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# Are External Reasons Impossible?\*

*Rachel Cohon*

It is clear that our desires and aims provide us with some reasons for action. Are there also reasons for action that are not contingent upon what desires or aims we have? In his article "Internal and External Reasons,"<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams answers a version of this question in the negative. He offers an argument intended to show that there are no reasons to perform actions that would not satisfy the agent's desires, aims, or other "motives." I shall try to bring into sharp focus what I take to be the weaknesses in this argument. But I also wish to show that, although the argument is unsuccessful, Williams does successfully identify the main hurdle that his opponents must surmount if they are to prove that desire-independent reasons are possible.

According to Williams there are two mutually incompatible ways to interpret a sentence of the form "P has a reason to A" or "There is a reason for P to A."<sup>2</sup> On the first or internal reading, it is a necessary condition for the truth of the sentence that P have some motive or aim which will be served or furthered by his A-ing, so that if he has none, it is not the case that he has a reason to A. On the second or external reading, the reason sentence does not imply that the agent has any such motive or aim and so "will not be falsified by the absence of an appropriate motive" (p. 17). More explicitly, "any model for the internal interpretation must display a relativity of the reason statement to the agent's *subjective motivational set*, which I shall call the agent's S. . . . An internal reason statement [a statement interpreted in the internal way] is falsified by the absence of some appropriate element from S" (p. 18). Although no precise definition of a subjective motivational set is given, Williams says that S contains desires, and "such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects . . . em-

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1. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Rational Action: Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, ed. R. Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 17–28. All further references to this article will be given parenthetically within the text.

2. The two forms of sentences do not necessarily collect the two interpretations, respectively; in some uses, both forms of sentences may be given the same interpretation.

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bodying commitments of the agent" (p. 20). (I shall follow Williams in calling the desires and other desire-like factors in S "motivations" except where, for neutrality's sake, I must call them simply "elements of S.") Williams grants that our language contains statements understood in the external way (external reason statements) but argues that none of them can be true. That is, he denies that there can be any reasons for action whose existence does not depend upon the agent's having something in his subjective motivational set that the action would satisfy or fulfill.

About reasons in general Williams says: (a) If something is a reason for action, it must be that people sometimes act for that reason, and when they do, the reason must figure in some correct explanation of their action. Also, (b) If something is a reason for action, it shows that someone who acts on it is behaving rationally, in the sense that the agent could come to acknowledge that she had this reason as a result of deliberation. Thus, as Williams conceives of reasons they have two basic features: they can explain action, and they can provide rational support for action. In light of this conception of reasons, Williams says an agent may believe that something is a reason for her to act when it is not (she mistakenly thinks an action will further a certain element of her S) and may fail to believe that something is a reason for her to act when it is (she does not know that a certain action would further an element of her S). These are characteristics even of reasons that are properly described in internal reason statements, reasons whose existence depends upon the agent's having certain elements of S.

According to Williams's concept of deliberation, in deliberating one can discover internal reasons, and one can also discover that what one took to be internal reasons are not. On his view the recognition that something is the causal means to something else is not a piece of deliberation, although it would play a role in deliberation. "A clear example of 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" (p. 20). Another example is "thinking how the satisfaction of elements in S can be combined, e.g. by time-ordering" (p. 20). Others include removing elements from S and adding elements to S by using one's imagination to get "a more concrete sense of what would be involved" (p. 20).

Williams's argument falls into two parts. The first intends to show that a putative external reason is, by itself, insufficient to explain action, and something more is needed if it is to satisfy the requirement that any reason for acting must be able to explain the action. The second part starts by assuming that such a further factor could come into being, so that the external reason could fulfill the explanatory requirement, but argues that, given the way in which this 'something more' must come into being, the putative external reason cannot satisfy the other requirement on reasons, that they could be arrived at by the agent through rational deliberation.

Williams illustrates his argument with the story of Owen Wingrave from the Benjamin Britten opera. Owen's father urges him to join the army to uphold the family pride and tradition of military service. Owen hates everything about military life and desires a different kind of life, but his father nonetheless urges him to become a soldier. The father could have expressed himself by saying that there was a reason for Owen to join the army, and, given the condition of Owen's S, the father would be giving this claim the external interpretation.

