

## Normativity

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## 1

A young Swiss guest of Richard Hare's, after reading a book by Camus, concluded in despair that *nothing matters*. Hare suggested that his friend should ask 'what was the meaning or function of the word "matters" in our language; what is it to be important?' His friend soon agreed, Hare writes,

that when we say something matters or is important, what we are doing, in saying this, is to express our concern about that something . . . Having secured my friend's agreement on this point, I then pointed out to him something that followed immediately from it. This is that when somebody says that something matters or does not matter, we want to know *whose* concern is being expressed or otherwise referred to. If the function of the expression 'matters' is to express concern, and if concern is always *somebody's* concern, we can always ask, when it is said that something matters or does not matter, 'Whose concern?'<sup>1</sup>

As Hare pointed out, his friend *was* concerned about several things. So was everyone—except a few fictional characters in existentialist novels. People's values differ, and may change. But, since we all care about something, 'it is impossible to overthrow values as a whole'. Hare's treatment worked. 'My Swiss friend ate a hearty breakfast the next morning.'

If someone doubts whether anything matters, it may not help to ask 'Whose concern?' Hare managed to convince his friend

that the expression 'Nothing matters' in his mouth could only be (if he understood it) a piece of play-acting. Of course he didn't actually understand it.

<sup>1</sup> 'Nothing Matters', in R. M. Hare, *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 33–4.

There is, I believe, a use of the word 'matters' which Hare does not understand.

When Hare writes that we use such words to *express* concern, he is not, he claims, using 'express' in an 'emotivist' sense. 'I am no more committed to an emotivist view of the meaning of these words than I would be if I said "The word 'not' is used in English to express negation".' Despite this disclaimer, Hare does accept an emotivist or, more broadly, non-cognitivist view. That is why, when Hare's friend concluded that nothing mattered, Hare didn't try to remind him that some things, such as suffering, do matter. As Hare writes:

My friend ... had thought mattering was something (some activity or process) that things did ... If one thinks that, one may begin to wonder what this activity is, called mattering; and one may begin to observe the world closely ... to see if one can catch anything doing something that could be called 'mattering'; and when we can observe nothing going on which seems to correspond to this name, it is easy for the novelist to persuade us that after all *nothing matters*. To which the answer is, "Matters" isn't that sort of word; it isn't intended to *describe* something ...'

On Hare's view, nothing can be truly described as mattering. The truth is only that we care about some things. In saying that these things matter, we are not claiming that they really do matter. Rather, as emotivists claim, we are expressing our concern.

Hare assumes that, in making these claims, he is not denying anything that others might mistakenly believe. There is nothing to deny, he claims, since no other view makes sense. He imagines an objector saying:

All you have done is to show that people are *in fact* concerned about things. But this established only the existence of values in a *subjective* sense. Now, it may be said, when people talk about the overthrow of values, they do not mean anything so far-fetched as that people should stop being concerned about things ... But values are overthrown if it is shown ... that these subjective feelings of people are all that there is; that values are not (as I have heard it put) 'built into the fabric of the world'. This objection, then, is a challenge to moral philosophers ... to demonstrate what has been called 'the objectivity of values'.

Philosophers, Hare answers, should reject this challenge. There are not two possibilities here, or two genuinely conflicting views. In Hare's words:

I do not understand what is *meant* by the 'objectivity of values', and have not met anybody who does ... suppose we ask 'What is the difference between values being objective, and values not being objective?' Can

anybody point to any difference? In order to see clearly that there is *no* difference, it is only necessary to consider statements of their position by subjectivists<sup>2</sup> and objectivists, and observe that they are saying the same thing in different words . . . An objectivist . . . says, 'When I say that a certain act is wrong, I am stating the *fact* that the act has a certain non-empirical *quality* called 'wrongness'; and I *discern* that it has this quality by exercising a faculty which I possess called 'moral intuition'. A subjectivist says, 'When *I* say that a certain act is wrong I am expressing towards it an attitude of disapproval which I have.'

It is true that, as Hare implies, these sentences could be used so that they did not conflict. Hare's objectivist might agree that, when he claims some act to be wrong, he is expressing his disapproval of this act. But this objectivist would mean that he is expressing his belief that this act has the property of being wrong. And, on Hare's view, there is no such property. Acts can't *be* wrong; the truth is only that we disapprove of them. When Hare claims that there is no disagreement here, since these people are saying the same thing, he misinterprets the objectivist's view. He assumes that, when objectivists claim that some acts really are wrong, they cannot mean what they seem to say. They cannot be intending to say something that is, in a strong sense, *true*.

Hare continues:

We all know how to recognize the activity which I have been calling 'saying, thinking it to be so, that some act is wrong'. And it is obvious that it is to this activity that the subjectivist and the objectivist are both alluding. This activity . . . is called by the objectivist 'a moral intuition'. By the subjectivist it is called 'an attitude of disapproval'. But in so far as we can identify anything in our *experience* to which these two people could be alluding by these expressions, it is the same thing—namely the experience which we all have when we think that something is wrong.

When objectivists claim that certain acts really are wrong, they are not referring to the experiences that we have when we believe something to be wrong. Their claim is about *what* we believe. More exactly, it is about what some of us believe. They would concede that some people—such as some subjectivists, relativists, or sceptics—do not have such beliefs.

