

Moral Cognitivism: 'Motivation' and Agency

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Abstract: Moral cognitivism is pointless unless what people know they ought to do leads them to do it. But then, how can we act unless we're motivated to act? So, moral knowledge requires motivation if it is to be realized, and because we need to want to act morally in order to do so, cognitivism has disappeared. I shall attempt to deal with this problem by proposing that we jettison the very idea of motivation. Taking my cue from Richard Norman's "Practical reasons and the redundancy of motives,"¹ and the direction of some of the work that precedes it, I shall suggest that rational action has no need of any notion of motivation at all. Reasons, I shall argue, are all that we need to explain not only belief, but also action, since agency is not something that requires to be "switched on"; rather it is integral to personhood. "Motivation," "will" and all that goes with them can be simply dropped as no more necessary in the context of action than that of belief.

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1. Introduction

Why is motivation such a problem for moral cognitivists? Because moral cognitivism is pointless unless what people know they ought to do leads them to do it, to act on that knowledge; and to act appears to require that we are motivated to act. There is nothing necessarily odd about knowing that Quito is the capital of Ecuador but doing nothing in light of that knowledge. But if you knew it was wrong to torture a prisoner, it would be bizarre if you did it nonetheless. As Jean Hampton puts it in her still definitive account of reasons and reason, the view that there is no "logical connection between an action's moral characteristics and a reason

¹ See Richard Norman, "Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4 (2002), 3–22.

for performing it"² empties morality of what is fundamental to it, namely, either that something needs to be done, or that it must not be done. Without a plausible link between moral knowledge and moral action— that is to say, an account of how moral beliefs and judgments lead us to act—any analysis of morality is empty. On this, Hume was entirely right. Again, as Hampton asks: suppose Albert knows it is wrong to burn cats but that this knowledge does not impinge on what he does, such a view

not only separates Albert's knowledge that cat-burning is wrong from a motive not to engage in it; it also fails to locate any way in which Albert has a reason not to burn cats. Albert's labelling the activity "wrong" is not only without intrinsic motivational impact ... it is also without any authoritative impact. Albert is free to say, ... "Okay, cat burning is wrong, but what does that label have to do with whether or not I should do it? I want to do it, so I have no reason not to do so." In other words, there is no way to say that Albert has a reason not to burn cats if, as it happens, he would like to do so.³

So, it is difficult to see what Albert actually knows: in asking why he should take any notice of the moral reasons he knows there are not to burn cats, he can't mean exactly what he appears to be asking. Nor does he. What he is actually asking is why he should take any notice of what other people take to be moral reasons; and that is an entirely different question. For there being a reason is not the same as having a reason, as I shall go on to discuss. To acknowledge a reason as a moral reason is precisely to acknowledge it as a reason to do or not to do something. This isn't peculiar to moral reasons: it applies to practical reasons quite generally. To acknowledge the pouring rain as a reason to take an umbrella is to acknowledge that one ought to do so— other things being equal, since a reason in this context need not, of course, be a decisive reason. That is how everyday practical reasons differ from moral reasons; but that does nothing to undermine the practicality of either of them. Their "action-guidingness," as one might say, remains in place. Nor does this differentiate theoretical reasons from practical reasons. Knowing that India is larger than Malaysia, and that China is bigger than India, is a reason for knowing that China is bigger than Malaysia. If I were then to ask why I should believe this, I would simply have failed to grasp what a reason was. The

² Jean Hampton, *The Authority of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101. This is, of course, Thrasymachus' notorious question in Plato's *Republic* about why he should not do whatever he wants if he can get away with it.

³ *Ibid.*

“belief-guidingness” of theoretical reasons, whether logical or empirical, is exactly parallel to the “action-guidingness” of practical reasons. Indeed, one could regard believing something as one sort of action: certainly, acquiring beliefs is not something passive, not something like, say, becoming aware of the sound of a car going down the road.