First, we are asked to suppose that there is indeed an external reason for Owen to join the army. Since reasons must be able to figure in explanations of action, Owen's external reason could be someone's reason on a particular occasion and would figure in an explanation of that person's action. But an external reason can be present even if the agent for whom it is a reason is not motivated to act; Owen has a reason even when he is not in the least inclined to join the army. Thus, if he eventually does join the army, the external reason could not by itself explain his action, for it was there when Owen was not motivated to join, and "nothing can explain an agent's (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act" (p. 22). Therefore, some additional explanatory factor, a psychological link, is needed to explain Owen's action if he accepts his father's claim and joins the army.

Presumably, the crucial link is Owen's believing the (external) reason statement. Once he comes to believe that family honor is a reason for him to enlist, he then has an appropriate motivation in his S, and in fact comes to have an *internal* reason.<sup>3</sup>

Since reasons for action reveal the rationality of an action as well as how it may be explained, Williams says that the agent must acquire this new motivation "*because* he comes to believe the reason statement" (p. 23) and under the conditions of correct deliberation, rather than by some nonrational process. He suggests that the external reason statement entails that, "if the agent rationally deliberated, then, whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to [A]" (p. 24). But, by hypothesis, there is no motivation in the agent's S for him to deliberate *from*, to reach the new motivation that he acquires in coming to believe the external reason statement. The new motivation is not a desire to do

3. The point here is not to collapse external reasons into internal reasons. True, once the agent comes to believe the external reason statement, he is in the same condition as an agent who has and believes she has an internal reason, so the difference between the two sorts of reasons cannot be found in this situation. But they are different. We have seen one difference already: when Owen had no interest in joining the army, the external reason statement was nonetheless true of him, whereas an analogous internal reason statement about his joining the army would not have been true. Here is a second difference: the external reason statement has been true of Owen all along, but when he comes to believe it he comes to have a new motivation. This does not happen when an agent comes to believe an *internal* reason statement that has been true of her for some time, for she has had an appropriate motivation in her S from the beginning.

what would be the most pleasant, most economical, or most convenient way to satisfy an element of S, nor is it a desire to follow a time plan, nor is it related to the elements of S in the other ways mentioned in Williams's account of deliberation. For if it were, the agent would have had an internal reason to perform this action from the start. Therefore it is impossible for an agent to deliberate rationally to the formation of the motivation to act on an external reason. Thus it is never true that someone has a reason to act regardless of the contents of her S.

Both parts of the argument fail.

To obtain his conclusion to the first part of the argument, Williams depends upon the key premise that "nothing can explain an agent's (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act." This claim, which I shall call Premise M, is thoroughly plausible but owes its plausibility to an equivocation. Once the equivocation is removed, the premise turns out to say something question begging and probably false.

The reasoning in this first part of the argument is contained in full in the following paragraph:

In considering what an external reason statement might mean, we have to remember again the dimension of possible explanation, a consideration which applies to any reason for action: 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. Now no external reason statement could *by itself* offer an explanation of anyone's action. Even if it were true (whatever that might turn out to mean) that there was a reason for Owen to join the army, that fact by itself would never explain anything that Owen did, not even his joining the army. For if it was true at all, it was true when Owen was not motivated to join the army. The whole point of external reason statements is that they can be true independently of the agent's motivations. But nothing can explain an agent's (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act. So something else is needed besides the truth of the external reason statement to explain action, some psychological link; and that psychological link would seem to be belief. [P]'s believing an external reason statement about himself may help to explain his action. [P. 22]

How are we to interpret Premise M, the claim that nothing can explain an agent's intentional actions except something that motivates him so to act? What does "something that motivates" mean here? The key is in the two preceding sentences, "For if it was true at all [that Owen had an external reason to join the army], it was true when Owen was not motivated to join the army. The whole point of external reason statements is that they can be true independently of the agent's motivations." By "motivations" here he has to mean elements of S, because the whole point of external reason statements, the characteristic that distinguishes them from internal reason statements, is that they can be true even if

the agent has no elements of S that would be served or furthered by performing the action. Thus the next sentence, Premise M, claims that nothing can explain an intentional action except a member of the agent's S. Intentional action is impossible, or at least inexplicable, in the absence of an element of S that the action serves or furthers.

