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# McDowell on External Reasons

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John McDowell's paper 'Might there be External Reasons?' presents an interesting and significant contribution to the debate over the existence of external reasons—a debate initiated by Bernard Williams's classic paper 'Internal and External Reasons'. Williams had argued that there are no external reasons. In other words, he argued that an agent has a reason to Φ *only if* Φ-ing is rationally related to the agent's 'subjective motivational set', which he labels 'S'.[1] Were there no rational relation between Φ-ing and the agent's S—that is, were Φ-ing 'external' to the agent's S—then it wouldn't be the case that the agent has a reason to Φ. McDowell, in opposition to Williams, argues that there are external reasons; he argues that agents may, and often do, have a reason to Φ despite there being no rational relation between Φ-ing and the agent's S.[2]

What makes McDowell's paper a significant contribution to the debate is that his appeal to what he calls 'conversion' purports to undermine Williams's central argument against externalism (the view that there are external reasons).[3] Williams's central argument against externalism, discussed in detail in §1 below, is roughly this: for the externalist to truly say of some person that he has a reason to Φ, it must be the case that the person would come to be motivated to Φ *if he rationally deliberated*.[4] But it is implausible to think that rational deliberation could get everyone, regardless of their motivational make-up, motivated to do what the externalist thinks they have reason to do. McDowell's reply to Williams's argument, discussed in detail in §2 below, questions Williams's assumption that the agent's coming to be motivated to Φ must be a result of *rational deliberation*, instead of being the result of a non-rational process, like *conversion*. In McDowell's view, Williams holds this assumption in place only because he wrongly thinks externalism is a form of 'moralism' that aims to convict immoral people of some form of *irrationality* in their deliberation.

This paper considers whether McDowell's appeal to conversion is a good objection to Williams's argument against externalism. (It doesn't consider how well McDowell's appeal to conversion fares against other contemporary arguments against externalism.) After setting up the debate in §1 and §2, I argue that McDowell's appeal to conversion is not a good objection to Williams's argument against externalism. Specifically, in §3, I argue that the appeal to conversion misses the point. Contrary to what McDowell thinks, Williams is not driven to rule out non-rational processes like conversion because (or at least only because) he wrongly thinks externalism is a form of 'moralism', but (also) because of certain fundamental assumptions he makes about the connection

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between reasons and *explanations*. If we accept these assumptions, the appeal to conversion misses the point. However, I also explain, in §4, how McDowell might have been easily misled by some peculiar claims that Williams makes about the connection between an agent's beliefs about what he has reason to do and the existence of internal reasons. If we took these peculiar claims to constitute Williams's considered views, McDowell's appeal to conversion would, in fact, be *right on point*.

Williams's views on the connection between reasons and explanations are also relevant to McDowell's positive account of externalism, specifically his proposal of a new understanding of rational deliberation as a 'correct picturing' of one's practical situation. In §5, I argue that McDowell's positive account doesn't seriously engage with Williams's views about reasons and explanations and, in §6, I argue that were we to understand McDowell as claiming that the agent's 'correct picturing' is relevant to the explanation of his actions, then McDowell's views would be subject to objections analogous to those often presented in epistemology against externalists about epistemic justification.

In short, I argue that both McDowell's appeal to conversion and his positive account of externalism fail to take seriously Williams's views about the connection between reasons and explanations, but understandably so given that Williams is not entirely consistent in the presentation of his own views.

## 1.

As noted above, Williams argues for the claim that an agent has a reason to Φ only if Φ-ing is rationally related to his 'subjective motivational set' [S]. In specifying the meaning of this claim, Williams presents a liberal understanding of the contents of an agent's S. He allows for an agent's S to contain more than the agent's desires and include 'such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent' (Williams 1981: 105).[5] Williams also presents a liberal understanding of what it means for Φ-ing to be rationally related to an agent's S. The basic idea here is that Φ-ing is rationally related to an agent's S just when the conclusion to Φ could be reached by a process of practical reasoning starting from the agent's S.[6] But Williams is quite liberal about what could count as a process of practical reasoning. Practical reasoning may involve discovering 'the most convenient, economical way of satisfying some element in S' but may also involve such 'wider possibilities' as deliberating about how to combine various elements in S (for example, time-ordering), considering how much weight to give to different parts of one's S in cases where there is irresolvable conflict, and finding constitutive solutions.[7] Williams also allows for imagination to play a role in his account of practical reasoning.[8] Any of these wider possibilities could be used to specify a 'sound deliberative route' from the agent's S to the conclusion to Φ.[9]

Externalists deny that an agent has a reason to Φ only if Φ-ing is rationally related to the agent's S. Williams argues that externalism is false. The externalist, according to Williams, needs to satisfy two requirements. First, and most simply, the externalist needs to be considering a reason statement that is a genuine external reason statement. For the reason statement 'A has a reason to Φ' to be a genuinely external one, there has to be nothing within A's S that is rationally related to his Φ-ing. If there were something in his S rationally related to his Φ-ing, an *internal* reason statement would be true of him. Let us call this the *genuine externalism requirement* (GER). Second, the external reasons theorist needs to hold that if A *rationally deliberated*, then he would come to be motivated to ϕ, whatever A's motivations are to begin with.[10] (So, supposing we are dealing with a genuine external reason statement, it must be the case that rational deliberation is capable of producing in the agent a new motivation to Φ despite the fact that the his existing motivations are not rationally related to his Φ-ing.) Let's call this the *rational motivation requirement* (RMR).