But this raises an immediate difficulty. We all seem sometimes to know perfectly well what we ought, morally, to do, and yet fail to do it nevertheless. Why? The standard account—the belief-desire model of motivation, derived from Hume—offers an obvious answer: we don’t want to (enough). We have to want to do something if we are to do it, whether in a moral context or otherwise. My wanting to go to the bar is a reason for my going just because I want to: the desire is built into the reason. And in the moral case, so the story goes, where what I want, rather than what I ought, to do, appears not to come into it, I in fact do what I ought only if I want to do so at some “higher” level; if I want to be a good sort of person more than I want not to bother helping so-and-so. The story goes that the required motivation is sparked off, or, at any rate, somehow initiated, by desire, by what I want at some level or another. We have to want, if not directly to do something, then at least the consequences of doing it; we might not want to visit an aged relative in the hospital, but we do want her to think well of us, and so we go.

This sort of account—a determinedly psychologized account of morality—has it that, since both reason and the material world are motivationally inert, motivation—what moves us—has to come, so to speak, from within us. And only our wants, more or less broadly conceived, fit the bill. Given that we want something, and in light of the information we have about how to get it—our beliefs—it is our wanting it that gets us going, that motivates us. We have at some level to want to do what we do. But this is fundamentally mistaken. Moral reasons hold good quite regardless of what we want.⁴

That is what Kant meant by insisting that morality’s claims are categorical, and not hypothetical: morality requires that we do what is right. He insists that we ought to do what is right just because it is right. So, we have to be able to act, as Kant puts it, from reasons alone. To quote Hampton again:

Kant’s defense of the moral law is of this form: The moral law provides reasons for us, and is ultimately authoritative for us, but its authority does not in any way

⁴ See Bob Brecher, *Getting What You Want?: A Critique of Liberal Morality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

depend on its motivational efficacy, although it is true that, by virtue of its authority, the moral law is (necessarily) not only motivationally efficacious but sufficient to move us.⁵

So, the problem appears to be this: how to offer an account of how moral reasons can be “motivationally efficacious,” how they can be “sufficient to move us,” let alone how, on Kant’s view, they cannot fail “to move us.” But this appearance is misleading: the questions raised are themselves mistaken. That they lead inevitably to a rejection of moral cognitivism is not why they are mistaken, of course; that would be an obvious mistake. So why are they mistaken?

2. “Motivation,” reasons and actions: some difficulties

In this explicitly programmatic discussion, I’m going to propose that we need to jettison not only wants, but also the very idea of motivation. Taking my cue from Richard Norman’s oddly overlooked 2002 paper, “Practical reasons and the redundancy of motives,”⁶ and the direction of some of the work that precedes it, I want to suggest that it is not that reasons motivate without help from any sort of affect, but rather that rational *action has no need of any notion of motivation at all*. We can say all we need to say about why and how we do things without any talk of motive or motivation at all. In short, it is a mistake to think that some psychological state of affairs has to be obtained—my being motivated—if the reasons I have for doing something are to lead me—thanks to my being in such a state—to do it. I take this view because it is the only way I can see of avoiding the conclusion that we have to want to do what is right if we are to do it: we need to get rid of the very notion of motivation and to show that there being good reasons to do something is enough to account for our doing it. We need nothing *further* by way of positing some affective state of affairs to do what there is (sufficient) reason to do: that is to say, that “we do not need a theory of motivation at all,” as Norman puts it.⁷ Or to put it another way: the holiday that European language has been on since Augustine invented “the Will” as a means of dealing with theodicy is one that it should never have taken.

⁵ Hampton, op. cit., 68, n. 29. I think that Hampton is misled here by the idea of motivation when she goes on to say, in the same footnote, that Kant “would agree that moral reasons, as it happens, are also motivational”: for as she herself has just made clear, there is no contingency about that. See also fn. 24.

