# Recent Work on Motivational Internalism\*

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## 1. Background

It is generally agreed that there is an intimate connection between moral judgments and motivation. For instance, if an agent judges that it would be morally wrong to eat meat, we expect her to shun meat-eating. Indeed, we are likely to doubt the sincerity of someone who verbally affirms such a judgment yet displays no corresponding motivation. Similarly, when we are engaged in deliberation, the conclusion that some act would be morally wrong is typically taken to exclude that act from further consideration, whereas the conclusion that it is what morally ought to be done typically ensues in a decision.

These practical aspects of moral thought and talk, many metaethicists think, strongly suggest that moral motivation is somehow internal to or necessitated by the presence of moral judgments. A simple version of this view motivational internalism or just 'internalism' – can be formulated thus:

Simple internalism: Necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to  $\phi$ , then she is (at least somewhat) motivated to  $\phi$ .<sup>1</sup>

Similar internalist claims concern judgments about what is morally good, morally wrong, etc.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> We use 'to judge' and its derivatives 'judgment', 'make a judgment', etc., to refer to a mental state or act rather than a speech act. These terms are sometimes used to refer to speech acts rather than mental states, in which case internalism posits a necessary connection between moral speech acts and motivation. We will not consider this claim; for discussion, see Joyce (2002), and Ridge (2006). Also note that we do not use 'internalism' as requiring that the moral judgment is itself a motivational state: only some versions of internalism does, as we shall see.

Internalism is one of the most debated theses in contemporary metaethics, largely due to its role in an argument against moral cognitivism originating in Hume's writing. Cognitivists think that moral judgments are constituted by beliefs. On the Humean theory of motivation, beliefs are inert, i.e. they do not influence our actions except in conjunction with desires. If, as internalism has it, moral judgments are inherently or necessarily action-guiding, this means that they cannot be a species of belief. Rather, they must belong to the side of the passions, being desire-like states of mind, as non-cognitivists contend. Call this the 'Humean argument from internalism'. (The argument has its origin in Hume 1739/1888: 457. It is unclear, however, whether it is Hume's own argument; see Persson 1997, Radcliffe 2006, Sayre-McCord 2006.) Cognitivists have tried to defuse this argument in different ways. For instance, some deny that beliefs are inert and argue that (evaluative) beliefs either motivate in their own right or generate motivational states. Others argue that cognitivism and internalism are consistent despite beliefs being inert. (For references, see below.)

The most common move amongst cognitivists, however, is to defend the externalist view that motivation is neither internal to nor necessitated by the presence of moral judgments. Externalists usually invoke so-called amoralists, persons who make moral judgments despite lacking suitable motivation. If such characters are possible, then the simple internalism figuring in standard versions of the Humean argument must be mistaken, and non-cognitivism becomes problematic. Since internalism has typically been understood as an a priori claim, the relevant possibility here has often been understood as conceptual possibility (rather than e.g. nomological or metaphysical possibility).

Much of the debate about internalism from the last two decades can be seen as driven by efforts to reconcile the intuitions traditionally motivating

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 'Internalism' is a term used to denote a number of different theses. Our focus is on motivational internalism (aka 'moral judgment internalism' (Darwall 1983, 1995) and 'appraiser internalism' (Brink 1989: 40)). This thesis should not be conflated with the view that a moral obligation to  $\phi$  entails a reason to  $\phi$  (moral rationalism), or that a reason to  $\phi$  requires, perhaps under idealized circumstances, having a desire to  $\phi$  (internalism about reasons or existence internalism), or that a moral obligation to  $\phi$  requires, perhaps under ideal circumstances, motivation to  $\phi$  (moral internalism). For discussion of different forms of internalism, see Audi (1998); Darwall (1983, 1995), Parfit (1998), and Shafer-Landau (2003: 144–145 n. 3).

internalism with the seeming possibility of various kinds of amoralists, and an effort to reconcile cognitivism with internalism. This has led to a series of weakenings and qualifications of internalism forcing metaethicists to reconsider its dialectical role. In what follows, we will provide an overview of these developments.

#### 2. From Unconditional to Conditional Internalism

The simple version of internalism is an instance of *unconditional* internalism according to which the necessary connection between moral judgments and motivation holds irrespective of the person's mental condition (Lenman 1999). In contemporary metaethics, it is regularly assumed that this view is too strong, since it seems possible to conceive of someone who makes a moral judgment but fails to be motivated accordingly because she suffers from, e.g. apathy, depression, exhaustion, or emotional disturbance (Brink 1989: Chapter 3; Mele 1996; C. Miller 2008; Roskies 2003; Stocker 1979; Svavarsdóttir 1999). To accommodate this possibility, a number of contemporary internalists defend claims of the following form:

Conditional internalism: Necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to  $\phi$ , then she is (at least somewhat) motivated to  $\phi$  if she is C.