This is a controversial claim whose truth is by no means obvious; in fact, there are good reasons to think it false. Although it will not be argued at length here, it seems to me that many actions are done intentionally and can be readily explained, even though there is no element of the agent's S that the action serves or furthers. For example, on a particular evening a man makes a sack lunch just as he does every evening; he knows that tomorrow he plans to lunch in a restaurant with a colleague, but as he performs his routine task he does not happen to make the connection. Or, someone who has been given a posthypnotic suggestion rises at a certain signal, gets a pencil and paper, and performs a calculation. In another type of example, someone is swayed by a candidate's personality and votes for him, without thinking about whether he wants the person to have the job, when in fact he does not; or he buys a product out of admiration for the athlete who promotes it because he is influenced by the endorsement, although he has no expectation that the product will be useful. These actions are clearly done intentionally. The agent knows what he is doing and in some of the cases has to monitor his own behavior through a series of steps. In none of these cases is the action accidental, in the way that one may accidentally knock over a glass with a jerk of surprise, knowing what one is doing but nonetheless not intending it. Nor are these like the action of the person who intentionally walks forward and in so doing unintentionally steps on the cat's tail, where he intends to do what he is doing under one description but not under another. On the contrary, in each of the above cases the agent would say that he did the thing under the description I have given (made a lunch, did a calculation, bought something), did it on purpose, meant to do it, did it deliberately—all the marks of intentional action are there. These are not, of course, very wise things to do. But some of our actions are not very intelligent. The fact that an action is not intelligent, however, does not imply that it is not intentional. Furthermore, each of these actions is explicable; in fact, in describing them I have largely explained them. Why did the man vote for Johnson when he believed Smith would make a better chairman? He was influenced by Johnson's powerful personality. Why did the woman get pencil and paper and perform a compound-interest calculation? She had been given a posthypnotic suggestion to do so at a certain signal, and the signal was given. Why did the man make a sandwich this evening? Out of habit. Yet these actions do not serve or further any elements of the agents' S's, and their explanations do not mention any of the agents' desires, aims, projects, loyalties, or other things Williams allows in an S. Thus it does not seem to be true that nothing can explain an intentional action except an element of the agent's

S that would be served or furthered by it, and it is unwise to take this as a premise, as Williams does.

By doing so, furthermore, Williams assumes a large part of what he is trying to prove. He is trying to prove that there can be no external reasons because the considerations described in external reason statements cannot qualify as reasons. To be a reason, for Williams, a consideration must at least have his two features, the explanatory capacity and the connection with rational deliberation. Williams's strategy is to assume that there are some external reasons and perform a *reductio*. Thus he assumes that there are some reasons that could be present in the absence of any element of S (any "motivation") that would be served by the action, and since they are reasons, they therefore satisfy his explanatory requirement, even in the absence of any appropriate element of S. It is then open to Williams to try to *prove* that these putative external reasons cannot, in fact, satisfy his explanatory requirement, but it is not open to him to assume that they cannot. To assume, as he does here, that the only thing that can explain an action is an appropriate element of S is simply to assume that putative external reasons do not satisfy the explanatory requirement and therefore are not reasons. With this assumption Williams could immediately conclude that the considerations described in external reason statements cannot be reasons; he has begged the question at the outset. It is only because he has not noticed the exact contents and logical consequences of Premise M that he thinks he must go on to the second part of the argument and show that external reasons do not satisfy the rationality requirement.

It may be thought that in Premise M Williams does not actually assume that putative external reasons do not satisfy his explanatory requirement. After all, the requirement only says that, if someone in fact acts on a consideration, it must be capable of explaining the person's action. From Premise M Williams merely infers that, when the agent acts on the putative external reason, at that point she must have an appropriate element of S; he does not infer that prior to action, when she had no appropriate element of S but had the putative external reason, it was not a reason. So, it may be argued, Williams's assumption, while unsupported by argument, is not question begging.