Williams believes that these two requirements cannot be jointly satisfied, thereby showing externalism to be false. His argument for this claim, as we will see at the start of the passage quoted below, depends upon a certain view about the nature of rational deliberation, specifically, that rational deliberation must proceed *from* the motivations already present in the agent's S.[11] Concerning an agent currently unmotivated to Φ of whom the externalist says that he has reason to Φ, Williams argues:

> For, *ex hypothesi*, [on the externalist view] there is no motivation for the agent to deliberate *from*, to reach this new motivation [to Φ]. Given the agent's earlier existing motivations, and this new motivation, what has to hold for external reason statements to be true, on this line of interpretation, is that the new motivations could be in some way rationally arrived at, granted the earlier motivations. Yet at the same time it must not bear to the earlier motivations the kind of rational relation which we considered in the earlier discussion of deliberation—for in that case an internal reason statement would have been true in the first place. I see no reason to suppose that these conditions could possibly be met. (Williams 1981: 109)

Williams's view of rational deliberation—that rational deliberation must proceed from the motivations in the agent's S—is crucial to the argument. Williams argues that in order for the RMR to be satisfied, keeping in mind that rational deliberation must *proceed from* the motivations in the agent's S, it must be the case that there is some motivation in the agent's S that would lead to a motivation to Φ if the agent rationally deliberated. But this just says that Φ-ing is rationally related to the agent's S, which means that an *internal* reason statement is true of him. And since we are no longer dealing with a genuine external reason statement, the GER is not satisfied. We could also consider the argument in the reverse direction. Suppose there are genuine external reasons (and so the GER is

satisfied)—that is, an agent has a reason to Φ without there being *anything* in his S rationally related to his Φ-ing. Given that rational deliberation *must* proceed *from* the motivations in the agent's S, there is no place from which rational deliberation can proceed, and so it is unclear how rational deliberation could produce in him a new motivation to Φ, and so the RMR is not satisfied.[12]

In short, the RMR and the GER cannot be jointly satisfied if we accept the view that rational deliberation must proceed from the motivations in the agent's S, and so externalism is false. It is not my intention at this point to assess this argument or explain the assumptions behind the RMR or Williams's view of rational deliberation. I mention it only to provide a useful framework in which to understand McDowell's disagreement with Williams.

## 2.

Basically, McDowell agrees with the idea that deliberation must proceed from an agent's motivations and agrees with Williams that the RMR and the GER cannot be jointly satisfied. What he denies is that the externalist needs to be committed to anything like the RMR.

McDowell thinks that Williams is right to believe the externalist cannot 'invent an application of reason in which it can impel people to action without owing its cogency to the specific shape of their prior motivations' (McDowell 1998a: 100). According to McDowell, if a person has not been 'properly brought up', where this phrase refers to habituation along the lines conceived by Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics*, then we should not expect that such a person would be motivated by reasoning directed at him:

> In order to take seriously the idea that someone who has been properly brought up tends to consider matters aright in the relevant area, we surely do not need to embrace the massively implausible implication that someone who has not been properly brought up—someone who has slipped through the net, so to speak—can be induced into seeing things straight by directing some piece of *reasoning* at him. On the contrary, reasoning aimed at generating new motivations will surely stand a chance of working only if it appeals to something in the audience's existing motivational make-up, in something like the way exploited in Williams's account of the internal interpretation; and the trouble with someone who has in some radical way slipped through the net is that there may be no such point of leverage for reasoning aimed at generating the motivations that are characteristic of someone who has been properly brought up. (McDowell 1998a: 101–102)

McDowell here accepts that rational deliberation must proceed from the agent's S; rational deliberation has to appeal to some feature of the agent's S in order to bring about a new motivation. McDowell also notes that should the agent's S be constituted in a certain way, rational deliberation would not be effective in

motivating him to act as he has (external) reason to act, meaning that the RMR is not satisfied. In other words, should the externalist say 'A has a reason to Φ' and A is one of those people who have 'slipped through the net', it would be false to say that if A rationally deliberated, he would come to be motivated to Φ.

While McDowell agrees with much of what Williams has to say, what he denies is that the externalist needs to be committed to the RMR. Perhaps an agent's coming to be motivated to do what he has (external) reason to do is not the result of rational deliberation, but the result of some 'conversion' experience. McDowell defines the idea of conversion and its role in his argument as follows:

> The idea of conversion would function here as the idea of an intelligible shift in motivational orientation that is exactly *not* effected by inducing a person to discover, by practical reasoning controlled by existing motivations, some internal reasons that he did not previously realize he had. But if its upshot *is* a case of considering matters aright, why should such a process not count as someone's being made aware of some *external* reasons, reasons that he had all along for acting the in the relevant ways? (McDowell 1998a: 102)

Prior to conversion, there is nothing within the agent's S rationally related to his Φ-ing, so it is clear that we are here dealing with a genuine external reason. After conversion, the agent comes to be motivated in the same direction as the person who has been properly brought up. The conversion itself is not the result of any process of practical reasoning (just as being properly brought up usually involves non-rational elements as well) but, McDowell argues, there is no reason to think that this poses any problem for the externalist since externalists do not have to be committed to the RMR.

## 3.

In McDowell's view, Williams introduces the RMR because he sees the essential motivation behind the externalist project as an attempt to convict all immoral people of irrationality. In other words, the essential motivation behind the externalist project is to show that if someone is not motivated to do what he has reason to do (as specified by an externalist account according to which we have reason to act morally), then it must be because he has not rationally deliberated about the matter—that is, he has not thought the matter through, thought it through carefully enough, or because he failed in some other way specified in our account of what it is to rationally deliberate. Thus, on this line of thought, the externalist wants to say that if anyone rationally deliberated, he would come to be motivated to do what he has reason to do, regardless of the motivations he starts with. This is the RMR.

McDowell thinks that this explains why Williams would not allow the externalist to appeal to conversion:

> Williams simply assumes what rules [conversion] out, that the external reasons theorist must envisage a transition to considering matters aright that would be effected by reasoning. This assumption is held in place by what Williams takes to be the only point of believing in external reasons. According to Williams, the external reasons theorist wants to be able to bring a charge of irrationality against anyone who is not motivated in some direction that the theorist thinks he should be motivated in. . . . There is certainly a recognizable temptation hereabouts. Moralists in particular are prone to suppose that there must be an appeal to unaided reason, which, if one could only find it and get people to listen, would force anyone capable of being influenced by reasons at all into caring about the sorts of things one ought to care about. (McDowell 1998a: 102–103)

McDowell agrees with Williams that the externalist strategy here amounts to nothing but 'bluff' but thinks that one can be an externalist without endorsing this strategy.