Hare might reply that *he* has such beliefs. He is discussing the activity of 'saying, thinking it to be so, that some act is wrong.' In thinking that to be so, he believes that this act really is wrong. His point is that such beliefs are

<sup>2</sup> By 'subjectivists' Hare means non-cognitivists, not those cognitivists who believe that normative statements are factual claims about our own attitudes. 'Nothing Matters', 40.

not like ordinary, *descriptive* beliefs. In thinking something to be wrong, we are not believing something to be true, but accepting the imperative 'No one ever act like that!' If Hare gave this reply, however, he would be conceding that there is a disagreement here. According to objectivists, these beliefs *are* descriptive.

Hare then considers another way in which some objectivists explain their view. They claim that, when moral judgments conflict, at least one of these judgments must be mistaken. Subjectivists, they then argue, cannot make that claim. Hare replies that, though such a claim explains objectivity in some other areas, it does not, when applied to morality, draw any 'real distinction'. In his words:

Behind this argument lies, I think, the idea that if it is possible to say that it is *right* or *wrong* to say a certain thing, an affinity of some important kind is established between that sort of thing, and other things of which we can also say this. So, for example, if we can say of the answer to a mathematical problem that it is right, and can say *the same thing* of a moral judgment, this is held to show that a moral judgment is in some way *like* the answer to a mathematical problem, and therefore cannot be 'subjective' (whatever that means).

That is what it means.

Hare concludes:

Think of one world into whose fabric values are plainly objectively built; and think of another in which those values have been annihilated. And remember that in both worlds the people in them go on being concerned about the same things—there is no difference in the 'subjective' concern which people have for things, only in their 'objective' value. Now I ask, What is the difference between the states of affairs in these two worlds? Can any other answer be given except 'None whatever'?

The analogy with mathematics, though only partial, also helps here. According to some empiricists, arithmetical truths are contingent. If we ask what makes it true that  $5 + 3 = 8$ , the answer is that, when people add 3 to 5, they nearly always get the answer 8. This view, we may object, misunderstands the nature of mathematics. Arithmetical truths are not contingent, or empirical, but necessary. Such an empiricist might reply:

Your talk of necessity adds nothing. Imagine another world which is just like ours, except that in that world mathematical truths are not, as you claim, necessary. In both that world and ours, there would be no difference in the calculations of mathematicians. They would reach just the same answers. What is the difference between these worlds? None whatever.

This would not be a good reply. This empiricist would be right to claim that there is no conceivable difference between two such worlds. But that is because his imagined world is inconceivable. We cannot coherently suppose that 5 plus 3 did not, necessarily, equal 8. Since such truths are necessary, they are true in every possible world. And they are, in every world, necessary.

Hare, similarly, asks us to imagine two worlds. In the objectivist's world, 'values are plainly objectively built'. It is in a strong sense true that, for example, intense suffering is in itself bad, or that we have reason to prevent it, if we can. Such truths are irreducibly normative, and their denial is a mistake. In the subjectivist's world, there are no such truths, since objective values 'have been annihilated'. Everything else, however, is just the same. There is, Hare claims, no conceivable difference between these worlds. That is similarly true, but only because one of these worlds is inconceivable.

I have left it open which world this is. Though no one denies that there are mathematical truths, many deny that there are any normative truths. We shall return to some of the grounds for that denial. Our present question is only whether the idea of normative truths, and of objective values, makes sense.

Hare claims that it does not, as is shown by our inability to describe a difference between his two imagined worlds. But that inability should be explained in a different way. On both of the possible views about the objectivity of values, we cannot coherently imagine both these worlds. Suppose first that, as most objectivists believe, intense suffering really is bad. That, if true, is a necessary truth. There could not be a world in which intense suffering was otherwise just the same, but was not bad. Suppose next that, as Hare believes, it makes no sense to suppose that badness is a property that suffering might have. In his words, 'mattering' is not something that suffering could do. If that is so, there could not be a world in which suffering *was* bad. On neither view could there be two worlds, in only one of which was suffering bad. According to objectivists, such normative truths hold in every possible world. According to subjectivists, they hold in none. That is one difference between these views.

Hare might give a different reply. He might concede that, when objectivists claim that suffering is bad, they mean something different from what subjectivists mean. Hare believes that, if objectivism is put forward as a *moral* view, it is self-defeating. As he writes elsewhere:

moral judgments cannot be merely statements of fact, and ... if they were, they would not do the jobs that they do do, or have the logical characteristics that they do have. In other words, moral philosophers cannot have it both ways; either they must recognize the irreducibly

prescriptive element in moral judgments, or else they must allow that moral judgments, as interpreted by them, do not guide actions in the way that, as ordinarily understood, they obviously do.<sup>3</sup>

As this passage shows, Hare ignores the possibility that there might be normative truths. He claims that, if moral judgments were capable of being true, or of stating facts, they could not guide actions. But, if we judged that we ought to do something, that judgment could guide our acts. So Hare must assume that, even on the view that he is opposing, judgments like 'I ought to do that' could not conceivably be true.

## 2

Many other writers ignore the possibility that there might be normative truths. And, of those who mention this possibility, many do not take it seriously. According to Brandt, for example, it is 'logically possible' that there are truths about what we have most reason to want. But such truths, he claims, would have less rational significance than facts about what, after informed deliberation, we would want. Brandt could not have made that claim if he had really thought that there might be such truths. Similarly, Gibbard regards this possibility as too fantastic to be worth considering.