⁶ Richard Norman, “Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

What exactly is it that is said to require that a person be motivated if they are to be able to act? A theory of motivation “seems to be intended to fill a supposed gap between ‘reasons’ and ‘action.’ How, it may be asked, can our having *reasons* to act result in *action*?”⁸ Interestingly, we don’t ask how our having reasons to believe that such-and-such is so results in belief. But why do we take this for granted? Why is it taken to be just obvious that we need to be motivated to go for a walk, but do not need to be motivated to believe that it is raining? Well, presumably because actions are one thing and beliefs and judgements quite another: very roughly, actions are physical; beliefs and judgements, mental. And reasons, being mental entities, thus have some sort of “direct connection” with beliefs that they don’t have with actions. For actions consist in physical movements and are thus objects of scientific explanation; they require to be capable of being explained in causal terms. Actions need to be “prompted” by something which is also material. Reasons, however, since they are not material but mental entities, cannot fit the bill: “[B]elieving that I have a reason’ is one thing, it may be said, ‘acting’ is another, and it is the supposed gap between the two that a theory of motivation is supposed to fill.”⁹ But then, of course, once we have a scientific account, an explanation, we have neither need of, nor space for, any other. Once explained, the action is already intelligible so that reasons fall out of the picture altogether—unless, as Davidson famously argues, they are in fact a variety of cause in the first place.¹⁰ But then it turns out that they are not really *reasons* at all, inasmuch as something has already to figure in our motivational psychology if it is to be a reason. Reasons have to be “our” reasons; they are reasons “for us,” something we “have.” In short, the account given of reasons on this neo-Humean picture is a thoroughly psychologized one: as Dancy aptly puts it in one of his earlier treatments, “[The] general form of this position is that with Humean reasons in place, we need no other sort of reasons than Humean ones. Or, more strongly, there is *no space left* for any other sort of reason.”¹¹ Once we know that such-and-such is a reason “for you” to go to the bar, we have all the explanation we need, indeed all the explanation there could be, of why you went to the bar. “There is no space left” to ask whether or not there was, in fact, a reason for you to go; what you did is already fully intelligible in light of relevant facts *about you* (set in the appropriate context).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” reprinted in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3–20.

¹¹ Jonathan Dancy, “Why There Is Really No Such Thing as the Theory of Motivation,” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 95 (1995), 10.

What is perhaps most significant about how reasons are understood on this view—a view which most of the Anglo-American tradition in philosophy has come largely to take for granted—is that they are essentially private, rather like pain. If such-and-such is a reason “for you,” then that is all there is to it; your sincere claim that it is “mine” cannot be challenged, however odd it might be. Reasons figure primarily as explanations and only contingently as justifications. That is why Davidson’s view of reasons as, basically, causes is so widely accepted: it is the tradition’s natural view. Of course, your believing that such-and-such is a reason to go to the bar explains your going whether or not it actually is a reason, whether or not it justifies your going. But believing that there is a reason and there being a reason are different states of affairs. Unhappily, the way in which we speak possessively of reasons obscures this. Reasons are—in some sense, and however difficult to explicate—a feature of the world, not of the psychological constitution of any individual. They are not “yours,” “mine” or “ours.” But the antipathy towards reasons being understood in this way, as “external,” runs deep. So, for example, Bernard Williams influentially argues that

Should we suppose that, if genuine external reasons were to be had, morality might get some leverage on ... the fanatical Nazi? ... I cannot see what leverage it would secure: *what would these external reasons do to these people, or for our relations to them?*¹²

But this misses the point entirely. The point of moral reasons is not whether, as a matter of contingent psychological fact, they would actually convince particular people: they might or might not. Fanatical racists are of course unlikely to listen; or, listening, be unable to grasp what is being said; or, able to grasp it, mistakenly suppose otherwise. Nor are they alone, of course. Furthermore, and turning to Williams’ own contrast with moral thinking, scientific thought, the situation is no different. The fact that many eminent scientists were unable or unwilling to listen to what Galileo was telling them, or, listening, remained unconvinced, makes not the slightest difference to the fact that there were reasons to suppose that the Earth went around the Sun. It makes no difference at all that, until Galileo made his

¹² Bernard Williams, “Replies,” in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. by J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 216. Compare how he fails to see the same point on p. 215, perhaps because his opponents too write of reasons as something people “have”: “What is gained, except perhaps rhetorically, by claiming that A has a reason to do a certain thing, when all one has left to say is that this is what a *phronimos*, a decent person, or some such would do?” What a decent person would do—assuming that such a person would be one who did what was morally right—is what there was (sufficient) reason for them to do.

observations, no one “had” reasons to think so. There always had been such reasons (at least since the inception of the Solar System).

