

The John Locke Lectures 2009

Being Realistic about Reasons

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Lecture 1: Introduction

Contemporary discussion in metaethics differs in two important ways from the discussion in the 50s and 60s, and even in the later 70s, when John Mackie wrote *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. In that earlier period, discussion focused entirely on *morality*: on the proper interpretation of claims about moral right and wrong, and other forms of moral evaluation. Today, although morality is still much discussed, a significant part of the debate concerns practical reasoning and normativity more generally: the proper interpretation of claims about reasons for action, and, even more broadly, claims about reasons for belief and other attitudes, which are increasingly recognized as normative, and as raising questions of the same nature as those about reasons for action.

The metaethics of the mid-twentieth century also gave the central place to the question of *motivation*. With respect to morality in particular, the question was how agents can be motivated by their moral judgments. In *The Possibility of Altruism*, Thomas Nagel was attacking the prevailing Humean orthodoxy, and he considered requirements of ethics and prudence to be rational requirements. But he presented the problem he was addressing as a problem about motivation. Thus he wrote, “I conceive of ethics as a branch of psychology. My claims concern its foundation, or ultimate motivational basis.”¹ Today, although motivation is still mentioned, questions are more likely to be put

¹ *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 3.

in terms of *reasons*. With respect to morality the question is when and why it is true that a person has a reason to do what will benefit him or her in the future, or to do what morality requires.

It may be tendentious for me to say that metaethics as a field has undergone these two changes. Perhaps they are only changes in my own thinking, or the thinking of those I talk with most frequently. But, whatever may be said about the field as a whole, my approach in these lectures will fall on the second side of each of these dichotomies: my focus will be on normativity in general, treating morality as a special case, and I will be concerned centrally with the idea of a reason—mainly with the idea of a reason for action, although I will have a little to say about reasons of other kinds.

Indeed, I will take normativity to be the domain of claims about the reasons people have, for actions or for attitudes such as intention or belief. I also believe that familiar normative notions, such as value, and moral right and wrong, are to be understood in terms of claims about reasons. This assumption may affect what I have to say. In particular, as I will say in later lectures, focusing on specific claims about reasons, while ignoring the context provided by their role in richer normative notions, may make some of the problems about reasons that I will discuss appear to be more difficult.

Restricting ‘normativity’ to claims about reasons may also be controversial. Some may hold that not all normative claims are claims about reasons. But the term, ‘normative’ is not what the disagreement, if there is one, should be about. The question is whether claims about rationality support claims about reasons. I am inclined to believe that they do not. It is also an interesting question whether there are forms of normativity that do not depend on or lead to claims about reasons. I will leave this question open.

My lectures will offer a qualified defense of cognitivism about reasons: the view that claims about reasons for action can be correct or incorrect, and that the accepting such claims can be seen as a kind of belief. I will also maintain that truths about reasons are irreducibly normative truths—not reducible to or identifiable with truths of other kinds, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects, causes and effects. So I am what might be called a Reasons Fundamentalist. My defense of this position is not “qualified” because I am tempted by other views, but rather because I believe that a cognitivist view of the kind I defend faces serious problems, although these are not the problems that are most frequently discussed.

The idea that there are irreducibly normative truths about reasons is very close to common sense. Consider, for example, the following claims.

- (1) For a person in control of a fast moving automobile, the fact that if the steering wheel is not turned the car will injure and perhaps kill a pedestrian, but if the wheel is turned the car will hit no one, is a reason to turn the wheel.
- (2) The fact that a person’s child has died is a reason for that person to feel sad.
- (3) The fact that it would be enjoyable to listen to some very engaging music, moving one’s body gently in time with it, is a reason to do this, or to continue doing it.

These things seem, to me at least, obviously true. But the philosophical thesis that there are such irreducibly normative truths may seem unsatisfactory, because it leaves unexplained many things that need explaining. Consider the following questions.

Relational Character: Reasons are reasons *for* an agent. How is this relational character to be understood?