The conditionalisation of internalism raises questions about the metaethical significance of the resulting view. Since conditional internalism allows that moral judgments and motivation can come apart, it seems to leave open that moral judgments are beliefs even on a Humean theory of motivation. Accordingly, this view casts doubt on the non-cognitivist identification of moral judgments with desire-like states. However, the exact consequences of conditionalisation depend on how C is specified, and three broad kinds of specification have been particularly prominent:

C = Psychologically normal: Apathy and the other mental conditions listed above seem to be deviations from the normal functioning of deliberation and action-guidance. This suggests a way for non-cognitivists to accommodate these counterexamples to simple internalism. Some have argued that moral judgments are desire-like dispositions to action, states that require normal psychological functioning to provide occurrent motivation. Given this, the absence of motivation under abnormal conditions is just to be expected

(Björnsson 2002; Blackburn 1998: 59–68; Eriksson 2006: 172–87; Gibbard 2003: 154; Timmons 1999: 140; for criticism, see Strandberg, forthcoming b). A related form of internalism is spelled out in terms of the (etiological) *function* of moral judgments to produce action, rather than in terms of dispositions (Bedke 2009; Björnsson 2002: 329–30).

C = Practically rational: The mental conditions listed above might also be described as conditions of decreased rational control of actions, suggesting that C might be couched in terms of practical rationality (Korsgaard 1996; van Roojen 2010; Smith 1994; Wallace 2006; cf. Wedgwood 2007: 23–26). Significantly, rationalist conditional internalism has been seen as compatible with cognitivism, thus undercutting the Humean argument. Proponents of such internalism often maintain that a person's moral judgments consist in beliefs about what she has normative reasons to do. It can then be claimed that amoralists are irrational, since their motivation fails to match their own beliefs about what they have reason to do. Moreover, it has been claimed that since rationalist conditional internalism describes failure to be motivated by one's moral judgments as a rational deficiency, it captures the intrinsically normative connection between moral judgments and motivation (Smith 1994, 1995).

C = Morally perceptive: A different interpretation of amoralists is that they fail to really grasp the moral properties of actions. Accordingly, some cognitivists have argued that a person endowed with a kind of moral discernment or perceptivity not only will see what is right to do, but also be motivated to do it (McDowell 1978, 1979; McNaughton 1988: Chapter 8; Tolhurst 1995; Wiggins 1991). As this view seems to take moral perceptions to involve both a belief and a desire (thus constituting a 'besire'), it entails an anti-Humean theory of motivation. (For defences of such a theory, see Dancy 1993: Chapters 1–3; Garrard and McNaughton 1998; Nagel 1970; Pendlebury 2002; Scanlon 1998: Chapter 1; Shafer-Landau 2003: Chapter 5; Tenenbaum 2006.) Some anti-Humeans endorse views that are supposed to lie between internalism and externalism.<sup>3</sup> On such views, moral beliefs are intrinsically motivating, but there is no (non-tautological) general specification of C such that they are necessarily motivating if the believer is C (Dancy 1993; Shafer-Landau 2003; Simpson 1999).

<sup>3</sup> If externalism is the denial of internalism, this is, of course, ruled out on logical grounds.

Although there are significant differences between versions of conditional internalism, they face similar challenges. First, they need to offer an account of moral judgments explaining why such judgments have a necessary connection to motivation given that the judge is C (Copp 1997; Mason 2008; Sayre-McCord 1997). Second, they need to specify C in a way that does not threaten to make internalism explanatorily impotent (Strandberg forthcoming c) or vacuous (Lenman 1996: 298–99; A. Miller 2003: 221; Roskies 2003: 53–55; Sayre-McCord 1997: 64–65). Third, they should specify C so as to account for the relevant categories of amoralists.