There are good reasons to have this attitude. Irreducibly normative truths, if there are any, are most unusual. As many writers claim, it is not obvious how such truths fit into a scientific world-view. They are not empirically testable, or explicable by natural laws. Nor does there seem to be anything for these truths to be *about*. What can the property of badness *be*?

Given these points, it is natural to doubt whether these alleged truths even make sense. If such truths are not empirical, or about features of the natural world, how do we ever come to understand them? If words like 'reason' and 'ought' neither refer to natural features, nor express our attitudes, what could they possibly mean?

Non-reductive realists, as I have conceded, do not give helpful answers to these questions. According to them, we can explain some normative concepts, but only by appealing to others. Thus, in calling suffering bad, we mean that suffering is a state that we have reason to prevent, or relieve, or that we ought to prevent it, if we can. But normative concepts cannot be explained in non-normative terms. Nor can we say much to explain how we understand these concepts, or how we recognize normative truths. And,

<sup>3</sup> R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 195.

when we ask *why* there are such truths, or what *makes* them true, the most that we can do is to explain some of these truths by appealing to others. We soon reach truths for which we can give no further explanation. Many diseases are bad, for example, because they cause suffering; but we cannot say what makes suffering bad.

Though we cannot give helpful answers to such questions, that does not show that there are no normative truths. Normative concepts form a fundamental category—like, say, temporal or logical concepts. We should not expect to explain time, or logic, in non-temporal or non-logical terms. If there are normative truths, these are of a distinctive kind, which we should not expect to be like ordinary, natural truths. Nor should we expect our knowledge of such truths, when we have it, to be like our knowledge of the world around us.

There are some helpful analogies. One example is the category of modal concepts, such as *possible* and *necessary*. Truths are necessary if they could not conceivably be false, or if they hold in every possible world. The concept of necessity cannot be explained in empirical terms, necessary truths are not made true by natural laws, nor is our knowledge of such truths like our knowledge of the actual world.

I shall not try here to defend the view that there are some irreducibly normative truths. My aim will be only to make clearer their distinctive feature: normativity.

One way to make that feature clearer is to describe cases in which normativity is most obviously present. That can be easily done. Two such cases are the badness of suffering, and someone's reason to jump from some burning building. But examples can be misunderstood. Normativity can be confused with other features of the case.

Rather than merely saying where normativity can be found, some writers try to explain what normativity is. But, for the reason I have just given, that cannot be helpfully done. We can ask what normative concepts, such as *ought* and *reason* mean. But there are no answers to these questions that are both interesting and true.

There are some interesting answers, such as those given by naturalists and non-cognitivist. These answers are interesting because they seem to be informative, and, if they were true, they would have important implications. Some of these would be substantive conclusions about what we have reason to want, and to do. Others would be conclusions about the metaphysics and epistemology of ethics, and practical reasoning.

These answers cannot, I believe, be true. Though we cannot explain what normativity is, or what normative concepts mean, we can say what

normativity is *not*, and what these concepts do not mean. It could not be true that, as naturalists claim, normative statements mean the same as, or report the same facts as, statements about natural facts. Nor could these statements, as non-cognitivists claim, have merely an emotive or prescriptive sense. For these statements to be normative, they must be capable of being, in a strong sense, true.

Naturalists get one thing right, since they see that there are normative truths. But they mistakenly conflate these truths with the natural facts which, according to these truths, have normative importance. Non-cognitivists avoid this mistake, since they see that normativity cannot be reduced to, or consist in, such facts. They recognize the categorical difference between what is and is not normative. But they mistakenly take this difference to be between facts and the attitudes which they call 'values'.

Non-cognitivists, and many naturalists, get something else right. With their emphasis on motivation, these people see that practical reasoning is not concerned only with beliefs. For us to be fully practically rational, our normative beliefs must motivate us, and, when relevant, lead us to act. But non-cognitivists mistakenly conclude that these beliefs cannot really be beliefs. And both groups reduce normativity to motivating force. If we have most reason to act in some way, or ought rationally to do so, that is not a fact about, or an expression of, some desire or other motivating state.

If we believe in irreducibly normative truths, we are what Korsgaard calls *dogmatic rationalists*. As Korsgaard notes, since these rationalists have little positive to say, they are 'primarily polemical writers', who explain and defend their view by attacking other views.<sup>4</sup> That is what, in this essay, I shall mostly do. As Korsgaard also notes, 'the criticism of an opponent's position is normally the weakest part of a philosophical work'. But, given my beliefs about normativity, I have no alternative.

## 3

Many writers, I have claimed, ignore the possibility that there might be normative truths. Nowell-Smith, for example, writes: 'Moral philosophy is a practical science; its aim is to answer questions of the form 'What shall I do?' 'But', he warns, 'no general answer can be given to this type of question'. That is an understatement. As Nowell-Smith notes, the word 'shall' is ambiguous. Thus, in saying 'What shall I feel?', we ask for a prediction of

<sup>4</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* henceforth *Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 31.

our feelings, which others might correctly give. But, in asking 'What shall I do?', we are not trying to predict our acts. We are trying to make a decision. If moral philosophy had the aim of answering such questions, it could not possibly succeed. Philosophy cannot make our decisions.<sup>5</sup>

Nor can other people. When we ask 'What shall I do?', that is not a question to which even the wisest adviser could give an answer. If I say, 'That's what I shall do', others might say, 'No you won't', or 'No you shan't'. But those would not be conflicting answers to my question. They would be either a prediction, or the expression of a contrary decision—as when a parent says 'You *will do* what I tell you to.'