But is McDowell entirely correct about the reasons why Williams introduces the RMR and bars the externalist from appealing to conversion? It seems to me that Williams has more in mind than the thought that the externalist wants to convict immoral people of irrationality. In his paper, Williams presents certain assumptions about the connection between reasons and explanations and these assumptions provide a basis for barring the externalist from appealing to conversions.

According to Williams, 'if there are reasons for actions, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some explanation of their action' (Williams 1981: 102). He later adds that 'nothing can explain an agent's intentional actions except something that motivates him to act' (Williams 1981: 107). Williams takes these assumptions to support internalism since, according to internalism, there is always some motivation in the agent's S rationally related to what the agent has reason to do. As I understand Williams, his basic point here is that if we say of some agent that he has a reason to Φ and the agent Φs for that reason, in order to explain his Φ-ing, there must be some desire in S rationally related to Φ-ing to which we can point in an explanation that makes sense of his Φ-ing. And it is only for internal reasons that there is some desire in S rationally related to Φ-ing.[13] For example, suppose I have an internal reason to read McDowell's papers—that is, the conclusion to read McDowell's papers is supported by a sound deliberative route proceeding from my desires, specifically, from my commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy. When I read McDowell's papers for this reason, we could cite the relevant desire in S (my commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy) in order to make sense of my reading McDowell's papers. If it were an *external* reason—that is, if I had a reason to read McDowell's papers but had no commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy (suppose I actually hate the stuff) and there are no other motivations in my S rationally

related to reading his papers—when I acted for this reason, there would be no relevant motivation to cite in order to make sense of my reading McDowell's papers. Indeed, my reading McDowell's papers would make no sense at all. If we think that reasons and explanations are connected in this way, it seems to follow that there are only internal reasons.

Given these assumptions about the connection between reasons and explanations, Williams does have an independent ground for barring the externalist from appealing to conversion by his introduction of the RMR. No appeal to conversion would help the externalist meet the explanatory burden of Williams's assumptions. More precisely, if we say of someone that he has an external reason to Φ and he comes to be motivated to Φ through a process of conversion, there would still be no desire in light of which Φ-ing *makes sense*. If my non-philosopher in the example above were to come to be motivated to read McDowell's papers through some conversion experience, there is still no desire in light of which reading McDowell's papers makes sense. (Of course, if the conversion involved the attainment of something like a desire to keep up with interesting work in philosophy, there now *would be* a desire in S rationally related to his reading McDowell's papers. And so the internalist would happily concede that there is now a reason for him to read McDowell's papers. He'll just insist, against the externalist, that this reason was not there all along. It only came into existence when the relevant element in S came into existence.) In short, reason-giving explanations aim to show how an agent's Φ-ing makes sense, and Williams's argument is that this can be done only in light of the motivations in the agent's S that are rationally related to his Φ-ing. Acting for external reasons, to put it simply, just does not make any sense.

It's important to note that internalists are happy with the thought that as our desires in S change, so do our reasons. As mentioned above, if my S changes to include a commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy, this change affects the reasons I have by giving me a reason to read McDowell's papers—a reason I did not have prior to the change in my S. It does not matter to the internalist how this change in S occurs, whether by rational deliberation (from other desires) or by conversion. To be clear, it *does* matter to the internalist whether the agent can come to be motivated to ϕ only through a process of conversion or, alternatively, whether there is also a sound deliberative route proceeding from the motivations in his S, since, for the internalist, if the former is the case, an explanation could not be given which makes sense of the agent's acting on the reason, while if the latter is the case, such an explanation could be given. And the internalist will insist that only in the latter case—where there is a sound deliberative route proceeding from the motivations in his S—is there a reason present. But it *does not* matter to the internalist whether the motivation which *starts off* this sound deliberative route is itself the product of a conversion or of rational deliberation.

To sum up, Williams introduces the RMR and bars an appeal to conversion because of assumptions about the relationship between reasons and explanations: he thinks that if we say of some agent that he has a reason to Φ and the

agent Φs for that reason, in order to explain his Φ-ing there must be some desire rationally related to Φ-ing to which we can point in an explanation that makes sense of his Φ-ing. And it is only for internal reasons that there is some desire in S rationally related to Φ-ing. For external reasons, there is no such desire present. If the only way an agent could come to be motivated to Φ is through some conversion experience, this just reinforces the point that there is no such desire present. But if the agent could come to be motivated to Φ by a process of rational deliberation proceeding from his S, then there is such a desire present. Thus we can see how Williams's assumptions about the relationship between reasons and explanations explain why he bars the appeal to conversion. It's not because (or not only because) Williams wrongly assumes that externalists are moralists who want to convict immoral people of irrationality.

## 4.

Why does McDowell go wrong and fail to see that Williams's assumptions about the relationship between reasons and explanations make it pointless to appeal to conversion? The answer might be that Williams himself is not always consistent in his presentation of internalism. Williams sometimes presents the debate between internalists and externalists in a way which makes McDowell's appeal to conversion seem to be *right on point*. Specifically, Williams sometimes makes it seems as though the *internalist* is not committed to the RMR. (And, if this were true, then McDowell would be justified in thinking that the internalist would have no good grounds for insisting that *externalists* be committed to the RMR.) I'll here discuss one such instance of Williams presenting the debate in this way.