## 3. From Direct to Deferred Internalism

As we have seen, the apparent possibility of amoralists has led externalists to deny internalism and internalists to qualify their view. However, a number of internalists have argued that amoralists only make sense against a background of cases that do involve moral motivation, and that this shows that some form of internalism is true (Bedke 2009: 191–95; Blackburn 1998: 59–68; Dreier 1990: 9–14; Tresan 2006: 149–52, 2009b: 185–93). Consider, for instance, a person who asserts that a life of service is good and who used to be motivated accordingly, but no longer cares about anyone beside herself. Despite her present lack of motivation, it may still make sense to attribute to her the judgment that a life of service is good: she has not changed her mind, just lost her motivation. This attribution would run contrary to many forms of internalism. However, when we instead consider someone who asserts that a life of service is good but has never cared about other people, it might seem much less plausible to attribute that judgment to her. Common intuitions about pairs of cases like these suggest:

Deferred internalism: Necessarily, if a person judges that she morally ought to  $\phi$ , then she is either (at least somewhat) motivated to  $\phi$  or some relevantly connected moral judgments are accompanied by motivation.

Deferred internalism is unlike the direct forms discussed earlier, which require that each individual moral judgment is accompanied by moral motivation at the very instant it is made (provided the judge is C).

Forms of deferred internalism can take the relevantly connected moral judgments to be other judgments made by the same person, perhaps at an

earlier time (see Blackburn's (1998: 63) discussion of Milton's Satan), or those of the community to which the judge belongs (Tresan 2009b: 180). On Jamie Dreier's (1990: 9–14) view, what is required (in want of direct motivation) is *either* that the individual has previously been morally motivated *or* that her moral judgments connect to a practice where moral judgments often do motivate.

Advocates of communal versions of deferred internalism (and mixed versions like Dreier's) have suggested that communities where no one has ever been morally motivated provide the strongest internalist intuitions: we might be especially reluctant to ascribe moral judgments to *a whole community* of people who classify actions in much the way we do by using 'right' and 'wrong' but are (and have always been) entirely unmoved by these classifications (again, see Bedke, Dreier, Lenman, Tresan).<sup>5</sup>

In reply to claims that amoralists are possible only against a background of moral judgments accompanied by motivation, externalists have insisted that we can imagine amoralists without presuming such a background (Gert and Mele 2005; Svavarsdòttir 2001: 23). It has in turn been objected that externalists have such intuitions because they still tacitly rely on there being a background of this kind (Bedke 2009: 193–95).

The metaethical implications of a deferred internalism are somewhat unclear. Though Blackburn seems to accept a deferred form of internalism, it is not obvious how it is compatible with the non-cognitivist claim that moral judgments are desire-like states. Dreier argues that his version of speaker relativism provides the perfect fit. According to a simple version of this view, moral judgments are beliefs the contents of which are determined by the believers' motivational states (roughly, 'good' refers to a property that the speaker likes actions to have). To accommodate deferred internalism, Dreier defends a version according which the content can be fixed by the believer's former motivation or the motivation of other people to which her judgment is suitably connected (Dreier 1990: 21–26; cf. Finlay 2004). It has also been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Tresan (2009b) might be defending a non-disjunctive version of deferred internalism, making the individual judge's motivation insufficient in the absence of communal motivation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Adams (1999: 19–28) and Henning (forthcoming) incorporate communal forms of internalism in a two-dimensional realist moral semantics.

argued that deferred internalism is compatible with other forms of cognitivism via the idea of *non-constitutional internalism* (Tresan 2006, 2009b).

#### 4. From Constitutional to Non-constitutional Internalism

According to the Humean argument, moral judgments must be constituted by desires because only desires are attitudes of the kind that necessarily give rise to motivation. Attempts to reconcile cognitivism with internalism have typically involved arguing that the nature of moral beliefs is such that they guarantee motivation (under condition C), either in virtue of their content (Smith 1994), the way the content is fixed (Dreier 1990), or because they are a special kind of intrinsically motivating states (Dancy 1993). Either way, internalism has been taken to constrain accounts of the nature of moral judgments.

However, according to a recent suggestion – developed by Jon Tresan (2006, 2009a, 2009b) but also hinted at by Jackson (1998: 161) and Radcliffe (2006) – there is a form of internalism that can accommodate basically any version of cognitivism. The following analogy (Tresan 2009: 145) is helpful to introduce this idea. It is necessary that, if x is a planet, then it orbits a star. This necessity does not hold because planets are objects of a special nature forcing them to orbit stars. Rather, it is because our concept of a planet is such that an object *counts* as a planet only if is orbits a star. Similarly, what we might call *non-constitutional* internalism says that in order for a mental state to *count* as a moral judgment, it must be accompanied by motivation (unconditionally or conditionally, directly or deferentially, on the individual or the communal level). There is no requirement that the state itself guarantees such motivation: it might be an ordinary inert belief. In Tresan's words, cognitivists can 'plug in the account of moral content they favor' (Tresan 2006: 162).