As these remarks suggest, the question 'What shall I do?' is not normative, nor can it be, as Nowell-Smith claims, 'the fundamental question of ethics'. The fundamental question is: 'What *should* I do?' Since that question is normative, it might have answers that philosophy, or other people, could give. There might be truths about what we should do.

Nowell-Smith considers this objection. It may be said, he writes,

that the fundamental question is not 'What shall I do?' but 'What ought I to do?' and the fundamental concept not decision but obligation.<sup>6</sup>

He replies:

My reason for treating the 'shall' question as fundamental is that moral discourse is practical. The language of 'ought' is intelligible only in the context of practical questions, and we have not answered a practical question until we have reached a decision.

Though moral discourse is practical, that does not imply that its fundamental question is about what we *shall* do rather than about what we *ought* to do. If we ask moral questions, that may be because we have decided that we shall do, or shall try to do, whatever we conclude that we ought to do. In such cases, in answering these moral questions, we are deciding what to do.

Nowell-Smith might say that, since we may also decide *not* to do what we ought to do, it is still the 'shall' question that is fundamental. The 'ought' question, Nowell-Smith assumes, takes the fundamental concept to be *obligation*. Only the 'shall' question takes that concept to be *decision*.

By tying 'ought' to obligation, Nowell-Smith here restricts the *normative* to the *moral*. But most of our practical decisions do not involve moral thinking; and, in making these decisions, we often ask what we have reason to do, and what we should, ought, or must do. It is true that, in answering

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 319–20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ethics*, 267.

these questions, we may not be deciding what to do. Suppose I come to believe that, since it is the only way to save my life, I should jump from the burning building. After reaching that belief, I must still decide to jump. If I am irrational, I may not make the final moves from 'should' to 'shall', and from there to an act. But that does not show that, in practical reasoning, our fundamental question is whether to make the move from 'I should' to 'I shall'. On the contrary, if we were fully practically rational, we would always make that move, and without any further thought. We would always decide to do, and then try to do, whatever we had concluded that we should do, or that we had most reason to do. Since this move from 'should' to 'shall' would be automatic, we would *never* need to ask 'What shall I do?'

Consider next some remarks by Williams. Like Nowell-Smith, Williams regards practical reasoning as 'radically first-personal', since its central question is 'What shall I do?' But Williams assumes that, in deciding what to do, we often ask what he calls the *deliberative question*. We ask what we should do, all things considered, or what we have most reason to do.

Williams's conception of a reason is, however, reductive. He assumes that, when we have a reason to act in some way, that is a fact about this act's relation either to our present desires, or to the motivations that, after informed deliberation, we would have. Williams regards the concept of a reason as, in part, normative. But his conception of normativity is, I believe, too weak. Thus he writes that, when we claim that someone has a reason for acting, we do not mean only that this person is presently disposed to act in some way; but we might mean that he would be so disposed if he knew a certain fact. We would then be adding to, or correcting, this person's factual beliefs, 'and that is already enough', he writes, 'for this notion to be normative'.

When Williams argues that there are no external reasons, he imagines someone who maltreats his wife, and whose attitudes and acts would not be altered by informed and rational deliberation. If we are Externalists, we might claim that, despite this man's motivational state, his wife's unhappiness gives him reasons to treat her better. In rejecting this claim, Williams asks:

what is the difference supposed to be between saying that the agent has a reason to act more considerately, and saying one of the many other things we can say to people whose behaviour does not accord with what we think it should be? As, for instance, that it would be better if they acted otherwise?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', henceforth *IROB*, in *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39–40.

We might answer: 'The difference is that, if we merely said that it would be better if this man acted more considerately, we would not be claiming that, as we believe and you deny, he has reasons to do so.'

Williams's ground for rejecting this claim is that he finds it 'quite obscure' what it could mean. As he writes elsewhere, Externalists do not 'offer any content for external reasons statements'.<sup>8</sup> Williams may here be assuming Analytical Internalism.<sup>9</sup> On this view, in claiming that

(1) this man has reasons to treat his wife better,  
we would mean that

(2) if he deliberated rationally on the facts, he would be motivated to treat her better.

If (1) meant (2), and we knew that (2) was false, it would indeed be obscure what, in claiming (1), we could mean. *Non-Analytical Internalists* would not find our claim so obscure. Such Internalists believe that, though (1) is true only if (2) is true, these claims have different meanings. These Internalists would understand—though they would reject—the view that, despite this man's motivational state, he has reasons to treat his wife better.

Discussing another, similar example, Williams asks:

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 decent person . . . would do?<sup>10</sup>

This question seems to assume that, if our claim about A does not have the sense described by Analytical Internalists, there is nothing distinctive left for it to mean. We couldn't mean that, despite A's motivational state, A has a reason to do this thing. If we could mean that, there would be a simple answer to Williams's question. We might be saying something that was both distinctive and true.

Williams continues:

it would make a difference to ethics if certain kinds of *internal* reason were very generally to hand . . . But what difference would external reasons make? . . . Should we suppose that, if genuine external reasons were to be had, morality might get some leverage on a squeamish Jim

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams, *World, Mind, and Ethics*, henceforth *WME*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191, my italics.