As I mentioned earlier, Williams notes that 'nothing can explain an agent's intentional actions except something that motivates him to act' (Williams 1981: 107). And he anticipates how the externalist will conceive of the relationship between external reasons and the explanation of action: the externalist will answer that it is not that the *truth* of an external reason statement that explains the agent's action, but it is the agent's *belief* in the external reason statement that is brought in to explain the agent's action.[14] But the worry now, which Williams notes, is that it seems that if an agent believes of some reason statement that it is true of him, and, assuming as Williams does that this belief does 'provide, or indeed constitute, a motivation to act', then we are actually dealing with an *internal* reason since there is now some relevant motivation within his S.[15] In light of this point, Williams sees the debate with the externalist in the following way: The internalist will say that the agent who comes to believe some external reason statement about him has that reason (the reason specified in the reason statement) when he comes to believe it, but not before, while the externalist will say that he had that reason even before he came to believe it.

The problem here, which Williams fails to see, is that it *false* that an agent's coming to believe in some reason statement makes that reason (the reason specified in the reason statement) an internal one. On the internalist view, A has a

reason to Φ only if a motivation to Φ could be reached by a sound deliberative route from A's S.[16] But it is still an open question of any believed reason statement (of the form 'A has a reason to Φ') whether a motivation to Φ could be reached by a sound deliberative route from A's S. For example, should I believe that I have a reason to read McDowell's papers, it is still an open question whether there is something in my S, such as a commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy, that can be connected via a sound deliberative route to a motivation to read McDowell's papers.

In assuming that the belief in a reason statement itself 'provides or indeed constitutes' a motivation which makes an internal reason statement true of the agent, Williams threatens to close the question. My coming to believe, for example, that I have a reason to read McDowell's papers would provide or constitute a motivation that would make it true that I have a reason to read McDowell's papers. There would be no need to further investigate my S to see whether or not there is some other motivation, like a commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy, that could start off a sound deliberative route leading to a motivation to read McDowell's papers.

I think that Williams, in making this claim, is not faithful to his own presentation of the internal reasons conception. In particular, he strays from his own understanding of the epistemic consequences of a normative account of reasons. Williams had claimed that his account of internal reasons entails the following two epistemic consequences: '*A* may falsely believe an internal reason statement about himself, and ... *A* may not know some true internal reason statement about himself' (Williams 1981: 103). One source of these two consequences is that A may be ignorant of some relevant fact, such as when A falsely believes that the glass contains gin, when it actually contains petrol, and comes to falsely believe that he has a reason to drink the contents of the glass. Another source of these two consequences, argues Williams, is that A may be ignorant with respect to his S. For instance, A could be mistaken about the contents of his S and thus come to mistakenly believe an internal reason statement about himself. But if, as on the view being considered, merely believing a reason statement is enough to provide or constitute a motivation that would make that belief true, then it's hard to see how one could mistakenly believe a reason statement in this way.

We could illustrate this point by considering our example of the non-philosopher who has nothing in his S that could be connected, via a sound deliberative route, to his reading of McDowell's papers. Suppose that due to some ignorance or self-deception with respect to the elements of his S, he now comes to believe that he has a reason to read McDowell's papers. The internalist could here claim one of two things. He could claim that this belief provides or constitutes a motivation that makes it true that the non-philosopher has a reason to read McDowell's papers. Or the internalist could claim that the non-philosopher does not have a reason to read McDowell's papers since it is not true that the RMR is here satisfied; it's not true that if he rationally deliberated, he would come to be motivated to read McDowell's papers (since rational

deliberation, on Williams's account, would involve correcting for his ignorance or self-deception with respect to the elements of his S and there is actually nothing else in his S that could lead him to be motivated to read McDowell's papers). The latter option would allow us to hold onto the idea that one could be mistaken in one's beliefs about one's reasons due to ignorance of one's S. But the former option would not allow for the non-philosopher's belief to be mistaken in this way since the belief provides or constitutes a motivation which makes that belief true.

If the internalist takes the former option, there seems to be no grounds for barring McDowell's appeal to conversion. On the former option, there is an internal reason to read McDowell's papers even through the RMR is not satisfied—that is, even though it's false that if the agent were to rationally deliberate, he would be motivated to Φ. But, if the *internalist* can allow for the existence of reasons when the RMR is not satisfied, then surely McDowell would be right in insisting that the *externalist* need not be committed to the RMR.

An internalist might insist that the former option need not involve abandoning the RMR. He might argue, concerning the non-philosopher, that there *is* a sound deliberative route from his S leading to the motivation to read McDowell's papers. After all, the motivation provided or constituted by the belief that he has reason to read McDowell's papers is already *itself part of S*, and so he could, quite trivially, *reach* by rational deliberation from S the motivation to read McDowell's papers. And, so it's true that the RMR is satisfied—that is, it's true that if the agent rationally deliberated, he would come to be motivated to read McDowell's papers. But we should be careful here. Williams's notion of rational deliberation involves correcting for the elements in S based on mistaken beliefs. Think again of the gin-petrol case and the agent who believes that he has a reason to drink the contents of the glass. We wouldn't argue as follows: since the motivation provided or constituted by the belief that he has a reason to drink the contents of the glass is already itself part of S, and so he could, quite trivially, reach by rational deliberation from S the motivation to drink the contents of the glass, he thus has a reason to drink the contents of the glass. The reason we wouldn't argue this way is that in specifying a line of rational deliberation, we correct for mistaken beliefs (and motivations based on those beliefs) and his belief about what he has reason to do is mistaken. It is mistaken because there is actually no sound deliberative route from the agent's S to the motivation to drink the contents of the glass. Likewise, we shouldn't argue that since the motivation provided or constituted by the non-philosopher's belief that he has a reason to read McDowell's papers is already itself part of S, and so he could, quite trivially, reach by rational deliberation from S the motivation to read McDowell's papers, he thus has a reason to read McDowell's papers. The reason we shouldn't argue this way is that in specifying a line of rational deliberation we correct for mistaken beliefs (and motivations based on those beliefs) and his belief about what he has reason to do is mistaken. It is mistaken because there is actually no sound deliberative route from the agent's S to the motivation to read McDowell's papers. In both cases, in specifying a sound deliberative route, we need to correct for the agent's mistaken beliefs about what he has reason to do. And this requires

that we ask, putting aside that belief, whether there is indeed a sound deliberative route from the agent's S that would make that belief true.[17]

In conclusion, the internalist shouldn't claim, as Williams does, that believing a reason statement makes for an internal reason. He should instead insist that we need to look to see whether there is something further back in S that could start off a sound deliberative route that would make that belief true—in our example, something like a commitment to keeping up with interesting work in philosophy. If there is something further back in S that could start off a sound deliberative route that would make that belief true, then we do have an internal reason. And we also have some element of S which can figure in an explanation of an agent's actions when he acts on that reason, in the way discussed in the previous section of this paper.