Ground of Truth: In virtue of what are claims about reasons true, when they are true?

Does the idea that claims about reasons are true or false, independent of our opinions about them, and that truths about reasons are irreducibly normative, have unacceptable metaphysical implications?

Supervenience: How are facts about reasons related to natural facts? They are not entailed by natural facts, but cannot vary unless natural facts vary. This may seem puzzling.

Knowledge: If claims about reasons are claims about irreducibly normative truths, how we can come to know truths of this kind?

Practical significance: Judgments about reasons play a different role than other beliefs—such as beliefs about the natural world—in practical reasoning and in the explanation of action. How can they play this role if they are beliefs?

Strength: Reasons have varying strengths. The reason to turn the wheel of the car, for example, is a stronger reason than the reason to go on listening to enjoyable music: the fact that turning the wheel to avoid hitting the pedestrian would interfere with one's enjoyment of the music on the radio is not a sufficient reason not to turn it. So there is a question about what this strength amounts to.

Optionality: Some reasons seem to be “optional”—merely reasons it makes sense to act on if one chooses—whereas other reasons are normatively conclusive—reasons it does not make sense *not* to act on. The reason to turn the car seems to be of the

latter kind; the reason to listen to music of the former. If I would enjoy listening to some music, then I have a reason to do so, but it also might make sense for me to take a nap instead.

I will argue, in my next lecture, that the idea that there are irreducibly normative truths about reasons for action does not have troubling metaphysical implications, and I will offer an account of the relation between normative facts and naturalistic facts. It would be desirable to have an account of what makes claims about reasons true, when they are true. But such an account, if it could be given, would be itself a normative thesis, not a metaphysical one.

In my third lecture, I will provide an account of how an agent's judgments about reasons, even if they are *beliefs*, can explain his or her subsequent actions. Taken together with the first point, about the lack of metaphysical implications, this undermines the main pull toward expressivist views.

In my fourth lecture, I will argue that it is a mistake to think that there is an epistemological problem about how we could "get in touch with" irreducibly normative truths. This largely follows from what I will say about metaphysics in my second lecture. But I will also maintain that it is reasonable to want a fuller, normative account of how we can determine which claims about reasons are true. This is the residual problem of characterizing the ground of normative truth that I mentioned earlier. In my final lecture I will canvass some possibilities for a positive account of how we can come to know normative truths.

An account of this kind, if we had one, might provide answers to the further questions on my list. It might explain what it is for one reason to be stronger than

another, and how we should go about deciding whether this is so in a given case, and it might explain how some reasons can be optional, and others non-optional.

All the questions I have listed might seem to answered by an account of reasons that bases them on desires; for example by

- (4) X has a reason to do A just in case doing A would promote the fulfillment of some desire that X has.

or

- (5) X has reason to do A if doing A would promote the fulfillment of a desire that X would have if X were fully aware of the relevant non-normative facts and thinking clearly.

A view of this kind seems to explain the relational character of reasons: reasons are *reasons for* a person who has the relevant desire, or would have such a desire if fully informed and thinking clearly. It might also seem to account for the phenomenon of strength: desires have varying strengths, that is to say varying motivational power, and a desire theory might hold that one reason is stronger than another just in case the desire on which it is based is stronger in this motivational sense. The fact that some reasons are optional might also be explained by saying that they are reasons for doing something *if you desire or want to do so*, and the idea that some reasons are non-optional would thus be the idea that there are some things that promote the fulfillment of desires that everyone has (or everyone who is fully informed about his or her situation and thinking clearly.)

There might seem to be no difficulty explaining how we can know what reasons we have according to a view of this kind, since we can, at least sometimes, know what we desire and what would fulfill those desires. And we can explain how reasons can

motivate, since desires motivate a person to do what would promote their fulfillment, and a person has a reason to do something has a desire that that action would promote the fulfillment of.

Finally, a desire theory might claim to explain the phenomenon of supervenience. At one level, this seems obvious: if the reasons for action that people have are a function of natural facts about their desires and what will promote their fulfillment, then as long as these natural facts remain unchanged, people's reasons for action will remain the same as well.