<sup>9</sup> As he seems to do elsewhere. Thus he writes: 'I think the sense of a statement of the form "A has a reason to *phi*" is given by the internalist model' (*IROB* 40). See also 'Internal and External Reasons', henceforth *IER*, in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 109–10, and *IROB* 36; both discussed below. On the other hand, see *WME* 188.

<sup>10</sup> *WME* 215.

or priggish George, or even 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?

These remarks assume that, for external reasons to make a difference to ethics, such reasons would have to get *leverage* on people, by motivating them to act differently. This conception of ethics is, I believe, too utilitarian. When we believe that other people have reasons for caring, or for acting, we do not have these beliefs as a way of affecting those people. Our aim is, not influence, but truth. Similar remarks apply to morality. Someone might say:

What difference would it make if it were true that the Nazis acted wrongly? What leverage would that moral fact have secured? What would the wrongness of their acts have done to them?

Even if moral truths cannot affect people, they can still be truths. People can be acting wrongly, though the wrongness of their acts does not do anything to them.

After asking what external reasons would do to such people, Williams writes:

Unless we are given an answer to that question, I, for one, find it hard to resist Nietzsche's plausible interpretation, that the desire of philosophy to find a way in which morality can be guaranteed to get beyond merely *designating* the vile and recalcitrant, to transfixing them or getting them inside, is only a fantasy of *ressentiment*, a magical project to make a wish and its words into a coercive power.<sup>11</sup>

Williams has a real target here. Many philosophers have hoped to find moral arguments, or truths, that could not fail to motivate us. Williams, realistically, rejects that hope.

Note however that, in making these remarks, Williams assumes that claims about reasons could achieve only two things. If such claims cannot get inside people, by inducing them to act differently, they can only designate these people. On the first alternative, these claims would have motivating force. On the second, they would be merely classificatory, since their meaning would be only that, if these people were not so vile, or were in some other way different, they *would* act differently. As before, however, there is a third possibility. Even when such claims do not have motivating force, they could be more than merely classificatory. They could have *normative* force. Perhaps these people *should* act differently.

We should remember next that Externalists need not be Moral Rationalists. Some Externalists would agree with Williams that those who act wrongly

<sup>11</sup> WME 216.

may have no reason to act differently. These people are Externalists in their beliefs about prudential reasons. Return to Williams's imagined person who needs some medicine to protect his health, and whose failure to care about his future would survive any amount of informed and procedurally rational deliberation. Such a person, Williams writes, would have no reason to take this medicine.<sup>12</sup> He might ask:

What would be gained by claiming that this person has such a reason?  
 What would that add to the claim that, if he were prudent, he would take this medicine?

This claim would add what Williams denies. This person, these Externalists believe, ought rationally to take this medicine. He has reasons to care about his future; and, since these are reasons for caring, this person's failure to care does not undermine these reasons. Such claims, I believe, make sense, and might be true.

## 4

Many other writers conflate normativity and motivating force. For example, Korsgaard writes that, if a certain argument 'cannot motivate the reader to become a utilitarian then how can it show that utilitarianism is normative?' McNaughton writes that, when externalists deny that moral beliefs necessarily motivate, they 'deny the authority of moral demands'.<sup>13</sup> Scheffler writes that, even if wrong-doing were always irrational, that would not give morality 'as much authority as some might wish', since it would not 'guarantee . . . morality's hold on us'.<sup>14</sup> And Railton writes: 'our hypothetical approvals under full information have a kind of motivational force or authority for us'.

Railton also writes:

there is no need to explain the normative force of our moral judgments on those who have no tendency to accept them and who recognize no significant community with us. For that is not a force that we observe in moral practice.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> IER 105-6.

<sup>13</sup> David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Railton, 'What the Non-Cognitivist Helps us to See the Naturalist Must Help us to Explain', in John Haldane and Crispin Wright (eds.), *Reality, Representation and Projection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 286. This describes what non-cognitivists might claim, but Railton, though rejecting non-cognitivism, seems to endorse this claim.

What we can observe, in seeing how people act, is not normative but motivating force. Similarly, Railton writes that, to show how the idea of happiness can have a 'normative role', or have 'recommending force', we can appeal to the fact that it is 'impossible for a person to have the peculiar experience that is happiness and not be drawn to it'. But we cannot, he adds, 'claim it as definitional that happiness matters, i.e. that that which left us indifferent would not, by definition, be happiness'. The concepts *normative*, *recommend*, and *matter* are here conflated with, or reduced to, psychological appeal.

Consider next some remarks of Mackie's. Since Mackie is an *error theorist*, who believes that ordinary moral thinking is committed to peculiar non-natural properties, we might expect that he at least would give a non-reductive account of the normativity that he rejects. Mackie writes that, according to some cognitivists, a moral judgment is 'intrinsically and objectively prescriptive', since it 'demands' some action, and implies that other actions are 'not to be done'. These phrases look normative. But Mackie later writes that, in response to Humean arguments for non-cognitivism, cognitivists might

simply deny the minor premiss: that the state of mind which is the making of moral judgments and distinctions has, *by itself*, an influence on actions. [They] could say that just seeing that this is right and that is wrong will not tend to make someone do this or refrain from that: he must also *want* to do whatever is right.