Earlier I argued, against McDowell, that Williams does not introduce the RMR only because he thinks externalists are engaged in a project of trying to convict immoral people of some form of irrationality. And I suggested the RMR reflects a commitment of internalism, specifically one grounded in concerns about the connection between reasons and explanations. But, Williams's claim above—that coming to believe a reason statement provides or constitutes a motivation that makes the reason statement an internal one—amounts, as I've argued, to the claim that there could be internal reasons without the RMR being satisfied, and this could reasonably lead someone, and perhaps led McDowell, not to see the RMR as a commitment of internalism.

## 5.

In summary, I've argued that McDowell's appeal to conversion does not constitute a good objection to Williams's argument against externalism because it misses the point. Williams is not driven to rule out non-rational processes like conversion because (or at least only because) he wrongly thinks externalism is a form of 'moralism', but (also) because of certain assumptions he makes about the connection between reasons and explanations. Williams's worry is that for external reasons, there is no desire in light of which we can make sense of the agent's acting on those reasons. The appeal to conversion does not help alleviate this worry. If we say of an agent that he has external reason to Φ—meaning that there is nothing within the agent's S rationally related to his Φ-ing—then there is no desire in light which Φ-ing makes sense, even though it may be true that the agent could come to be motivated to Φ via conversion. But I have also explained how McDowell might have easily been misled by some peculiar claims that Williams makes. Specifically, I have focused on Williams's claim that a belief in a reason statement provides or constitutes a motivation to act which makes the reason specified in the reason statement an internal one. The belief might indeed provide or constitute a motivation to act, but to say that this motivation makes the reason specified in the reason statement an internal one would be to allow for the existence of internal reasons that do not

satisfy the RMR. And, if this is the case, it would be reasonable for one to think, as McDowell does, that Williams has no basis for ruling out non-rational processes like conversion.

So, taking into account Williams's views on the connection between reasons and explanation, we can see how the conversion objection misfires. But, as I'll argue here, we can also see how McDowell's own positive account of externalism is problematic. McDowell's positive account of externalism mainly involves his proposal of a new understanding of what it means to *deliberate correctly*. Earlier in his paper, McDowell endorsed Williams's view of rational deliberation—specifically, Williams's claim that rational deliberation must proceed from the motivations in the agent's S—and agreed with Williams that RMR and GER could not be jointly satisfied. On the earlier view, even if someone who has 'slipped through the net' deliberates correctly from his own motives, he may not come to be motivated to do what the externalist thinks he has reason to do. McDowell now suggests understanding deliberating correctly as correctly picturing one's practical predicament:

> In the context of this kind of refusal to find the 'the rationality of internal reasons' sufficient, the idea of not reasoning correctly might be glossed in terms of not giving a consideration the right weight in deliberation. On these lines, deliberating correctly would be giving all relevant considerations the force they are credited with in a correct picture of one's practical predicament. (McDowell 1998a: 106)

Not everyone, according to McDowell, will be able to deliberate correctly in this sense. For those who have not been properly brought up, some conversion experience may be necessary to get them to the point where they can give considerations the right weight in deliberation. Such a conversion experience, as McDowell puts it, would be a 'transition *to* deliberating correctly, not one effected *by* deliberating correctly' (McDowell 1998a: 107).

On the earlier view of correct deliberation, there was no assurance that correct deliberation would get agents to be motivated to do what the externalist thinks they have reason to do. And, as McDowell argued, some conversion experience may be necessary to bridge this gap. But the new view of correct deliberation is different in that some conversion may be necessary for correct deliberation to occur in the first place. The reason for this difference is that, on the earlier view, correct deliberation was understood to be applicable to an agent's S regardless of the substance of the agent's S. But on the new view, correct deliberation is understood to require that certain substantive motivations be present in S. Specifically, it requires that the agent give certain considerations the right weight in his deliberations. And conversion may be necessary to get an agent to the point where he gives those considerations the right weight in his deliberations.

As McDowell notes, with this view of correct deliberation in hand, the externalist can claim, just as the internalist does, that an agent has a reason to Φ

only if, *were he to correctly deliberate, he would be motivated to* Φ.[18] Of course, since the new view of correct deliberation has built into it the substantive notion of 'giving a consideration the right weight in deliberation' there are no independent motivational constraints on what the agent has reason to do. On the earlier view of correct deliberation, in contrast, the actual motivations in the agent's S were needed to determine what the agent would be motivated to do were he correctly deliberating. But on this new view of correct deliberation, in order for the agent to be correctly deliberating, he must be giving certain considerations the *right* weight in his deliberations. So, the *actual* motivations of the agent (the weights *he actually gives* to certain considerations) are irrelevant to what he would be motivated to do *were he correctly deliberating*.[19]

So, with this new understanding of correct deliberation in hand, the externalist has no problem satisfying both the RMR and GER. Supposing the externalist says of some agent A that he has reason to Φ, and that this is presented as a genuinely external reason in that there is nothing in A's S that is rationally related to Φ-ing (thus satisfying the GER), it is nonetheless true that if A rationally deliberated, then he would come to be motivated to Φ, whatever A's motivations are to begin with (thus satisfying the RMR). But, as noted above, the RMR is satisfied here only because the substantive conception of rational deliberation employed makes it such that what A's motivations are to begin with *is irrelevant* to what A would be motivated to do if he rationally deliberated.