The ability to explain these aspects of reasons is, I believe, a large part of what makes desire-based accounts appealing. There are, however, well-known difficulties with accounts of this kind. Some of these difficulties concern what may seem to be counterintuitive implications about what reasons people have. Does a person really have a reason to do what will fulfill any desire he or she has, not matter how foolish? Does everyone have desires that would explain the reason to turn the car and does that reason really depend on the person's having such a desire? These problems might be lessened by shifting from actual desires to informed desires, and making suitable assumptions about what people would desire if fully informed.² But this move brings problems of its own for the desire view's account of motivation, since it is less obvious that people are always motivated by the fact that an action would promote the fulfillment of desires if these are desires that they do not have, but only would have under different conditions.

I believe that substantive objections of this kind count decisively against accepting a desire theory of reasons. But I want to set these objections aside for the

² Mark Schroeder takes this line in Chapters 5 and 6 of *Slaves of the Passions*.

moment, and instead consider what may seem to be a deeper objection, which is that the explanatory potential of such theories is in an important respect illusory. The illusion arises from the fact that desire theories can be understood in two very different ways, and the statements of these theories often do not clearly distinguish between them.

One way in which it is natural to read desire theories is as substantive normative claims about what reasons people have. It may be quite plausible to claim (in many cases) that people have reason to do what will promote the satisfaction of their desires. But, so interpreted, this is just a plausible normative claim about one kind of reason, reasons for action. A theory of reasons based on it—what I will call a normative desire theory—would not explain normativity—would not explain what it is to be a reason. For one thing, it would not apply to all reasons, but only reasons for action. It would not, for example, explain reasons for belief, or why the fact that one’s child has died is a reason to feel sad. (This reason is not plausibly explained by invoking a *desire* to feel this way.) So if a desire theory is a plausible account of reasons for action, this must be due to something special about action.

Such a theory could explain some features of reasons for action, such as the relational nature of such reasons, and their strength, in the ways I have mentioned. But these explanations would be based on a general substantive claim about what reasons we have, and thus would be internal to the normative realm. For this reason, the explanations that a normative desire theory offers for other features may seem insufficiently deep.

A normative desire theory would not, for example, provide a general explanation of how we can come to know normative truths. It simply makes a general substantive claim about reasons for action—that we have reason to do whatever satisfies our

desires—which, if true, leaves us only with the empirical question of how to do figure out which actions will do this. In the same way, the thesis that the only thing we have reason to do is to get as much money as possible would leave us just with the problem of figuring out how to get rich. It would not solve the problem of how we can come to know normative truths, but would simply offer one such truth, which it claims we know.³ Nor would a desire theory of this kind explain how beliefs about reasons, *qua* normative beliefs, motivate people. All of the motivational work in the account it offers is done not by the belief that we have reason to do what will promote our desires but by those desires themselves, which the desire theory holds are what make that belief true.

Finally, it may seem that the explanation of supervenience offered by a normative desire theory would not go deep enough. It would not explain why there could not be a possible world in which the natural facts were the same as in our world, but in which normative facts were different because in that world people's desires did not provide them with reasons for action, or not all desires did this, or not only desires but also certain other considerations as well.

These points might be summed up by saying that normative desire theories are not rivals to Reasons Fundamentalism but are quite compatible with it; perhaps they even presuppose it.

An alternative interpretation of a desire theory would take it to offer a reductive claim about what it *is* for someone to have a reason, rather than normative claims about

³ The situation here is similar to a familiar one regarding utilitarianism as a moral theory. Utilitarians may criticize their opponents for relying on “intuitions” about what is right and wrong, and claim that utilitarianism offers an alternative to such appeals. But what it offers is rather one big appeal to intuition—such as that acts are right if they lead to maximum happiness—which, *once accepted*, reduces questions of right and wrong to matters of empirical calculation.

the reasons for action.⁴ Interpreted in this way, a desire theory might provide answers to some of the questions I have listed. The question, however, would be whether this would explain reasons or eliminate their normativity, by identifying facts about reasons with non-normative facts. The “action guiding” force of reasons, on such a theory, would be purely causal and explanatory. If the fact that one has a strong reason not to do X (and no countervailing reason to do X) is just a natural fact about what will satisfy one’s desires, then this fact might explain one’s failure to do X. But it does not explain why believing that one has such a reason (believing that this natural fact obtains) can make it irrational for one to do X.