But the objection misconstrues Williams's explanatory requirement on reasons. To be a reason for A-ing, a consideration C must be the kind of thing that could be someone's reason on some occasion, so that if some person P *were* to A and we were told, "He did it because of C," this answer would explain the action.<sup>4</sup> The requirement holds for all reasons, even those on which no one in fact acts; it is a requirement on what would be the case if someone were to act for the reason that C. If C

4. Of course, the explanatory requirement is a necessary but not a sufficient condition on C's being a reason. Not everything that explains action turns out to be a reason for it, but what cannot explain an action cannot be a reason for it.



would not explain P's doing A were it to occur, then C is not a (complete) reason. Suppose, for example, we wish to know whether the fact that this fruit is a lemon satisfies the explanatory requirement on being a reason for P to squeeze its juice into his tea. Were P to squeeze the juice of this fruit into his tea, and in answer to our question "why did he do it?" we were merely to be told "because it is a lemon," we would not be getting an explanation. To explain the action one needs more—P likes lemon in his tea, or P thinks tea with lemon is good medicine for his cold, or the like. If a consideration, such as the fact that this object is a lemon, would be insufficient by itself to explain action were the action to be performed, then it does not satisfy the explanatory requirement. And a consideration that does not satisfy the explanatory requirement is not a reason—not where action occurs and not in cases where it does not. Since there may be no relevant motivation when one has an external reason, in assuming, as he does in Premise M, that a consideration cannot explain an action without the help of a motivation, Williams is indeed assuming that no external reason can satisfy the explanatory requirement. Putative external reasons cannot fully explain action where it occurs because other considerations must also be invoked; therefore they are not themselves reasons in the first place. This is effectively what he has assumed. It is surely not anything his opponent would grant him in building his *reductio*.

The assumption is question begging, yet the paragraph quoted above does not *seem* to beg any questions. Why does this illegitimate move tend to escape our notice? Premise M has the ring of self-evidence. "But nothing can explain an agent's (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act." This seems obviously true because it inadvertently exploits the ambiguity of the word "motivates" and its cognates. When we read "something that motivates" we are not thinking of it in Williams's special sense, that of a desire, aim, pattern of emotional reaction, or other element of S. We naturally slide into thinking of it in an ordinary sense. *Webster's New International Dictionary*,<sup>5</sup> for example, defines "motivate" as "to provide someone with a motive, impel," and "motive" as "something (as a need or desire) that causes a person to act." (It is interesting that Williams mentions needs as things that are not necessarily elements of one's S.) When we read "something that motivates" we naturally think of just this meaning: something that causes the person to act. Of course we cannot explain Owen's (or anyone's) action without mentioning whatever it was that caused or impelled him so to act; this is what we found obvious in reading that pivotal sentence. But this fact carries few implications about the nature of whatever it was that caused him to act. The expression "something that motivates" does suggest a cause of action that is inner or mental; we would not accept, as fitting this description, a strong wind

5. *Webster's New International Dictionary, Unabridged*, 3d ed. (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1979).



at one's back or just anything that might cause a person to do something. (Hence the qualifier "as a need or desire" in the dictionary definition.) The fact that we must mention a mental cause to explain intentional action does not, however, imply that this 'whatever it was' must be a desire, aim, loyalty, or other element of S. Although we cannot explain Owen's action without mentioning its inner cause, for all Williams has shown we might well be able to do so without mentioning any element of Owen's S. And since, by the hypothesis with which the argument began, there is initially no element of S suitable to figure in that explanation, it had better be left open that something outside that set could cause the action, if Williams is to give his opponent a fair chance.

It is important to recognize, here, that Williams cannot use the dictionary meaning of "motive" to attain consistency throughout the quoted paragraph. This is precluded by his conception of internal reasons. The sense of "motive" or "motivation" he is committed to in Premise M is the sense in which the agent with an internal reason has a motivation and the agent with only an external reason does not. This cannot mean that the agent with the internal reason is caused or impelled to act but the agent with an external reason is not; that is not what constitutes the asymmetry between the two kinds of agent. For Williams allows that someone who has an internal reason can fail to know about the reason, fail to be impelled to act, and fail to act. Either kind of reason can be present in the absence of a motive in *this* sense. In either case Williams could say that the reason alone is not enough to explain action because it was there when there was no cause of action (no "motive" in the dictionary sense). But he says the two cases *differ* with respect to motive, so this cannot be the sense he means. What Williams really wants to say is that when the agent comes to believe she has a reason and then does act—when the cause of action does come into being—the internal reason gives us a way of explaining the origin of this cause of action by appealing to something that was there all along, an element of S, while the external reason does not give us this way to explain where the cause of action came from. Williams is really dealing with two different entities here and wants to explain the generation of one (the cause of action) by the presence of the other (the element of S) combined with a belief. But by equivocating on the word "motivate," he smuggles in the assumption that these two entities are one and the same. If they were a single entity, it would of course follow that the cause of action cannot be present at all without the element of S, which is what Williams concludes. But it would also follow that the element of S cannot be present without the cause of action, and hence without action, which is something Williams denies.