In summary, McDowell does not simply insist that that are external reasons after arguing that his objection from conversion undermines Williams's argument against externalism. Rather, he goes on to give an account of how those external reasons are connected to rational deliberation where rational deliberation is understood as 'giving all relevant considerations the force they are credited with in a correct picture of one's practical predicament'. But what does this view of rational deliberation add to the debate? As I argued in §3 above, Williams introduces the RMR not because (or not only because) he wrongly assumes externalists to be moralists, but (also) because of his views about the relationship between reasons and explanations. Our reasons must be such that when we act for them, there is some desire in S in light of which our actions makes sense. Acting for external reasons, such as my reading McDowell's papers when I have no interest in philosophy and no other element in S rationally related to reading McDowell's papers, does not make sense. But the proposal of a new understanding of rational deliberation as a 'correct picturing' seems to do nothing to address this worry. It's true that if Φ-ing were the conclusion of rational deliberation *in Williams's sense* (according to which deliberation proceeds from the actual motivations in the agent's S) there would be some element in the agent's S in light of which Φ-ing makes sense. But it is *not* true that if Φ-ing were the conclusion of rational deliberation *in McDowell's sense* (according to which deliberation is understood as a 'correct picturing') there would be some element in the agent's S in light of which Φ-ing makes sense. Thus, the RMR, which holds that A has a reason to Φ only if A would be motivated to Φ were he to *rationally deliberate*, would ensure the proper connection between reasons and explanations

on Williams's view of rational deliberation, but not on McDowell's view of rational deliberation.

Taking another example, suppose that the externalist claims that I have a reason to be pleasant to my colleagues and that were I to rationally deliberate in the sense of correctly picturing my practical predicament, I would be motivated to be pleasant to my colleagues. But as it stands, were I to rationally deliberate in Williams's sense, there is no sound deliberative route from my S to the conclusion to be pleasant to my colleagues. Suppose I have a tenured, well-paid position and my being rude and indifferent to them will have no bearing on my conducting my research in peace, which is all I care about. Further, my being nice to them only encourages these useless people to talk to me and distract me from my work. Further, I find being pleasant to be nauseating. Here, my S leads in a direction different from where a correct picturing of my practical predicament, in which I would give weight to the interests and feelings of others, would lead. Suppose that we have here a complete account of the relevant elements of my S that have a bearing on my actions, and suppose that today I am pleasant to my colleagues. My being pleasant to them would not make sense. It is indeed the right thing to do and it's true that it would make sense for someone who correctly pictures his practical predicament to be pleasant to his colleagues. But it would not make sense for me to do this.

So, it seems that McDowell's new view of rational deliberation also fails to take into account Williams's assumptions about the connection between reasons and explanations. The usual philosophical reaction to phrases like 'a correct picture of one's practical predicament' is to point to the difficult philosophical issues of value realism that are involved in thinking that there is a correct picture of one's practical predicament to be had and the associated epistemological burdens involved in spelling out how one correctly pictures it.[20] However, the criticism of McDowell developed here does not depend on whether plausible answers can be given to these difficult philosophical questions. The criticism developed here is that if we follow McDowell in seeing rational deliberation as involving 'a correct picture of one's practical predicament' instead of seeing rational deliberation, as Williams does, as proceeding from one's existing motivations, then the RMR—that is, the requirement according to which A has a reason to Φ only if, if A *rationally deliberated*, he would come to be motivated to Φ, whatever A's motivations are to begin with—would no longer provide the assurance that when we act as we have reason to act, there is some desire in light of which our acting makes sense. And Williams requires that there be such assurance.

## 6.

But why must we assume that the only way for the action to make sense is in light of the desires in the agent's S? Perhaps we can make sense of an agent's action as his coming to get things right about his practical predicament. For example, there seems to be some sense in which my coming to be pleasant to my

colleagues *makes sense* despite my desires leading in another direction. And if we think that something *external* to an agent's S—namely, his coming to 'get things right'—can be employed to make sense of his action, then Williams would be wrong to think that the need to connect reasons to explanations provides grounds for preferring internalism to externalism.

I think McDowell's proposal of rational deliberation as correct picturing might be meant to suggest this idea. Perhaps he is aware that Williams's view of rational deliberation and the RMR are meant to ensure, in the way suggested above, that there is some psychological element in S in light of which the agent's acting as he has reason to act makes sense. And in presenting his externalism along with a *new view* of rational deliberation as correct picturing, McDowell is suggesting *another* way in which the agent's acting as he has reason to act makes sense. In other words, in presenting a new view of rational deliberation, he intends it to play the same role that rational deliberation plays on Williams's account. Whether or not McDowell actually has this in mind, it is worth considering the question of whether the internalist is right to insist that we can make sense of an agent's action only in terms of the *internal* psychological elements in his S, or, alternatively, whether there is something *external* to these psychological elements, such as his 'getting it right', that can be employed to make sense of his actions.

Conceived in this way, the debate between the internalist and the externalist becomes analogous to the debate in epistemology between internalists and externalists about epistemic justification. Roughly speaking, internalists about epistemic justification (henceforth EJ-internalists) hold that what justifies a belief is some 'internal' feature of an individual's mind—some feature to which the individual has access upon reflection. As Chisholm puts it, EJ-internalism holds that an individual can, by 'sitting in one's armchair' and with no outside assistance, determine whether any belief he has is justified.[21] In determining whether or not a given belief is justified, there is no need to appeal to some third-person observer (perhaps some other person or ourselves at a later time) to consider the relationship of our beliefs to anything *outside* of our beliefs. Externalists about epistemic justification (henceforth EJ-externalists) hold that in speaking of what justifies a belief, we must reference some conditions external to what the individual has access to upon reflection, such as whether the process by which the belief was formed was a *reliable process*—that is, a process that leads to true belief in general—or whether the truth of P *caused* the agent to form the belief that P. Since whether or not these conditions are satisfied cannot be determined by the agent's armchair reflection and require the presence of some third-person observer, they are 'external' to the agent.[22]

I have not provided a full characterization of these two positions nor is there a standard view in the philosophical literature of how to precisely state the positions. However, such a characterization is unnecessary for the purposes of this paper. I mention the analogy between EJ-externalism and McDowell's externalism about practical reason only because there are two standard objections to EJ-externalism that can provide us with a basis for objecting to McDowell's

externalism about practical reason (provided we understand McDowell's externalism to be denying that we can make sense of an agent's actions only in terms of the *internal* psychological elements in his S). I'll spell out these objections in opposition to a reliabilist version to EJ-externalism, but they could be reformulated to go against other versions of EJ-externalism.[23] The first objection attacks the idea that a reliable process is necessary for justification while the second objection attacks the idea that a reliable process is sufficient for justification.