A reductive desire theorist might reply that if all normativity is to be understood in terms of the idea of a reason, then if it is true that *a person’s having a reason just consist in some fact about that person’s desires and what will promote them*, then a reductive desire theory preserves normativity, since it preserves the idea of a reason.⁵ So the question is whether this reductive claim should be accepted. I myself believe that this claim is refuted by the evident lack of intrinsic normative significance of facts about desires. But simply asserting that this is so may seem to lead to a stand off. To move beyond this standoff, one needs to consider and assess the evidence offered in support of the reductive thesis. In Schroeder’s case, much depends on his claim that facts about desires, rather than, say, about what a person would enjoy, are the best explanation of the reasons that one person (who likes dancing) has to go to a party where there will be dancing (as compared to the reasons of another person, who does not like to dance.)⁶ This

⁴ This is the position Schroeder argues for in *Slaves of the Passions*.

⁵ As Schroeder argues in *Slaves of the Passions*, pp. 79-83.

⁶ *Slaves of the Passions*, Chapters 1 and 8.

beliefs were true. People use ‘rational’ in this sense when, for example, they claim that what it is rational to do is to act in one’s self interest. Such a claim about rationality does not explain claims about reasons, but rather presupposes, or asserts, claims about what reasons people have. It is a non-garbage in, non-garbage out understanding of rationality, so to speak—what some might call a buck-passing view.

A rationality-based account of reasons would be trivial, and fail in its aims, if the notion of rationality it appealed to were of this buck-passing sort. So a view of this kind must employ a conception of rationality that does not consist of or depend on a substantive conception of the reasons people have.

In a Kantian theory, which is the most familiar view of this type, the fundamental claim is that the Categorical Imperative is a condition of rationality. The basic claim is that anyone who sees him or herself as a rational agent must, on pain of irrationality, see the Categorical Imperative as the fundamental principle of practical reasoning. A consideration X is a reason for an agent to A, according to this theory, if a failure to count X as a reason to A would be incompatible with the Categorical Imperative. So far, this seems to cover only moral reasons, broadly construed. Christine Korsgaard’s Kantian view broadens this by adding that X is a reason for an agent to do A if failing to see it as such a reason is incompatible with some “practical identity” that the agent has adopted (and adopting that identity is itself compatible with the Categorical Imperative.)⁷

It is worth considering how a view that bases claims about reasons on requirements of rationality might explain some of the puzzling features of reasons that I

⁷ See *Sources*, esp. pp. 102-107, 239-242. For a non-Kantian view that bases reasons on rationality see Joshua Gert, *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

mentioned above. A view of this kind can explain what I called above the relational character of facts about reasons, since such facts are, on this view, facts about what an agent can (consistent with rationality) treat as a reason. It can also explain what makes claims about reasons correct when they are correct: they are correct if they do indeed follow from requirements of rationality. We can know what reasons we have, on such an account, because we can know what rationality requires, and insofar as we are rational we will be moved to do what have reason to do. The “strength” of reasons can be explained in what might be called a “top down” fashion, in contrast to the “bottom up” explanation offered by a desire theory. It is not that reasons “come with” particular strengths, as they would on a desire-based view. Rather, one consideration is a stronger reason than another if it would be irrational to refrain from doing what the former reason counts in favor of because the latter reason counts against so acting.

It is less clear how a rationality-based view should explain the optional character of some reasons. But I will leave this aside for now in order to consider what has been seen as one of the main advantages of such a view over rival accounts, such as Reasons Fundamentalism.

