

## Ohio Philosophical Association (2019)

Comments on Michael Prinzing

“Inclusive Internalism: How to be an internalist without being an “internalist” about reason”

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What does it mean to have a reason for an action, belief, or plan?

- Why did Ronnie go to the dance and Bradley did not?
- Why did Ruth Bader Ginsburg enroll at Columbia Law School?
- Why did Mary Midgley believe philosophy is like plumbing?
- Why did Thích Quảng Đức douse himself with gasoline and set himself on fire?
- Why did the basketball coach take out her tallest player with 30 seconds remaining in the game?

A theory of reasons seeks to elucidate the meaning of “R is a reason for agent A to  $\phi$ ,” and thus should provide insight when thinking about these type of questions.

Prinzing starts his analysis by contrasting two general approaches to reasons. Internalist theories of reason assert that “R is a reason for A” is at least partially, if not solely, grounded in some facts about the A’s motivations states, what Bernard Williams calls A’s “subjective motivational set.” While externalist theories assert that reasons are irreducible and *sui generis*, or that they are grounded in motivation-independent facts.

Prinzing is right to note that internalism and externalism are not singular theories but categories that represent broad families of approaches to reasons for action. He is also right in noting that the debate between these two general approaches has stagnated and that a great deal of this stagnation is the result of a stalemate over the extension adequacy of each theory, in particular, how each set of theories handles a set of challenging hypothetical cases – cases about “ideally coherent eccentrics.” Prinzing argues that these cases reveal that internalist theories have been unnecessarily constrained by focusing solely upon an agent’s motivation states, and he proposes a broader, more inclusive form of internalism.

His paper goes beyond a mere defense of a position and contributes to a more far reaching shift in the debate because it redefines internalism and thus reframes the internalist/externalist distinction. I think that this is an insightful and effective strategy in approaching reasons for action.

### **An Easy Case for Internalism and Externalism**

Consider the case of Ronnie, Bradley, and the party. Both internalist and externalist theories can explain why Ronnie has a reason to go to the party and Bradley does not have a reason.

A “traditional” internalist would assert that reasons for agent A to  $\phi$  are grounded in A’s motivational state. So, Ronnie’s reason to go to the party is grounded in his motivational state (i.e., *a desire to dance*), and Bradley’s lack of a reason is the result of his lack of this motivational state. In contrast, externalists point to facts that are independent of A’s motivation-states. So, in this case, an externalist might appeal to a motivation-independent fact (i.e., *the value of the pleasure that Ronnie would experience at the party*) and a different motivation-independent fact (i.e., *the absence of this value to Bradley*) in order to explain why Ronnie has a reason to go and Bradley does not.

### **Challenging Cases for Traditional Internalism – Ideally Coherent Eccentrics (ICE)**

Prinzinger believes that traditional internalism which grounds reasons for action on subjective motivational states faces some serious challenges from cases involving “ideally coherent eccentrics.” ICEs are individuals whose subjective motivational set is internally consistent and also contains motivations that are eccentric (i.e., the motivations that deviate in bizarre ways from the norm and are such that most of “us” don’t share them). Prinzinger focuses on three such cases: the ideally coherent anorexic who embraces body norms that if followed will lead to death by starvation; the ideally coherent grass-counter who has made it her life’s work to count blades of grass in various prescribed spaces, and the ideally coherent individual who acts to cause himself a future period of intense agony. Thus, each ICE agent meets the internalist’s conditions for having a reason for action despite the fact that intuitively we think there is no reason for action.

Internalists addressed some of these ICE counterexamples by asserting that reasons for action depend upon not an agent’s *current* subjective motivational set but rather an *idealized* subjective motivational set, that is, one that results from careful reflection, the correction of false beliefs, etc. But Prinzinger points out that the ICE counterexamples can be modified to so that they still raise problems for internalism, and he argues that the problem lies with the way internalism has been defined.

### **Prinzinger’s strategy for moving beyond the traditional internalism/externalism debate**

Prinzinger argues that the ICE cases are a problem because internalism has too narrowly construed what counts as internal states. Internalism has only focused upon “motivational states,” and Prinzinger proposes a broader or more inclusive version of internalism which countenances other types of mental states.

***Inclusive internalism:*** Reasons for agent A to  $\phi$  are grounded in A’s mental states, including (but not necessarily limited to): *motivations* whose object is, or would be made more probable by,  $\phi$ -ing; *hedonic states* that A would experience as a result of  $\phi$ -ing; *evaluative or normative judgments* about  $\phi$ -ing, or about things that would result from  $\phi$ -ing; *emotions* whose object is  $\phi$ -ing or that would result from  $\phi$ -ing. (Prinzinger, 7).

