason specified in the claim in question 5: there is a rational route from the agent's present state to one in which the desire to F is in her S.

Given the two requirements, the internalist contends that anything that is not an internal reason is not a reason. Kantian Categorical Imperatives, for instance, cannot yield reasons unless there is a rational route from an agent's S to the acceptance of that Imperative as a reason to act in a certain way. Whether or not something is a reason for an agent's item, depends entirely on the state of the agent and their S.

These two requirements face significant problems, however, if they are intended to rule out anything which doesn't meet them as a reason. The essential objection is that reasons can exist for agents even though there is no rational route for them. Consider an example of the "education objection": suppose that a child is deeply unwilling to brush its teeth, such that no amount of rational argument could convince that child to brush its teeth. Yet later on in life, the child deeply regrets not having brushed its teeth, since the resultant health problems have caused great harm, or at least such that, retrospectively, the person realises that, as a child, they had a reason to brush their teeth. Yet, as a child, there was no rational way for that reason to become part of their S, and so, for the internalist as conceived, it was not a reason at all.

The internalist can object at this point that the child was not "fully rational" – i.e. they did not have the appropriate level of moral maturity and information to appreciate the reasoning. Hypothetically, however, had the child been fully rational, they would not have refrained from brushing their teeth. This is still consistent with the claim in question.

The non-internalist can re-join, however, that there are other cases in which reasons exist but there is no rational route to them. Imagine, say, that I currently believe that the fun I will derive from hitting a wasps' nest will exceed the pain derived from this action. However, what I don't know is that the pain I will actually endure from the action is actually far greater than my expectations predict. Furthermore, since pain is subjective, there is no way anyone can know precisely how much pain I will experience. The only way in which knowledge of the experience of pain resultant from this action can be derived is by actually performing the action. There is

therefore no rational route, from my present situation, to coming to accept that I have a reason not to hit the wasps' nest that outweighs reasons in the action's favour. This is a clear counter example to the deliberative requirement, since the claim that I have no reason to hit the nest is not rationally acceptable, but my belief from the hospital bed that I had a reason not to hit the nest is clearly not absurd.

The internalist might reply that there is no difference between the two cases: in each, there is no rational route from the present state to one in which the reason is accepted, but had the agent been aware of their future reaction towards the consequences of their action, there would. This, however, is to confuse reasons with rationality. Rationality is a property involving correct application of inferences, but reasons are not a property of the agent; to suppose that rationalists can be hypothetical is to confuse it with reasons.

In conclusion, the internalist argument that an agent had a reason to F if she would desire herself to F if she were fully rational is false. Clear counter examples can be found, and to deny that they are reasons is to confuse reasons with rationality.

**A clearly written and well constructed answer. There is not quite enough detail to push it into the first class - for instance, the response to the first internalist objection is too quick - but the answer earns a solid 2i on account of showing relevant knowledge and being pertinent and well organized.**