The two shifts in metaethics that I mentioned earlier, from morality to normativity in general, and from motivation to reasons, interact in way that raises a difficulty. If morality is the topic, then the second shift, from motivation to reasons, is intelligible: one can ask not only what “motivates” people to do what morality requires, but also what reason they have to do this. If reasons in general are at issue, however, what room is there for a further question, if it is not “motivational”?

One possibility is the question that Christine Korsgaard calls “The Normative Question,” of how reasons acquire their normative force or, as she sometimes puts it, how reasons “get a grip on” an agent. A view of the kind I am calling Reasons Fundamentalism, which takes there to be facts about which things are reasons, cannot, she says, give a satisfactory answer to this question. If a consideration’s being a reason for a person is just another fact about the world, she says, then the person could still be perfectly indifferent to this fact.⁸

What kind of grip is in question here? It cannot be a normative grip if normativity is understood solely in terms of reasons. The question cannot be, “What reason do I have to do what I have reason to do?” We might say that the question is one of motivation. But here we need to distinguish several different issues. On the one hand, there is the question of how a person can be motivated by the thought that something is a reason for action if this thought is a mere belief that something is the case. This is the problem coming down to us from Hume. As I will say later, I believe that the idea of rational agency provide an answer to this question, which might be called the internal question of motivation. But I will not discuss it here, since I do not believe it is the question that Korsgaard has in mind.

A second way of understanding Korsgaard’s Normative Question in terms of motivation would be to see it as what might be called an external question of motivation—a question about how the fact that X is a reason for an agent to do A, if it is just a fact, could get the agent to accept that X is a reason to A and treat it as such. The agent could simply deny that it is a reason. If he did, what could we say to him? A

⁸ *Sources*, pp. 44-46.

Reasons Fundamentalist, Korsgaard might say, would simply insist that X is after all a reason, and that is all there is to it.⁹ This is obviously not going to move the person who denies it.

The challenge here is not, I think, correctly described as a question of motivation if that is understood to mean a question that might be answered by a psychological explanation of how a person could be moved to respond to a fact in a certain way. The problem is not a matter of motivation in this psychological sense, but rather of something more like normative authority. The question is not how an agent might come to respond to the fact that X is a reason for her to do A, by accepting that it is a reason, but rather a question of why, if she does have these reasons, she *must* so respond. That is why she calls it “the *normative* question.”

Korsgaard is quite correct about what a Reasons Fundamentalist, or at least *this* Reasons Fundamentalist, would say in a situation of the kind she imagines. According to a Reasons Fundamentalist, the relation that holds between an agent and a consideration X in such a situation just *is* the relation of X’s *being a reason for that agent to do A*. The “grip” that X has on the agent just is this relation: *being a reason for* him or her (or, in the strongest cases, a decisive reason.) As Korsgaard puts it, quite correctly, a Reasons Fundamentalist “insists on the irreducible character of normativity.”¹⁰ The fundamental disagreement is whether there is some further explanation that can and should be given of why the agent in this situation *must* treat X as a reason.

Korsgaard believes that in order to explain the force of this ‘must,’ we have to find something *about the agent* in virtue of which she must accept that X is a reason for

⁹ *Sources*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 32.

her to do A. Whatever plays this role can't just be another truth about what reasons the person has, or else the whole problem would begin again. But in order to have normative force; the explanation we are looking for can't just be a psychological principle. It follows that the problem can be solved only by finding a kind of normativity—some grounding for a “must”—beyond the normativity of reasons. Korsgaard finds this in the idea of rational agency itself. As she puts it, “Kantians believe that the source of the normativity of moral claims must be found in the agent’s own will ...”¹¹ I believe that what she here says explicitly about moral claims is in her view true of all claims about reasons. Claims about moral requirements are grounded in things that an agent must accept insofar as she sees herself as acting at all. Other reasons are things that an agent “must” see as reasons in virtue of some more specific identity that she has.