If cognitivists made such claims, Mackie continues, they would 'deny the intrinsic action-guidingness of moral judgments', and they would 'save the objectivity of moral distinctions . . . only by giving up their prescriptivity'. Mackie here assumes that, in claiming moral judgments to be action-guiding and prescriptive, we mean that such judgments can, by themselves, *influence* us, or tend to *make* us act in certain ways. So, even when describing the view that he rejects—or the 'objectively prescriptive values' that he calls 'too queer' to be credible—Mackie takes normativity to be a kind of motivating force.<sup>16</sup>

Others make similar remarks. An objective value, Korsgaard writes, would have to be 'able both to tell you what to do and make you do it. And nothing is like that.' And Wittgenstein wrote:

the absolute good . . . would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclination, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for

<sup>16</sup> J. L. Mackie *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 54–5. For another discussion of this view of normativity, see Stephen Darwall, 'Internalism and Agency', in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 6, *Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the *coercive power* of an absolute judge.<sup>17</sup>

Normativity, I believe, cannot be, or be created by, any kind of power, not even that of some absolute omnipotent judge.

The most surprising maker of such claims is the young Thomas Nagel. In his introduction to *The Possibility of Altruism*, Nagel wrote:

Philosophers ... commonly seek a justification for being moral: a consideration which can persuade everyone or nearly everyone to adhere to certain principles, by connecting those principles with a motivational influence to which everyone is susceptible ...<sup>18</sup>

This remark conflates justification, persuasion, and motivation.

This conflation was deliberate. When Nagel wrote this book, he regarded ethics 'as a branch of psychology', and was 'in search of principles which belong both to ethics and to motivation theory'. This approach, he admitted, 'may appear to involve an illegitimate conflation of explanatory and normative enquiries'. But the alternative, he thought, was 'to abandon the objectivity of ethics'. If we are to 'rescue' ethics, we must show that ethical requirements are based upon, or provided by, motivational requirements. Normativity, Nagel assumed, must be a kind of motivating force.

This assumption, I have claimed, does not rescue but abandons ethics. It is one example of what Nagel later called 'the perennially tempting mistake of seeking to explain an entire domain of thought in terms of something outside that domain, which is simply less fundamental than what is inside'. Since Nagel is one of those who have done most to challenge this mistake, it is significant that, in his first book, he himself made this mistake. That shows how tempting, and damaging, it can be.

Nagel began by discussing first-person practical judgments, such as

- (1) the judgment that we have a reason to act in some way, or that we should do so.

Such a judgment involves

- (2) the belief that we have a reason to act in this way, or that we should do so.

<sup>17</sup> (my italics) 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics', *Philosophical Review*, 74/1 (Jan. 1965), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, henceforth PA (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 3.

But, Nagel argued, (1) involves more than (2). Though such judgments involve beliefs, they include another element, which he called their *motivational content*.

Nagel described this content in several ways. In his most common phrase, such judgments include

- (3) 'the *acceptance of a justification* for doing or wanting something'.

(3), straightforwardly understood, gives to 'motivational content' what we can call its *justificatory* sense.

We may ask how (3) differs from (2). When we believe that we have a reason to do something, or that we should do it, are we not thereby believing that we have some justification for doing this thing? Nagel would have replied that, in *accepting* a justification for this act, we are not merely *believing* that it would be justified. Since such judgments are practical, they have 'practical consequences'. When we accept such a judgment, that should affect our motivation.

On the simplest form of this reply,

- (1) our judging that we have a reason to do something, or that we should do it,

includes

- (4) our being motivated to do this thing.

(4) gives to 'motivational content' what we can call its *motivational* sense.

If Nagel had claimed that (1) includes (4), he would have been defending Belief Internalism. On this view, we cannot believe that we have a reason to do something without being motivated to do it.

Nagel hoped to defend this view. Thus he claimed that, if ethics is to contain 'practical requirements', motivational theory must contain results that are *inescapable*: there must be 'motivational influences which one cannot reject once one becomes aware of them'. And he wrote:

Internalism is the view that the presence of a motivation for acting morally is guaranteed by the truth of the ethical propositions themselves. On this view ... when in a particular case someone is (or perhaps merely believes that he is) morally required to do something, it follows that he has a motivation for doing it .... The present discussion attempts to construct the basis of an internalist position.

This attempt failed, since the conclusions Nagel reached were not, even in his own terms, internalist. As he wrote, 'a practical judgment can sometimes

fail to prompt action or desire'. Such judgments can fail to motivate, he added, even 'without any explanation'.<sup>19</sup>

Though Nagel rejected Belief Internalism, he defended a related view. In his words:

The belief that a reason provides me with sufficient justification for a present course of action does not necessarily imply a desire or a willingness to undertake that action; it is not a sufficient condition of the act or desire. But it is sufficient, in the absence of contrary influences, to *explain* the appropriate action, or the desire or willingness to perform it. That is the motivational content of a judgment about what one presently has reason to do.

On this more cautious view, practical judgments do not *necessarily* motivate us. What such judgments guarantee is only what Nagel calls 'the *possibility* of appropriate motivation'.

This view may seem trivially true. Who would deny that, when we believe that we have a reason to do something, or that we should do it, we *might* be motivated to do it?

Nagel's view was not, however, trivial. On the Humean theory of motivation, which is now widely accepted, no beliefs can motivate us all by themselves. For some belief to motivate us, it must be combined with some *independent* desire—some desire that is not itself produced by this belief. Suppose that, though we believe that we should do something, we have no such relevant independent desire. On the Humean theory, it is then causally impossible for us to do this thing. Reason by itself is impotent, since beliefs about reasons have no power to motivate us. Nagel argued, I believe soundly, that we should reject this view. And, as he claimed, this rejection has great significance.