Tresan advocates a communal version of deferred internalism, holding that beliefs with a certain content count as moral beliefs only when beliefs with that content are accompanied by motivation in the believer's community. But there are other possibilities. One is represented by Elisabeth Radcliffe's (2006) interpretation of Hume, which combines cognitivism, internalism and the Humean theory of motivation. On this view, it is not the moral belief constituting the moral judgment that explains there being a necessary connection to motivation, but rather the requirement that moral judgments are

'causally preceded by the proper sentiment – namely moral disapprobation' (Radcliffe 2006: 369). Either way, a non-constitutional version of internalism does not support the Humean argument for non-cognitivism.

Importantly, Tresan (2006: 148–52) further argues that the intuitions ordinarily used to defend internalism support at most non-constitutional internalism. If our concept of moral judgments excludes unmotivated people from having moral opinions, this suffices to explain the intuition that such people lack moral opinions. Thus, the intuition lends no support to the further claim that moral opinions are also *constituted* by motivational attitudes.

## 5. The Evidence For and Against A Priori Internalism

As noted above, internalism is usually regarded as an a priori claim, and the kind of evidence driving the debate has consisted largely in intuitions about various thought experiments involving putative amoralists. However, as the debate evinces, these intuitions are hardly uniform, and internalists and externalists have adopted a variety of strategies to address the fact that people appear to have both internalist *and* externalist intuitions.

We have already seen how internalists have tried to explain away some apparently externalist intuitions by arguing that amoralists seem possible only against a background of moral motivation. Other internalist strategies are to claim that putative amoralists make moral judgments in an 'inverted commas' sense, referring obliquely to what others think, rather than expressing their own moral judgments (Hare 1952: 124–25, 164–65; cf. Björnsson 2002: 340–42) or to deny that amoralists master moral concepts (Smith 1994: 68–71). However, critics have found these strategies ad hoc (Svavarsdóttir 1999: 187–94; Roskies 2003: 59–60). From the other direction, externalists have tried to explain away apparently internalist intuitions, arguing that pragmatic accounts of the connection between usage of moral language and motivation explain why we might feel that the absence of motivation undermines attributions of moral judgment (Bar-On and Chrisman 2009; Copp 2001, 2009; Finlay 2004, 2005; Strandberg forthcoming a).

Sigrún Svavarsdóttir (1999: 183–87) proposes several other ways of explaining away apparently internalist intuitions, suggesting that deep moral commitments, moralist optimism, and a desire to close off the sceptical question 'why be moral?' might make it harder to imagine amoralists. Most

importantly, she thinks that amoralists are made deeply puzzling by the expectation that people who bother making moral judgments have some degree of moral commitment. When we are given some alternative explanation for the judgment, the puzzlement should disappear.

One might suspect that intuitions about amoralists are at least partly influenced by prior theoretical commitments. To avoid such influences, Shaun Nichols (2002, 2004: Chapter 3) set out to study laymen's intuitions about the moral outlook of psychopaths. A majority of his respondents contended that psychopaths can understand moral requirements in spite of lacking the corresponding motivation, suggesting that internalism is false as an account of an ordinary concept of moral judgments.

Another strategy turns to arguments that are independent of intuitions regarding amoralists. In his 'fetishist argument', Michael Smith argues that externalism is committed to implausibly understanding good and strong-willed agents as being motivated by a fetishist desire to do what is right, whatever happens to make it right, rather than by the features of the action that make it right, such as the fact that it promotes well-being (Smith 1994: 71–76). As the various responses to Smith's argument demonstrate, however, it has hardly been less contentious than arguments based on amoralist intuitions (Brink 1997; Copp 1997; Cuneo 1999; Dreier 2000; Lillehammer 1997; A. Miller 1996: 221; Olson 2002; Shafer-Landau 1998; Strandberg 2007; Svavarsdóttir 1999; Zangwill 2003; for a reply, see Smith 1997).

It has also been argued that we need to consider cases that are in some respects different from traditional amoralist scenarios. Andrew Sneddon (2009) highlights situations where people are motivated in accordance with their moral judgments, but motivated solely by *non-moral* considerations. He argues that, intuitively, such people make genuine moral judgments and need not be practically irrational, which makes him suggest that unconditional and rationalist conditional internalism fail. Nick Zangwill (2008) describes cases of reduced, rather than absent, motivation and argues that the possibility of such cases is evidence against a form of internalism requiring that the strength of a person's moral motivation is proportionate to her degree of moral belief.