What Williams should be trying to demonstrate here is that one cannot be moved (caused) to act intentionally without an element of S that would be served or furthered by the action. He should be trying to show that motivation in the sense of cause of action is dependent upon motivation in the sense of an element of S. He needs to establish this

point in order to proceed with his argument because the second part of the argument is based on the claim that a new element of S must come to exist when someone acts on a purely external reason. If it is possible for someone to be moved to intentional action by something that is not itself, and was not generated by, any element of S, that whole argument cannot get started. The failure of the first part of Williams's argument denies the second part its starting point.

However, it is not enough for Williams's opponent, who wants to preserve external reasons, to deny the dependence of causes of intentional action on elements of S or even to produce examples of intentional actions that serve no element of the agent's S (as I did). Williams may still argue that these S-independent causes of intentional action do not yield *rational* action, the kind that the agent would choose in rational deliberation, and hence that agents who are impelled by them are not acting on true reasons. What the defender of external reasons has to do is produce examples of actions of this S-independent sort whose rationality is beyond question, about which we can truly say that an agent in such circumstances who deliberated rationally would be caused so to act. Without this, while Williams is still wrong to assume that intentional action requires a suitable element of S, a great burden of proof lies with the defender of external reasons (as can be seen even more clearly in the analysis of the second part of Williams's argument below). Because Williams thinks a new element of S is needed for action on the external reason, he goes on to examine the possible genesis of that new element to see if it can come to be by rational deliberation. If the defender of external reasons thinks there is something else, not in S, that can give rise to action on the external reason, she must examine the genesis of *that* entity to see if *it* can come to be by rational deliberation. If it cannot, she has not advanced toward showing that there are such things as external reasons.

The second part of Williams's argument also fails, however, even if we disregard the effects on it of the errors in the first part. Suppose that the agent who is moved to act on an external reason, where before she had no element of S that would be served by so acting, now must acquire an appropriate element of S. She must, Williams says, acquire this new element by rational deliberation. Rational deliberation is a process of associating the elements of S with one another according to broad (and not fully determinate) rules that govern their relationships. There is no rational deliberative process that could yield this new element, he says, given that there are no old elements from which it could be derived.

It is important to notice which mistake Williams does not make here. He says that the element of S needed to explain acting on an external reason must be acquired by a rational process, yet he never says the elements of S that explain action on internal reasons must similarly be acquired by any rational process. No doubt some of these latter elements of S are produced by deliberation from other elements of S, but Williams does not and could not claim that every element of S that forms the basis

of an internal reason was produced by deliberation from another element of S. For, first, it is impossible for elements of S all to be derived from other elements of S ad infinitum, for the sorts of reasons Hume delineates in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.<sup>6</sup> And, second, some of our desires that give rise to action are obviously not derivative but just basic. If I play a record because I like it, or try some of a new dish because I want to know how it tastes, I act on an internal reason based on an element of my S that was not derived from any other but just happened. In an example Williams mentions wanting a gin and tonic as a reason to do something; surely the desire for a gin and tonic need not be acquired by deliberation from other elements of S. Yet he seems to assume that any element of S that could explain one's action on an *external* reason must be arrived at rationally. Why is it that these must involve deliberation (from another element of S) while the elements that explain action on internal reasons can just assail us? It may be thought appropriate to object to this extra restriction on external reasons.

But there is nothing illegitimate in this assumption. Williams apparently reasons as follows. When someone has an internal reason, the only ground there is for attributing the reason to her is the existence of the relevant element of S. If it is an element of S—for example, a desire—that was not derived from others but just arose, and it came into existence at a particular time, then before the desire came to be, the agent had no internal reason. With someone who has an external reason, however, and later comes to have an appropriate element of S, the situation is different. There must be some ground of attributing the reason to him before he acquires the element of S. The existence of the element of S cannot be the ground of attributing the reason, for he has the reason when the element of S does not yet exist. Williams suggests what he takes to be the only plausible ground the defender of external reasons could offer. Although the agent has no element of S that would be served by performing the action, he has a reason because, suggests Williams, if he were to deliberate correctly, he would acquire an appropriate element of S. The ground for attributing the external reason is the fact that rational deliberation would yield the relevant element of S. Hence, there are strict rationality requirements on the genesis of the element of S.