The baleful influence of this psychologized notion of reasons is widespread. Even thinkers who would not at all agree with Williams’ neo-Humean conception of what reasons are often fail to be sufficiently rigorous in their non-psychologism. For example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord rightly points out, in the course of defending coherentism, that there is a great difference between someone’s being “justified in holding a particular belief” and the question of whether or not “the belief [is] justified”:¹³ “one might justifiably believe what (as it happens) is false.”¹⁴ I might, for instance, have good reason to believe that the temperature of the spiced sugar syrup I am making is 110 degrees because that is what it says on my hitherto entirely reliable sugar thermometer, even though it actually is not, because as it turns out, and unbeknownst to me, the thermometer is not working properly. And Sayre-McCord is right to go on to say that therefore, on his view, “a person’s belief is justified only if it coheres well with her other beliefs; whether it does is independent of whether she thinks it does.”¹⁵ But something crucial is missing here: are her other beliefs *right*? It is not a question of whether or not she is justified in believing what she believes: as Sayre-McCord, says, she might be justified in believing something false. Rather, it is a question of whether or not she is *right* to believe what she believes. Otherwise, Williams’ and others’ “logically consistent racist” could be an exemplar of a coherentist view of morality. The question is not what reasons someone *has*—they could be false despite being justifiably held—but what reasons *there are*. The distinction is crucial.

3. Reasons, beliefs, and actions

Nor is the relation of reasons to action so very different from their relation to belief. Notice, first, that to make a judgement is to *do* something; it is not passive, not an event: it is not something that happens to us, that comes to us from outside, but something that we *make*. Our acquiring beliefs need not always be a matter of our imbibing and absorbing them from those around us, in the way that children might start to form their beliefs; or rather, might come to have their beliefs formed by people around them. Typically, as we grow up, so we exercise increasing discretion in what we believe: we learn to think for ourselves. And thinking is something that we *do*; it is not

¹³ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Coherentist epistemology and moral theory,” in *Moral Knowledge?*, ed. by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 146.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

something that happens to us. Thinking is a species of activity. And in that case, why assume that acting requires that we be motivated—by desire or the will (whatever that may be)¹⁶—when desiring and willing *themselves* do not require motivation? Let me put it crudely, so as to make clear what is fundamental here. The neo-Humean response, or at least, a reconstruction of what I take the underlying thought to be, is that an “act of the mind” is not “really” an act. It is not something physical, and so only metaphorically an action. But if that is so, then, we have a puzzle. If to want, or to will, something is simply a mental state of affairs or, in the case of willing, a mental act, then, how do either of these serve to motivate (physical) action? Presumably, again, it must be that the similarity in respect of act outweighs the difference in respect of physical and mental. Such an account might well seem plausible: to *have* a reason is not an action, and there being a reason even less so. That is why the presence alone of a reason to act is insufficient, and requires the addition of affect, which is something—at least metaphorically, if not necessarily literally—active. Well, suppose that this is indeed plausible: but even if the “passivity” of reasons were enough to explain why they are unable to initiate action, the question would remain of exactly how reasons could then initiate thinking, deliberating, judging, and so on, since these are actions, even if “mental” actions. And if that is denied—if it is insisted that actions be understood in purely physical terms, as the movement of neurons or whatever—then, it is even more puzzling how reasons are able to initiate these, but not other sorts of “physical movement,” namely, actions. In short, the very idea of a reason becomes increasingly tenuous: on this sort of view, it becomes very hard to see what part reasons might have even in our deliberations, let alone our actions.¹⁷

To put it crudely: if “motivation” designates something “mental,” then how does it connect with actions? If, on the other hand, it designates something “physical,” then, how does it connect with reasons? As Hampton puts it, the difficulty on this view is how to explain that while the

authority (of reasons) is not the same as motivational efficacy, [but] it does seem as if there is some kind of link between the two. Even if one is not some kind of motivational internalist, one will likely still believe that

¹⁶ A thorough-going defence of moral cognitivism would of course require not merely that we junk “motivation,” but also that we reject the very idea of “the will” and of “willing.” But that is for another occasion.

¹⁷ Again, a defence of moral cognitivism will eventually require an account of the relation between something’s being the case and the reason, or reasons, why it is the case. The metaphors to which we have become accustomed—something “follows from” something else; reasons “impel” or “lead” us in various ways; it is the “force” of reasons that does the connecting work—are all of them less than perspicacious.

it is possible for human beings to be motivated by reasons.¹⁸

But how? For, as Hampton's Humean has it, "it doesn't make sense to say that it follows from the concept of having a reason to x that ... one also has a motive to x. Whatever our concepts are, they don't have control over the workings of the physical world."¹⁹ Let us consider this in some detail.