The first standard objection to EJ-externalism involves an appeal to Cartesian evil demons. Suppose that all the beliefs you now have are the result of the workings of some Cartesian evil demon, so they were *not* produced by a reliable process, but by an elaborate deception of which you are unaware. In this demon world, you hold all the same beliefs as you would hold in a world without demons in which your beliefs *are*, by and large, produced by reliable processes. Intuitively, since you have the same beliefs in both the demon world and the non-demon world and you are unaware of which world you inhabit, it seems that you would be equally justified in your beliefs whether you are in the demon world or the non-demon world. But since in the demon world your beliefs were not formed by a reliable process, it follows that being formed by a reliable process is *not necessary* for justification; it is not true that one is justified in holding beliefs only if they are produced through a reliable process.

We could make an analogous objection to McDowell's externalism. Imagine a world in all your practical beliefs and concerns were put there by an evil demon, and so you are not correctly picturing your practical predicament, but are instead the victim of an elaborate deception. You have all the same beliefs and concerns that you would have in a non-demon world, in which you would be correctly picturing your practical predicament. Intuitively, since you have the same beliefs and concerns in both the demon and the non-demon world and don't know which world you inhabit, your acting on those concerns would make sense in both worlds, regardless of the fact that one world involves correct picturing and one does not. So, correct picturing is *not necessary* for an action to make sense; it's not the case that one's actions make sense only if they are a product of a correct picturing of one's practical predicament.

The second standard objection to EJ-externalism concerns someone who comes to have a belief through some reliable process—some process which leads to true belief in general—yet who does not believe that he has come to have this belief through a reliable process. The usual example is that of a reliable clairvoyant who comes to acquire a belief through some reliable process yet unknown to our scientists. But since this person also thinks that people cannot form reliable beliefs through clairvoyance, he would not be justified in holding onto this belief. It's true that he would be proven right in the end if he held onto the belief, but that doesn't have any bearing on whether he is believing in a way which is justified. So, it is not true that if a belief is formed by a reliable method, we are justified in holding that belief; being produced by a reliable method is *not sufficient* for justification.

We could make an analogous objection to McDowell's externalism. Imagine an individual who correctly pictures his practical predicament (whatever that involves for McDowell) and comes to give certain considerations the right weight in deliberation. Yet, he has doubts about the process by which he came to give these considerations the right weight in his deliberations. Suppose he thinks he came to give those considerations that weight in his deliberations based on *incorrect deliberation*—some incorrect picturing of his practical predicament. Since he thinks the method by which he came to give those considerations that weight is an incorrect one, his acting in accord with those considerations would not make sense. It's true that he's picturing it correctly, but by his own lights, he's acting on the outcome of an incorrect picturing. So, correct picturing is *not sufficient* for an action to make sense; it's not the case that if one's actions are a product of a correct picturing of one's practical predicament, then one's actions make sense.

Both of the standard objections to EJ-externalism aim to articulate the idea that there is a difference between our being *justified* in holding a belief and our getting that belief right. And the analogous objections to McDowell's externalism aim to articulate the idea that there is a difference between our actions *making sense*, and our action being in accord with the correct picture of a practical predicament. As I mentioned above, one might be skeptical about the idea that there are 'correct pictures' to be had here, but the objections presented here do not rely on such skepticism. We can instead concede, for the sake for argument, that there are correct pictures to be had, but question the bearing these correct pictures have on the question of whether or not our actions make sense.

In presenting these two objections to EJ-externalism, I am not taking a stand in favor of EJ-internalism. Indeed, I have not even begun to provide a precise characterization of the position. Rather, I am examining the debate over epistemic justification only to suggest a relevant *similarity* to the internalism-externalism debate about practical reason other than the common use of the words 'internal' and 'external'. Specifically, my point here is that if we understand McDowell's proposal of rational deliberation as 'correct picturing' as playing the role that rational deliberation plays on Williams's account—namely, that of assuring the presence of something (for Williams, an element of a S) that could explain the agent acting as he has a reason to act—then McDowell's externalism would be subject to objections that are analogous to the standard objections to externalism about epistemic justification.

## 7.

In summary, I have argued that Williams bars an appeal to conversion not (only) because of an assumption that externalists are 'moralists' but (also) because of certain assumptions about the connection between reasons and explanation. In cases where one can come to be motivated to Φ only via some conversion, there is no desire present in light of which we could make sense of the agent's Φ-ing, and

Williams requires that we be able to present such an explanation. Williams misleads McDowell by claiming that coming to believe a reason statement provides or constitutes a motivation to act which makes the reason specified in the believed reason statement an internal one. It may indeed provide or constitute a motivation to act, but it is not the kind of motivation that makes for an internal reason. If it were, then it would be right to suppose, as McDowell perhaps does, that the RMR is not a commitment of internalism. I have also argued that McDowell's positive proposal of rational deliberation as 'correct picturing' does not answer Williams's concerns about the connection between reasons and explanations. If McDowell's view of rational deliberation were to play the role that Williams's view of rational deliberation plays, it would be subject to objections analogous to the standard objections in epistemology against externalism about epistemic justification.

In conclusion, I've argued that both McDowell's appeal to conversion and his positive account of externalism fail to take seriously Williams's views about the connection between reasons and explanations, but understandably so given that Williams is not entirely consistent in the presentation of his own views.[24]

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## NOTES

[1] See Williams 1981, Williams 1995a, and Williams 2001.