I think that this is a useful way of reframing the internalist/externalist debate, and I am inclined to accept the view that reasons for action can be grounded in a broader or more inclusive set of mental states. (As a note, Section 3.2 is dense with citations about mental states and needs some unpacking before I accept Prinzinger’s specific claims here.) So, I am not going to examine his claims about

which mental states should be countenanced (e.g., motivations, hedonic states, normative judgments, emotions, etc.). Instead I am going to take a step back and raise some questions about the resulting general theory of reasons.

## Question

Prinzing's inclusive version of internalism provides the tools to answer externalist objections, particularly the ICE counterexamples. But I am not sure that inclusive internalism takes us closer to understanding reasons for actions.

The purpose of a theory of reason is to clarify or explain what we mean by "R is a reason for agent A to  $\phi$ " and I am not sure that inclusive internalism helps. When faced with a given case to analyze (e.g., Ronnie and Bradley, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the grass-counter) an inclusive internalist has a wealth of tools to identify reasons for action, but now we seem to have too many tools, and we need guidance on which to use in a given case. Do we analyze the grass-counter by looking at her motivational states, hedonic states, normative judgments, emotions, etc.?

The situation reminds me of the old adage "If all one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Traditional internalism had one tool (i.e., motivational states) and tried to use this to explain the whole array of reasons agents have for acting. Prinzing has added more tools to the internalists' tool box, but now we need a principle for determining which tool to use when. Prinzing writes:

"The payoff for inclusiveness *is the ability to posit more reasons*. So, if one is attracted to conative internalism, but finds it extensionally inadequate, a pluralistic view like this will be very appealing. *Obviously, the more states one includes in one's theory, the more reasons one will end up positing.*"

This is precisely my concern – we may have too many reasons.

Prinzing argues that reasons internalist are mistaken by narrowly restricting their theory to "motivational states." As a result, the internalist tool box is too barren to do the work that needs to be done, that is, to answer the ICE counterexamples. So, he suggests that we expand the tools in the internalists box – expand it to include other types of mental states (e.g., motivations, hedonic states, evaluative or normative judgment, or emotions). This may be an effective strategy for countering externalism, but I am not convinced it moves us closer to a complete analysis of reasons agent A to  $\phi$  unless we have some way of deciding which mental state to consider in which type of cases.

One might object that I have confused a theory of reason with a criterion for determining a reason in a given case. Possibly?

Let me try to rephrase the point. Does agent A have reasons for  $\phi$ -ing when the mental states point in different directions? Inclusive internalism does not clarify the concept of "reasons for action" unless it provides principles to resolve conflicts between various mental states. Once internalism has more tools, we need to know which tool to use.

## Comment

Finally, I want to take a step back from the specifics of the internalism/externalism debate and make some general comments about what it means to assert that “Agent A has a reason for  $\phi$ -ing.” These comments I think can enhance Prinzinger’s position.

I think statements such as “Agent A has a reason for  $\phi$ -ing” are fundamentally *incomplete*. The concept of a reason for action is systematically ambiguous and in order to understand them we must first specify a *perspective* and a *goal*. (Richard Foley has developed this point in his book *Working without a Net* (Oxford, 1992) and in series of papers such as “Rationality, Belief, and Commitment” (*Synthese*, 1991).)

To understand what is asserted when one states that “R is a reason for agent A to  $\phi$ ,” one must first specify a point of view. Are we using A’s own point of view, A’s point of view under ideal circumstances, the point of view of A’s community, the point of view of an ideal observer?

The ideally coherent eccentric in Parfit’s example has reasons for taking actions to cause himself future agony from his own perspective. However, from my own perspective, Prinzinger’s perspective, and from the perspective of “most people,” Parfit’s ideally coherent eccentric does not have a reason for causing himself future agony. The point is that in order to answer the question “Is R a reason for A to  $\phi$ ?” we need to first know the answer to the question – “From what perspective?”

I want to make a similar point in regards to goals – to answer the question “Is R a reason for A to  $\phi$ ?” we need to first know the answer to the question – “In regards to what goal?”

The ideally coherent eccentric grass-counter illustrates this point. If the grass-counter’s goal is to obtain truth, then there is a reason for him to spend her time counting blades of grass. However, if you agree with Michael and me that a person ought to do something more productive with one’s life, then the grass-counter does not have a reason for her actions.

My point here is not to argue for a particular approach to understanding reasons for action but to argue that statements of the form “Agent A has a reason for  $\phi$ -ing” are systematically ambiguous and incomplete and that in order to make them complete one must first identify both a *perspective* and *goal*.

I believe that these points are not only consistent with the spirit of Prinzinger inclusive internalism but also would enhance his overall theory of reason.