First, it is clearly the case that my thinking about a physical object will not move it. However, if there is a reason for me to do something, and I do it, then, that makes a difference in the physical world. So, reasons, since they are a necessary component of action, clearly *impact* on the physical world, even if they do not control it. How action, as contrasted with behaviour, is possible is of course, a notorious difficulty. (I am not going to solve the free will/determinism issue here.) But the point is that *if* action is possible—*if* action is action and not merely behaviour—then, reasons figure *somehow* in the physical world. Again, Hampton's characterization is apt as an initial approach to the issue:

[W]hen we say that an agent acts "on," or "for the sake of" a reason, we are trying to say something about how this agent is "lured" to the action *by* the reason, as opposed to being driven or pushed into the action by some inner motivational force.²⁰

Desires, passions, and other instances of affect, we might say, push us; reasons, by contrast, pull us. It is in that sense that we have control over our actions. To put it metaphorically, the pull of reasons can be accepted or resisted in a way that the push of what we want seems to admit of "no such choice or decision,"²¹ inasmuch as our wants are part of the physical world. But though this way of putting it may initially seem helpful, the "push-pull" metaphor allows, in the end, too close a similarity between how affect works and how reasons work. The metaphor is too mechanical. For "[T]he practical force of normative reasons is not something that *makes* us act."²² Rather, "... the practical force of reasons ... is *sui generis*, it is just the force of *reasons*, and cannot be equated with some other kind of force ..., something rooted in our

¹⁸ Hampton, *The Authority of Reason*, 91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richard Norman, "Public Reasons and the 'Private Language' Argument," *Philosophical Investigations*, 23 (2000), 310.

social nature.”²³ Perhaps so. Certainly, what is centrally important is the distinction, in Hampton’s words, “between, on the one hand, reasons that are compelling considerations on which we choose to act, and on the other hand, nonrational motivators as mere ‘drivers’ of action....”²⁴ Except that there is considerable ambiguity about what exactly she means here. First, if the “nonrational motivators” which are “mere ‘drivers’ of action” are purely affect, then, there is no action at all, but only behaviour. Nor is there any action if “acting from desires” is understood as acting purely in response to, or on account of, desires; again, to “act” thus is to behave, and not to act at all. Only if my desires constitute the reasons for what I do, do I act “from desires.” Kant, for example, insists that the difference between a moral action and a non-moral action lies precisely in this: desires, or wants, cannot constitute (any part of) my reasons for acting if my action is to be a moral one:

I cannot have respect for inclination as such, whether it is mine or that of another; I can at most in the first case approve it and in the second sometimes even love it, that is, regard it as favorable to my own advantage. Only what is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or at least excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice—hence the mere law for itself—can be an object of respect and so a command.²⁵

Second, it does not follow at all “from the *concept* of having a reason” that “one also has a motive.” Rather, to say that I am motivated to do something is just a traditional but wholly misleading way of saying that there is a reason—one I recognize—to do it. The mistake is to suppose that there is something “behind” reasons, motivation, that is needed to theorise; and to suppose that, therefore, there really is an issue about how it can be, as Kant puts it, “that my psychology is under pressure by logic.”²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 13 [4:400]. Cf. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13 [6:213]: “That choice which can be determined by *pure reason* is called free choice. That which can be determined only by *inclination* (sensible impulse, *stimulus*) would be animal choice (*arbitrium brutum*). Human choice, however, is a choice that can indeed be *affected* but not *determined* by impulses, and is therefore of itself ... not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure will. *Freedom* of choice is this independence from being *determined* by sensible impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be of itself practical.” In the end, even Kant is too much of a voluntarist.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

4. Agents and agency

The empiricist tradition from Hobbes onwards has propagated an oddly mechanical notion of the individual, and thus, of human agency as an “extra” that requires explanation.²⁷ However, it is a picture of human agency on which no coherent understanding of morality is possible. For if teleological accounts are ruled out as accounting for actions because they are not scientific, then, *reasons* for action are ruled out too; and if there can really be no explanatory reasons for action, but only causal accounts of it, then, there are indeed no actions, only behaviour. If we understand ourselves as fundamentally physical entities that need a “shove” to get them moving, then no contortions, however ingenious, can make intelligible the notion of acting for reasons. No wonder, then, that on the neo-Humean picture, nothing finally remains of practical reason, let alone of morality—or even of agency.