The idea that claims about the reasons an agent has must be grounded in something that is already true of that agent (or of that agent’s own attitudes) is shared by a surprisingly wide range of views, many of them not at all Kantian. I am tempted to say, although it would no doubt be an exaggeration, that it is shared by almost all those who believe in reasons but are not Reasons Fundamentalists.

Consider, for example, Gilbert Harman’s view, as expressed in “Moral Relativism Defended.”¹² Harman writes that an agent’s reasons for action must follow from his or her “goals, desires or intentions.” He does not put it this way, but it seems in the spirit of his view to add that claims about reasons that are not so based fail to “get a grip on the agent.” I believe that something similar might be said by proponents of desire based views more generally, such as Bernard Williams’s view that the only correct claims about

¹¹ *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 19.

¹² *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), pp. 3-22.

reasons are what he calls internal reason statements—that is, claims about what could be reached by a sound deliberative route from the agent’s actual subjective motivational set.¹³

Williams’ inclusion of the idea of a “sound deliberative route” allows that a consideration can be a reason for an agent even though the agent is not presently motivated by that consideration. It is enough that being so motivated has the right kind of connection with the agent’s present attitudes. This connection might be described in terms of motivation, but it seems to me to at base a *normative* connection, as indicated in the fact that what is in question is a *sound* deliberative route.¹⁴ What the soundness of this route does is to ground the reason normatively in something to which the agent is already committed.

Another claim that Williams once made may be relevant here. Arguing against proponents of “external” reasons, he said that there are many criticisms that might be brought against a man who treats his wife badly and does not care at all about this—he may be cruel, heartless, and so on, and it might be better if he were not like this. But a defender of “external reasons” statements, Williams said, wants to go beyond this and say that the man is *irrational* if he fails to recognize that he has a reason to treat his wife

¹³ “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-113.

¹⁴ I myself have doubts that the idea of a sound deliberative route can be explained without appeal to the idea of a good reason, but I will not pursue this question here. I said earlier in discussing desire based views that the move from an actual desire account to one based on informed desires might involve sacrificing the connection with motivation that is one of the hallmarks of desire theories. The fact that desire theorists are not troubled by this move may support the point I am making—that what may be described as motivation is actually a matter of rational connection.

differently.¹⁵ A defender of external reasons need not accept this requirement, as Williams later recognized.¹⁶ But I conjecture that Williams made the claim in the first place because he himself believed that claims about reasons must “get a grip on the agent” in a way that would ground a charge of irrationality if the agent ignored these reasons, and so thought that his opponent would want to claim this as well.

A similar thought seems to be what draws Michael Smith, in *The Moral Problem*, to identify reasons with what the person would desire for him or herself if fully rational. The fact that the reason is determined by what *that person* would desire if fully rational (informed, thinking clearly and so on) ensures a connection with the agent him or herself, perhaps close enough to make it irrational for the person to reject the reason. As Smith has said more recently, “If morality requires some limited form of altruism then... the principle of limited altruism is a principle... on all fours with *modus ponens* and *modus tollens* and the principle of means-ends.”¹⁷ Here again, the idea seems to be that claims about the reasons an agent has, if correct, must be claims that the agent cannot deny without irrationality.

The idea of grounding claims about an agent’s reasons in attitudes that that agent already holds may derive some of its appeal from the dialectical context in which argument about reasons for action is imagined to take place. In Williams’ example of the

¹⁵ “Internal and External Reasons,” p. 110. Korsgaard makes a similar suggestion about what a realist might claim in “Acting for a Reason,” p. 17.

¹⁶ In his “Replies” in Altham, J.E.J., and Ross Harrison, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 192.

¹⁷ “Objectivity and Moral Realism: On the Significance of the Phenomenology of Moral Experience,” in *Ethics and the A Priori: Selected Essays on Moral Psychology and Meta-ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 250.

man who sees no reason to treat his wife better, the context is an instance of what Gilbert Harman calls “external reasoning,” a context in which two people are arguing about what reasons for action one of them has.¹⁸ In such a context, facts about one party’s actual attitudes (as opposed to the merits of the content of those attitudes) have a particular salience. It is an obvious dialectical advantage to be able to “get a grip” on your opponent by saying: “But you accept that ... and it follows from this that the fact that *p* counts in favor of *phi*-ing.”