6. David Hume, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, app. 1, consideration 5, in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, 2d ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 293; italics original: "Ask a man *why he uses exercise*; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. Perhaps to your second question, *why he desires health*, he may also reply, that *it is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *Why?* *It is the instrument of pleasure*, says he. And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason. It is impossible there can be a progress *in infinitum*; and that one thing can always be a reason why another is desired. Something must be desirable on its own account, and because of its immediate accord or agreement with human sentiment and affection."

Thus Williams has had to make an assumption about what constitutes the ground for attributing external reasons. Perhaps he is wrong to think the ground he chooses is the only plausible candidate, but he has not introduced any ad hoc differences between internal and external reasons.

Williams goes wrong in another way. Recall that, by hypothesis, there are no previously existing elements of S that the agent could deliberate from to get the new element of S (call it E) that explains her A-ing, since any such previously existing elements would have given her an internal reason to A in the first place. Therefore, Williams reasons, she could not acquire the new element E by rational deliberation. However E comes to be, it is nonrationally, for all the forms of rational deliberation require the presence of already existing elements of S. Now Williams admits that, given the vagueness of his characterization of the contents of S and the open-endedness of his account of deliberation, one might object that "it is unclear what the limits are to what an agent may arrive at by rational deliberation from his existing S" (p. 25). He points out that there are no fixed boundaries to what counts as rational deliberation, as he understands it, and he allows it to include "the use of the imagination to extend or restrict the contents of the agent's S" (p. 25). Williams denies that this absence of fixed boundaries poses any difficulty for the internal reasons theorist, since for him it only shows that the set of reasons for an agent to A is less determinate than one might have supposed. However, this lack of clear limits on what counts as rational deliberation does pose a problem for Williams, who wants to show that external reasons are impossible because there is *no* process of rational deliberation that could yield E in the absence of old elements that the agent may deliberate from. If Williams cannot specify which processes qualify as rational deliberation and which do not, he cannot rule out the possibility that there is a qualified process (perhaps one employing the imagination) that can produce E without working from any other elements of S. He needs to show that the coming to be of E cannot be rational, and given his open-ended delineation of deliberation, he cannot do this.<sup>7</sup>

7. Of course, there has been, all along, a problem with the notion of an agent's S. In places Williams writes as if he wishes S to contain dispositions to *act* as well as the other things he mentions (p. 23). And while he generally sounds as if he wishes S to exclude anything purely cognitive, such as beliefs, in some places he writes as if S is to contain beliefs about what reasons one has (p. 20). Clearly, if S is sufficiently expanded, there will come to be little or no disagreement between Williams and the so-called external reasons theorist. For example, if S can contain beliefs, it would be possible for someone to derive a new element of S from existing elements of S by *theoretical* reason, deriving a belief from other beliefs. This would surely be a rational way to arrive at a new belief. And if it is an element of S, presumably it can explain action. Thus someone who thinks reasons may be based on beliefs alone would be classified as an internal reasons theorist alongside someone who claims that nothing can be a reason unless it is based on a desire. We begin to lose the distinction between the two views, and there is little left that can be called an external reasons theory. However, when one attempts to give a precise definition of the set S that maintains an interesting distinction between internal and external reasons theorists, for example by limiting S to desires and aims, Williams's argument becomes less and less plausible.

The failure of Williams's refutation leaves the defender of external reasons with the job of finding some rational way in which an agent can come to be moved to act on an external reason. Because Williams has not shown that there must be an element of S to explain the action, the theorist is not constrained to find an element of S that triggers the action and is also rationally arrived at. However, she is constrained to find some way in which acting on an external reason is really acting on a reason and not acting on a whim of the moment, by providing a possible trigger of the action, outside of S, that necessarily would operate if the agent were well informed and rational. Williams has identified the task that external reasons theorists have so far failed to perform (as far as I know): they must find considerations that can obtain regardless of the agent's desires, aims, or sentiments, that would move the agent to action if she were well informed and thinking rationally. Therefore they must be able to show that a well-informed agent who is not so moved is not thinking rationally, and this requires them to point out what error she is making in her practical reasoning.