The main reason why a need for some theory of motivation is assumed is that agency is thought of as something *exceptional*: the machine, normally static, needs something to get it moving. The assumption is that, as people, we *sometimes act*: “[T]he picture is of humans beings as essentially static, beings whose natural condition is one of inaction, and who need some kind of motivating force to effect the transition from inaction to action.”²⁸ But why not *start* with agency? Why not think of ourselves primarily as agents, who *sometimes do not act*? After all, we are as much “doing beings” as “thinking beings”; and as I have suggested, to think is to do something. We are not static objects which are, from time to time, “moved” to act. Rather, we are, first and foremost, agents: it is our doing things—whether physically, mentally, or both—that makes us persons and not just members of the species, *homo sapiens*. So, for instance, Martin Hollis points out that “it is not plainly true for everyone that all effort is at a cost. The idea that the rational agent always needs an incentive to *do anything at all* is dubitable.”²⁹ Or as Norman succinctly puts it, we need to remind “ourselves that, in the relevant sense, we are always acting, that is, for as long as we are conscious, and not asleep, under a general anaesthetic, comatose or dead.”³⁰

²⁷ Thus, Hobbes said “For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within ...” See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 81.

²⁸ Norman, “Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives,” 7.

²⁹ Martin Hollis, *The Cunning of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19. He goes on to remark that this idea “is connected with the thought that voluntary social relations are instrumental and so engaged in only for mutual gain, which is dubitable too.” Altruism is impossible on the neo-Humean view of agency; it would always be an “altruism” at best, tinged by the desire to be altruistic, for on this view to “call an agent rational is to say merely that he reasons correctly in identifying the action likeliest to satisfy his preferences.” *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁰ Norman, “Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives,” 8.

A great advantage of this perspective is that it enables us readily to distinguish two questions which are otherwise easily run together and which sow confusion in debates about moral cognitivism. One is the question misleadingly raised when in “the grip of this ‘picture which holds us captive’”:³¹ “Why do you act (rather than not acting)?” But this is an unanswerable question, and thus, not properly a question at all.³² To act is what agents just do, in the same way as thinking is something thinkers just do. The other question is the genuine, everyday question we happily ask when we ask why someone is doing *that*. And unlike the former, this is a perfectly good question. The point is that “Why are you doing that?” and “Why are you doing anything at all?” are profoundly different, notwithstanding any grammatical similarity.³³ Again, we need to *start* with what we are, namely rational agents. If we do that, then, the puzzle—about how something both static and non-physical, or reasons, can “move” us to do things—dissolves. We are freed from the assumption that some mediation is required between thought and action; and from the assumption that our “normal” state is a passive one. We no longer have to suppose that we have to invoke something special, something “out of the ordinary,” to explain why we are, unusually, moved to do something. Again, acting turns out to require no explanation at all, for, as agents, acting is just what we do:

If we are always acting, then it is misleading to talk about practical reasons as “reasons for acting.” Practical reasons are always reasons for doing *this*—for performing one specific action rather than another. *There are no reasons for acting, there are only reasons for actions.*³⁴

We do not need something other than, or additional to, reasons for a particular action in order to act on those reasons: “people perform actions,” Norman says, “because they take themselves to have reasons for performing those actions, and ... their reasons explain why they act *as they do*.”³⁵ Of

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Compare Aristotle when he insists that trying to discuss anything at all with someone who seriously questioned whether or not they should be rational would be “like trying to argue with a vegetable.” See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), IV 1006a, 15.

³³ “The relevant sense (of ‘acting’ in which we are always acting) is the sense in which we can always appropriately ask of a conscious human being ‘Why are you doing that?’ Someone who is sitting in a chair staring into space or at a television screen is in that sense acting. We can ask ‘Why have you been sitting in that armchair for the past hour?’ and the answer might be, perhaps, ‘I need to relax’, or ‘I’m watching an interesting programme’, or ‘I’m planning my next lecture.’” Norman, “Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives,” 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

course, we can be mistaken in taking it that there are reasons to perform a particular action: but exactly the same is the case of taking it that there are reasons to believe something or other. Moral cognitivism does not rule out our making moral mistakes, any more than the view that mathematics is a rational system (call it mathematical cognitivism if you like) rules out our making mathematical mistakes.