[2] McDowell 1998a. For Williams's reply to McDowell's essay, see Williams 1995b.

[3] Similarly, I take 'internalism' to refer to the view that there are no external reasons.

[4] Of course, the motivation need not result in action. This qualification is made by both Williams and McDowell, and should be understood to be in place throughout this paper.

[5] The term 'desires' is often used formally to cover all of these. I will follow this convention by using 'desires' or 'motivations' to refer to the elements of the subjective motivational set and using 'ordinary desires' to refer to the smaller set within S that we call, in ordinary informal language, 'desires'.

[6] The line of reasoning could start from S in the sense that the first premise in the line of reasoning refers to the agent's desires, as in 'I have a desire for a glass of milk' or could simply be such that the agent has a motivation relevant to the contents of the premise, such as 'I need to finish this paper' where I am motivated to finish this paper.

[7] Williams 1981: 104.

[8] Williams 1981: 105.

[9] Williams uses this term in Williams 1995a: 35–36.

[10] Williams is not always clear about what exactly the agent should be able to reach via rational deliberation from his S. Sometimes he speaks of reaching a new *motivation*; he suggests, for example, that if the agent 'could not reach any such motivation from motives he has by the kind of deliberative processes we have discussed' then we are dealing with an external reason statement. See Williams 1981: 105. (See also pages 106 and 109 for similar remarks.) Another time he suggests that it's a *conclusion that one should Φ* or simply *a conclusion to Φ* that needs to be reached from S. For instance, he writes, 'What are we saying when we say someone has a reason to do something? Consider the following formulation: A could reach the conclusion that he should Φ (or a conclusion to Φ) by a sound deliberative route from the motivations that he has in his actual motivational set'. See Williams 1995a: 35. There are important differences between these views, but I don't think these differences are crucial to my claims here about McDowell's response to Williams, and so I'll leave aside the question of which formulation the internalist should adopt.

[11] Williams's main concern here is with practical deliberation, and not theoretical deliberation, which obviously need not start from the motivations already present in the agent's S.

[12] Other commentators have noted that Williams's view of rational deliberation is a problematic part of his argument. See Hooker 1987, Korsgaard 1986, and Cohon 1986: 553–556.

[13] However, this is certainly not the only way to understand Williams since, as we will see in the next section, Williams seems to stray from this view at times.

[14] Williams 1981: 106–107.

[15] Williams 1981: 107.

[16] As I noted in footnote 10 above, this isn't the only way to formulate the internalist view. Williams sometimes says that it's a conclusion to Φ (or a conclusion that one should Φ) which needs to be reached by sound deliberation from S, and other times it's a motivation to Φ which needs to be reached, as it's formulated here. However, the argument that follows in the text would work against any of these formulations of the internalist view.

[17] In both the gin-petrol case and the case considered here, the agent's false belief that he has a reason (to drink the contents of the glass in the gin-petrol case, and to read McDowell's papers in the case considered here) might provide or constitute a motivation to act. But since these motivations are based on false beliefs, they do not generate reasons on the internalist conception.

[18] As the terms are employed in this paper, there is no difference between 'rational deliberation' and 'correct deliberation'. I use the latter term in this present discussion since it is the term used by McDowell in the above quotation. But in his using this term, McDowell clearly has in mind the concept of 'rational deliberation' used by Williams. Of course, the *conception* of rational or correct deliberation used by McDowell differs from the one used by Williams since on Williams's Humean view, rational or correct deliberation is understood to involve correcting for an agent's mistaken beliefs and mistakes in reasoning, but not involve correcting for the agent's motivations in his S. But, as explained here, McDowell's conception of rational or correct deliberation would involve correcting for the agent's motivations in his S.

[19] Williams, in his own reply to McDowell's essay, is concerned that McDowell's appeal to correct deliberation is too far removed from the subjective motivational sets of actual agents. See Williams 1995b: 186–194. Williams argues that since McDowell's correct deliberator has improved motivations, the correct deliberator will approach certain

situations in ways that actual agents with less-than-ideal motivations should not approach them. For example, an agent lacking self-control should not put himself in situations involving a temptation to do something wrong or imprudent. But a correct deliberator, with full self-control, would have no problem doing this. So, Williams argues, we shouldn't claim that in determining what an agent has reason to do, we consider what a correct deliberator would do when placed in his shoes. But since externalism is committed to doing so, it should be rejected. For reasons that I cannot fully explain here, I find Williams's own reply inadequate. The basic problem is that he wrongly assumes that McDowell's appeal to a correct deliberator must employ what Michael Smith has called an 'example model' instead of an 'advice model'. See Smith 1995: 110–112. Roughly put, the 'example model' considers what a correct deliberator would do when placed in the actual agent's shoes while the 'advice model' considers what a correct deliberator would advise an actual agent to do taking into account the extent to which the actual agent's motivations are irrational. Smith argues convincingly that the *internalist* will need to employ an advice model. If, as Smith argues, this model is available to and necessary for a plausible internalist view, I see no reason why the externalist should be unable to avail himself of the same resource. But since Williams's reply to McDowell assumes the externalist will have to employ an example model, I find Williams's reply to McDowell inadequate.

[20] McDowell addresses some of these issues in McDowell 1998b, McDowell 1998c, and McDowell 1998d.

[21] Chisholm 1989: 76.

[22] For a general overview of this debate, see Audi 1998: 216–237, Alston 1998 and Chisholm 1989: 75–84. For a recent engagement in the internalism-externalism debate, see Bonjour and Sosa 2003.

[23] Both of these objections are presented in greater detail in Bonjour 2003: 24–35.

[24] Thanks to Akeel Bilgrami, Ernesto Garcia and Joseph Raz for detailed comments on this paper and for many interesting discussions about internal and external reasons. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for the *EJP* for very helpful comments, and to the graduate students in my ethics seminar at UMSL.

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