It is noteworthy, I think, that much of Williams’s discussion in “Internal and external Reasons” involves one person trying to force some other person to agree that he has a reason to act in a certain way. (The example just mentioned, of the man who treats his wife badly, is a case in point, the Owen Wingrave example is another. These are, I think, typical.) Part of Korsgaard’s argument early in *The Sources of Normativity* assumes a similar dialectical situation. She imagines two people disagreeing about whether something is a reason for a certain action, and she observes that it is mere reiterative stone-kicking for one party to say, in the face of the other’s denial, “But it just *is* a reason!” A much more effective response would be to come up with an argument that begins from something that the other party accepts, or cannot deny on pain of irrationality.

But what it takes for a claim to be correct need not be the same as what it takes for the claim to be one that one’s opponent in argument cannot consistently deny. These two things are certainly different with respect to claims about empirical facts, and I believe they are also different with respect to claims about reasons, which is the point at

¹⁸ In his “Notes on Practical Reasoning” (unpublished)

issue. That they are different is strongly suggested we shift to what Harman calls a case of “internal reasoning,” which is reasoning about what reasons one has oneself. In this case, the mere fact that one cannot consistently reject a certain attitude given that one has some other desire, intention or other attitude is not itself dispositive. One can always ask oneself whether why one should have these attitudes in turn—whether they can be justified in the relevant way. From the agent’s own point of view her own attitudes are largely transparent to the subject matter under consideration.

Korsgaard recognizes, indeed emphasizes, the possibility of this kind of reflective “stepping back” when one is thinking about what reasons one has. In such a situation, she says, a person must keep on asking “why” until she comes to a point at which it is “impossible, unnecessary or incoherent to ask why again.”¹⁹ This is what she calls the search for the unconditioned. But, leaving aside whether it is possible to find an unconditioned starting point for reasoning about what reasons one has (a starting point that does not itself involve some substantive judgment about reasons), must we always seek such a starting point? The claim that we must continue stepping back until it is “impossible, unnecessary or incoherent to ask why again” would be much less plausible without the disjunct ‘unnecessary.’ But when is it unnecessary to ask any further? I would say that this depends on the substantive merits of the answer one has reached—on whether this answer seems clearly correct.

Grounding claims about reasons in claims about rationality (that is, claims about what is required to avoid *irrationality*) thus has greatest appeal in the case of external reasoning. In internal reasoning what comes to the fore are substantive conclusions about

¹⁹ *Sources*, p. 33.

the subject matter being dealt with—in this case reasons about what to do. There is a reversal here that may at first seem surprising, but should not be so. Claims about irrationality are in one sense more internal than substantive claims about reasons, because, as John Broome says, they depend only on the contents of the subject’s own mind. But such claims are not as relevant in internal reasoning as in the external variety, and it is the point of view of internal reasoning that is primary in an investigation of reasons and normativity. From this point of view the question of how reasons “get a grip on one” properly disappears. There is only the question: what reason do I have?

In these introductory remarks I have tried, first, to identify the position for which I will offer a qualified defense: claims about reasons can be correct or incorrect, and such claims are fundamental—not reducible to or explainable in terms of claims of other kinds. I have tried to identify this position in a way that brings out what seems unsatisfactorily incomplete about such an account. I have considered two ways of providing a fuller explanation of reasons, by basing them in desires or in an idea of rationality. I have explained briefly why I find these unsatisfactory, and I will have something more to say about this in later lectures. If they are unsatisfactory, and if, as I will argue in the next two lectures, the appeal of expressivist views should be resisted, then unless there is some other general account of reasons (which I doubt) Reasons Fundamentalism will be left as the only available position.

If this is so, however, it may be a case in which one should be careful what one wishes for, since we will be left with the various problems about reasons that I have listed. I will take up these problems again in my final lectures.