There is no need of any theory of motivation at all: for now, there is no longer any mysterious gap between our reasons for doing something and what we do that needs to be bridged by motivation, volition, or whatever. The so-called motives invoked to bridge the gap between reasons and actions, because reasons alone seemed unable to make the connection, turn out not to be needed at all. For instance, it is not that my “failure of moral motivation ... necessarily *involves* or *signals* a cognitive failure”;³⁶ rather, my failure to act morally well *is* a cognitive failure. In the normal, case we can say all there needs to be said by way of explaining why people do the things they do without referring to motives at all. In fact, motives turn out even metaphorically to feature “only in special cases”³⁷ where there is some doubt about whether or not the reasons cited by someone are *really* the reasons for which they acted. If “I ask what your *motives* were, I imply that things are not what they seem, that you had *ulterior* motives.”³⁸ But ulterior motives are just unacknowledged reasons: the question, “What are your (real) motives?” can always be rendered without loss or addition as the question, “What are your (real) reasons?” And of course, motives might be invoked in everyday talk, as they often are, to refer to a person’s general reasons for doing the things they do: “[I]f someone donates money to charity and says that her reason for doing so is the terrible suffering of the victims of the famine, we can say that, if that is her reason, she was motivated by pity.”³⁹ But to say that is simply to say that pity was her reason for what she did. Even in such unexceptionable everyday talk of motivation, unencumbered by any “theory of motivation,” motives are not something that motivates. They are simply reasons.

5. Conclusion: reasons for actions

We do things for reasons. That is just what *doing* something is. And as in the ordinary everyday practical contexts of doing something, so in the specifically moral case: the conviction that moral judgements require something “more” if they are to lead to action is misplaced. To speak out

³⁶ Margaret Olivia Little, “Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Noûs* 31 (1997), 59–79, p. 72.

³⁷ Norman, “Practical Reasons and the Redundancy of Motives,” 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

against the latest plans to commodify the university, or health provision, because they destroy the requisite co-operative ethos needs no more than the judgement that that is what they will do and that it is wrong. Agency, one might say, goes all the way down. We are a species, individual and collective members of which are fundamentally characterized by agency; to be a person is inescapably to be an agent. And it follows from this that recognizing a consideration as a reason to do something is already to be committed to act on it; again, as Norman insists, “we do not need any further explanation of why, in the normal case, human agents act on their beliefs about what they have good reasons to do. They just do it.”⁴⁰ And if that is the case, then, we can rid ourselves of a good deal of entirely unnecessary and confusing philosophical baggage. First, the internal reason/external reason distinction becomes immediately irrelevant: for the point about citing reasons to act in a particular way is precisely “not, then, to show that a belief about right and wrong can explain an action, but that a belief of such a kind can give the agent reason to do or not to do it”—so that “someone who does what is wrong thereby acts in a way that is contrary to reason.”⁴¹ Second, the distinction between motivating and justifying reasons also becomes immediately redundant. Remember, the problem about reasons leading to actions arose because we seemed to need *both* explanation and justification of what people do. To explain is one thing; to justify quite another. True. But the thought is not dependent on any “motivation.” If *x* justifies *z*, then *x* also explains *z*.

While we are thinking of philosophical baggage and its inconvenience, it is worth pausing to consider how and why some philosophers—noticing that explanation is one thing and justification another, but not wanting to deprive reasons of any motivational role, so as to retain the possibility of moral cognitivism—have tried to square the circle by distinguishing two sorts of reasons: those that actually motivate someone to action, and those that either justify or would justify their action.⁴² For people clearly make mistakes about reasons and thus, do things which they suppose there are reasons to do when in fact there are not: so we can explain what they

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 62. As Warren Quinn observes in his discussion of Williams’ “Internal and External Reasons”: “modern subjectivists have extended Hume’s idea that morality produces motives only through its noncognitive content to the idea that it produces reasons only in the same way.” See “Putting Rationality in its Place,” reprinted in W. Quinn’s *Morality and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 231.