Return now to Nagel's view about the content of practical judgments. According to Nagel, in

- (1) judging that we have a reason to do something,

we are not having a mere belief, since this judgment has motivational content. (1) includes

- (5) being in a state which, though it may not motivate us to do this thing, would be sufficient to explain such motivation.

This claim gives to 'motivational content' what we can call its *explanatory* sense.

<sup>19</sup> PA 65.

Nagel's view seems, in one way, inconsistent. If (1) includes (5), that does not show that (1) is not a mere belief. (1) could be the same as

- (2) our believing that we have this reason.

It could be true that

- (6) in having such beliefs, we are in a state which, though it may not motivate us, would be sufficient to explain such motivation.

Humeans would reject (6), since they assume that no belief could by itself motivate us. But, as I have said, Nagel rightly rejected this view.

It might be said that, if such beliefs could by themselves motivate us, they cannot be *mere* beliefs. They would be very special beliefs: ones with motivating force. But this reply misses the point. If practical judgments are beliefs, that makes them mere beliefs in the sense of 'mere' that is relevant here. According to anti-Humeans, beliefs that are in this sense 'mere' could by themselves motivate us.

Remember next Nagel's claim that (1) includes

- (3) our accepting a justification for doing this thing.

This claim also fails to show that practical judgments are not mere beliefs. (3) could be our *believing* that we have this justification.

Nagel's view, I conclude, should have taken a simpler form. He need not have distinguished (1), (2), and (3), since these are all descriptions of the same kind of normative belief. Nor should Nagel have claimed that the *content* of these beliefs is, in part, *motivational*. These beliefs are, in content, *normative*. Nagel's claim should have been only that these beliefs might, by themselves, motivate us.

If Nagel's view had taken this simpler form, it would have been closer to the view that, in his later writings, he so forcefully defends. Practical judgments, he could have claimed, are about irreducibly normative truths.

Nagel did not make that claim, in his first book, because he conflated normativity with motivating force. Though that conflation was in part deliberate, it led him, I believe, astray.

He did not distinguish, for example, between his different senses of the phrase 'motivational content'. Thus, in discussing first-person practical judgments, Nagel wrote:

the acceptance of such a judgment is by itself sufficient to explain action or desire in accordance with it . . . I have referred to this motivational content as the *acceptance of a justification* for doing or wanting something.<sup>20</sup>

This definition conflates what I have called the justificatory and explanatory senses. This conflation is surprising. When we claim that someone's state would be sufficient to explain his doing something, we do not seem to be claiming that this person accepts a justification for doing this thing.

Nagel's failure to draw this distinction had, I believe, some bad effects. For example, he wrote:

Moral scepticism is a refusal to be persuaded by moral arguments or reasons. The object of persuasion in this case is action or desire, and that differentiates it from epistemological scepticism. The latter is a refusal to be persuaded by certain arguments or evidence, where the object of persuasion is *belief*. To defeat moral scepticism, therefore, it is not sufficient to produce the belief that certain moral statements are true, for this may leave the sceptic unpersuaded to act differently. He may refuse to accept the fact that he *should* do something as a justification for doing or wanting to do it; i.e. he may attempt to acknowledge the truth of the statement without accepting its motivational content . . . This explains why a successful attack must be directed against volitional rather than cognitive scepticism.<sup>21</sup>

Consider first what Nagel meant, if and insofar as he was using 'motivational content' in its justificatory sense. Nagel would be claiming that, even if we convinced the sceptic that he should do something, he might not accept that this fact was a justification for doing it. Though someone might hold such a view, it would be a form of cognitive rather than 'volitional' scepticism. Nor would this view be worth considering, since it is obviously incoherent. If we *should* do something, that is a justification for doing it. Anyone who denied that fact would not know what 'should' means.

Consider next what Nagel meant, if and insofar as he was using 'motivational content' in its explanatory sense. Nagel's point might have been that there are people who, though believing certain moral statements to be true, do not accept that these beliefs could, by themselves, motivate them. There are indeed such people. But their view is not a form of moral scepticism. These people combine moral cognitivism with the Humean theory of motivation. Such a view was held, for example, by David Ross. And, of those who hold such views, some might never doubt, or fail to do, their duty. These people's moral beliefs would always motivate them. Their mistake would be only to regard such motivation as requiring an independent desire to act on these beliefs.

<sup>21</sup> PA 143-4.

Nagel's point may instead have been that there are some cognitivists who, though believing that they should do something, are *not* motivated by that belief. As before, though there might be such people, they do not seem to be moral sceptics. What are they doubting? Such people might accept both of Nagel's claims about the motivational content of moral beliefs. When they believe that they should do something, they might accept that this fact was a justification for doing it. And, unlike Ross, they might agree that, in believing that they should act, they are in a state that *could* by itself motivate them. 'Could' does not mean 'does'. Moral beliefs, as Nagel wrote, 'can sometimes fail to prompt action or desire'. These people might say, 'My belief, regrettably, is one such case.'

*Volitional* scepticism, it may be objected, need not involve *doubting* anything. Nagel's point may have simply been that moral beliefs sometimes fail to motivate. In that case, however, Nagel's wording was misleading. When these people's moral beliefs fail to motivate them, they are not, as Nagel claims, refusing to be persuaded that certain acts would be justified.