Yet another strategy invokes methodological considerations. Svavarsdóttir (1999: 176–83) suggests that when we seek explanations of a certain state of affairs, the burden of proof is on the side that wants to restrict the class of

possible explanations. Internalism, she suggests, restricts the number of explanations of cases in which a person appears to make moral judgments without showing any signs of being motivated accordingly. She concludes that internalism has the burden of proof to explain why the externalist explanation is not possible.

The most radical response to differences in intuitions about putative amoralists might be to say that metaethicists have *different* concepts of moral judgments (Francén 2010; cf. Gill 2009). If this is correct, different internalist or externalist claims might accurately capture the connection between moral judgments and motivation that holds according to different people's concepts of moral judgments.

### 6. From A Priori to A Posteriori Internalism

Although most of the debate about moral internalism has treated it as an a priori claim, some have taken it to be a thesis with substantial empirical consequences, subject to a posteriori testing. Typically, this move has been a response to conflicting intuitions about the possibility of amoralists and worries about the reliability of a priori intuitions (Björnsson 1998: 7–8, 2002: 331–33; Cholbi 2011: 29–34; Prinz 2006: 38–39, 2007: 42; Roskies 2003, 2006).

The appeal to empirical data has taken two broad forms. Some have primarily focused on actual cases of putative amoralists, while others have tried to provide a more general comprehensive empirically motivated account of moral judgments. As an early example of the former approach, Adina Roskies (2003) adduces empirical evidence about patients with damaged ventromedial prefrontal cortex ("VM patients") which seems to indicate that they make moral judgments but lack moral motivation: they pass psychological tests of moral thinking but apparently fail to be moved by moral considerations. Michael Cholbi (2006a) and Jeanette Kennett and Cordelia Fine (2008a) criticize Roskies' argument by presenting evidence that calls in question both whether VM patients have moral beliefs and whether they lack moral motivation. Kennett and Fine also appeal to other studies, arguing that psychopaths' notorious lack of moral motivation is compatible with internalism, as empirical studies reveal that the psychopaths' putative moral judgments are too erratic and inconsistent to involve a real grasp of moral concepts. (For discussion, see Roskies 2006, 2008; Cholbi 2006b; Kennett and

Fine 2008b; Smith 2008.) Cholbi (2011) argues that actual cases of depression do not display the lack of moral motivation that is assumed when depressed agents figure as counterexamples to unconditional internalism.

A general worry about the discussion of such cases is that conceptual commitments (internalist or externalist) will govern our interpretation of experimental data, undermining the role of actual cases as providers of independent evidence for or against internalism (Kauppinen 2008).

The other, more comprehensive empirical approach, is exemplified by Jesse Prinz (2006, 2007: Chapter 1). He amasses evidence from a variety of studies concerning experiences of intentional violations of norms, moral development, justification or moral beliefs, the influence of emotions on moral judgments, psychopaths, etc. The collective evidence, he suggests, supports a theory of moral judgment according to which such judgments are dispositions to emotional reactions and thus motivation. Earlier, Gunnar Björnsson (2002) argued that evidence traditionally adduced against internalism – i.e. the existence of chronically depressed, VM patients, sadists and fictional amoralists – lacks force when internalism is understood as part of a comprehensive empirical theory about the nature of moral judgments (cf. Cholbi 2006a: 614).

Whether one finds these arguments successful or not, they open up possibilities that seem to have been ignored in much of the debate, and raise fundamental methodological questions. First, they suggest that even if internalism should be false as an a priori claim about moral judgments, our best empirical theory of moral judgments might still understand them as intrinsically motivational states. Second, if we are concerned to determine whether a substantial a posteriori version of internalism is correct, we presumably need to go beyond a priori considerations and a few select studies of abnormal psychologies. What is needed, it seems, is syntheses of ranges of empirical data. (To some extent, much important work in metaethics can be seen as taking on this task; see Gibbard 1990, Blackburn 1998, Joyce 2006.) Third, although a posteriori internalism is compatible with the conceptual possibility of amoralists of various kinds, it cannot serve as an a priori constraint on theories of moral judgments (Smith 2008). This raises the question how an a posteriori internalism would be philosophically relevant.

#### 7. Conclusion

Internalism was once a simple thesis in close allegiance to non-cognitivism. As is manifest from recent developments, this is no longer the case. 'Internalism' now denotes a variety of different theses that can be combined in different ways, often without any association to non-cognitivism. In light of this, metaethicists need to reconsider the dialectical role of various forms of internalism. Discussions need to be clear about exactly which of the many forms of internalism is at stake, exactly what sort of evidence it can be supported by, and exactly what its metaethical implications are. This work has only begun.

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