⁴² The view once advanced by E.J. Bond in his *Reason and Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) that one should distinguish “motivating” from “justifying” reasons was historically a helpful advance on the Humean position; but in the end such a view merely shifts the problem to that of trying to account for their relations, in a way that parallels the “internalism/externalism” debate. If something does not justify a belief or an action—at least to some extent, for there may of course be countervailing reasons—then, it is not any sort of reason.

did without condoning it (she thought she was acting for the best). And with that distinction in place, to state someone's "justifying reason" for what they did (she thought it was cowardly not to speak out) is not to explain it: something else, a motivating reason, is needed for that. Without knowing what "pushed" her to speak, her speaking remains unexplained—unexplained (to go back to the earlier discussion) because its cause has not been identified. Reasons, now "justifying reasons," can't explain actions because they are not affectively engaged. It takes "motivating" reasons to do that. If motivating reasons and justifying reasons are different, as they must be; and if in the case of moral acts they nevertheless have to coincide, as they do if morality is not to be optional, but rather, in Kant's terminology, categorical, then, motivating reasons for a moral act have to take precedence over justifying reasons. And so, we find ourselves with another version of the internal/external problem. But without any "motivational gap" in place, there is no difficulty in seeing that if a judgement justifies an action, then it also explains it. I put on my mac because it is raining. What further explanation is needed for what I did? There are not two kinds of reason, "justifying reasons" and "motivating reasons," but rather two kinds of explanation: intentional and causal. The first explains actions by citing reasons for it; the second explains events by detailing their cause(s).⁴³

But still, don't we often do something simply because we want to? And shouldn't that lead us rightly to reassert the view that desires sometimes motivate at least some actions, so that we need the language of motivation after all? No. Very often, of course, we do say that we are going to do something "because we want to": but the "because" here only gives an appearance of anything causal going on. Rather, our wanting to do something *is* the reason for doing it; and it is sometimes a perfectly good reason. But wanting to do something does not cause us to do it; it does not compel us to act. Otherwise, again, we would not be *acting* at all, but merely behaving—as indeed we sometimes do, when we just respond to some stimulus such as a desire. But automatically, having another glass of wine, rather than deciding to have another, or simply picking something off the supermarket shelf, rather than choosing it, are not *actions* at all.

It is also the case, of course, that we do sometimes talk of reasons as motivating us to adopt certain beliefs. You get yourself to (try to) believe that the job you are doing is not one that exploits people in order to be able to get on with doing it without too much trouble. Or, you give assent to a judgement, and succeed in making it your own, in order to join, or to remain

⁴³ What exactly the relation might be between these constitutes one version of the problem of free will and determinism. That, however, is another matter. But if determinism were true, then of course, we would not—could not—be agents.

within, some group or another: consider Members of Parliament and the rubbish their parties require them to believe if they are to have any hope of preferment. Nor is this always a matter of simply appearing to have the right beliefs and to make the right judgements: cynicism is, at least, sometimes matched by sincerity, which is what makes the histories of many politicians' changing beliefs and judgements so puzzling. How can she sincerely say today what yesterday she denied? How can he now judge that something is indeed the case which yesterday he was clearly convinced was not? But again, the terminology of reasons as motivating us to adopt beliefs is entirely unnecessary; and in terms of understanding actions, it is profoundly misleading. There is no difference between saying that a politician was motivated to adopt some belief in the hope of preferment, and saying that their hope of preferment was the reason for their adopting the belief. Where people are said to "have motives," what is actually being claimed is that there are reasons for what they do or intend to do.

Of course, there being a reason for you or me to do something does not always result in our doing it. But again, that is not because of some sort of motivational failure. We might not be aware of the reason; we might be aware of it, but underestimate its importance relative to countervailing reasons; or we might just feel too tired or too ill to do this particular thing, or even to do anything at all. It is a rational failure: one that is no less, but also no more, mysterious than rational failures regarding beliefs. Of course, there are ways in which rational failure is indeed puzzling, hence, the invocation of "weakness of will," for instance, or anomie.⁴⁴ But its ubiquity in the context of action no more undermines the rationality of morality than does its ubiquity in the context of beliefs. Our mistakes in reasoning about the world or about mathematics do not undermine the rationality of such reasoning. Why should mistakes in practical reasoning—including moral reasoning—be thought to undermine the rationality of such reasoning? It is only because the action concerned is conceptualized as some sort of "addition" to the judgement that a problem appears to arise. But on a view of agency as the "standard" state of affairs, there is no more a question of judgement plus action than there is of judgement plus belief. In each case, these two elements are part of a single whole.

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⁴⁴ A defence of moral cognitivism would, of course, have to deal in detail with these and other matters. Here, however, it is enough to dispel the view that the phenomenon of motivation offers a threat to moral cognitivism.

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