It may next be said that, in making these remarks, I am missing Nagel's point. Such people *cannot* have been persuaded that these acts would be justified. If they really *believed* that they should do something, they could not fail to be motivated to do this thing. As we have seen, however, Nagel rejects this view. Moreover, if this view were true, that would undermine Nagel's conclusion. On this view, by defeating cognitive scepticism, we would defeat volitional scepticism. To motivate people to act morally, it *would* be enough to persuade them that there are certain moral truths.

It seems then that, in this passage, Nagel might have been making any of these claims:

- (7) There could be people who did not understand that, if they ought to do something, that justifies their doing it.
- (8) There are people who, though believing that there are moral truths, accept the Humean theory of motivation.
- (9) Moral beliefs sometimes fail to motivate.

These claims are all true. But they are not, as Nagel seemed to think, claims that his arguments support. The most important claim—(9)—is something that his arguments assume.

Nagel's arguments do support several significant conclusions. One example is his rejection of the Humean theory. But I believe that, because he conflated normativity with motivation, and justification with persuasion, Nagel sometimes mis-stated, or misunderstood, his conclusions. Thus, in

the passage we have been considering, Nagel seems to be claiming something other than (7) to (9).

## 5

Consider next Nagel's account of practical reasoning. Nagel wrote:

a judgment that a certain action or desire is justified has motivational content. To accept a reason for doing something is to accept a reason for *doing* it, not merely for *believing* that one should do it.<sup>22</sup>

As Nagel's second sentence claims, in believing that we have some reason for acting, we are believing that we have a reason for *acting*. But this is not some further 'motivational content' that, when combined with this belief, makes it a practical judgment. This is the content of this belief. *What* we believe is that we have this reason for acting.

Nagel seems to be intending, here, to reject a different view. His remarks suggest that, according to some people, when we believe that we have some reason for acting, we are not believing that we have this reason for acting. Our belief is only that we have a reason for *believing* that we have this reason for acting. There is, however, no such view. It is impossible to think that, in having some belief, we are not having this belief. Nor is it possible to think that, in having some belief, we are believing only that we have a reason for having it. If we have some belief, we have this belief.

Nagel was intending, I assume, to reject some other view. There are two possibilities. On the same page, Nagel wrote:

the crucial point is that a practical reason is a reason to do or want something, as a theoretical reason is a reason to conclude or believe something . . . To hold, as Hume did, that the only proper rational criticism of action is a criticism of the beliefs associated with it is to hold that practical reason does not exist. If we acknowledge the existence of reasons for action we must hold not merely that they justify us in believing certain special propositions about action, but rather that they justify the action itself . . .

On Hume's view, all reasoning is theoretical. Since reasoning is concerned with truth, there are no *practical* reasons: reasons for caring or for acting. Unlike beliefs, desires and acts cannot be either true or false; so they cannot be supported by, or contrary to, reason.

<sup>22</sup> PA 63-4.

Nagel rightly rejected this view, for which Hume gave no argument. And when Nagel insisted that reasons for acting are reasons for *acting*, Hume may have been his only target. But that would not explain his claim that, in accepting that we have some reason for acting, we are not accepting merely that we have a reason for *believing* that we have this reason for acting. Since Hume ignored reasons for acting, he expressed no view about what is involved in accepting that we have such reasons.

Nagel's target seems here to be, not Hume's view that all reasoning is theoretical, but an overly theoretical view about practical reasoning. His claim may be that, when we engage in practical reasoning, it is not enough to reach conclusions about what we should do. Such reasoning should also lead to *decisions*, and to *acts*.

Many other writers make a similar but stronger claim. According to them, practical reasoning is not concerned with beliefs, or truths. That is how Korsgaard, for example, criticizes rational intuitionism, or what I am calling practical realism. Intuitionists, Korsgaard writes, 'do not believe in practical reasoning, properly speaking. They believe there is a branch of theoretical reason that is specifically concerned with morals.' According to them, when we ask 'practical normative questions ... there is something ... that we are trying to find out ... our relation to reasons is one of seeing that they are there or knowing truths about them'. This view, Korsgaard claims, is deeply mistaken. As Kant saw, practical reasoning is wholly distinct from theoretical reasoning. There are no such independent normative truths. We *create* reasons, and morality consists, not in *truths*, but in *imperatives*.

We shall return to Korsgaard's view. Surprisingly, in his first book, Nagel sometimes made similar claims. Thus he wrote:

I suspect ... that it is really an unrecognized assumption of internalism that underlies Moore's 'refutation' of naturalism. The evaluative factor which is always left out by any naturalistic description of the object of ethical assessment is in fact the relevant inclination or attitude. But Moore did not realize this, and consequently [held a view] in which a peculiar non-natural quality served to flesh out the content of ethical claims.<sup>23</sup>

These remarks suggest that, in judging some act to be good or right, we are not claiming that this act has some normative property, but expressing an inclination or attitude.

This suggestion must have been a slip, since Nagel was not an emotivist, or non-cognitivist. He believed that there are moral truths. But, in his claims about 'motivational content', he came close to abandoning that belief.

<sup>23</sup> PA 8.

Thus, after mentioning Moore's view that words like 'good' and 'right' refer to irreducibly normative properties, Nagel wrote that, on this view,

it can only be regarded as a mysterious fact that people care whether what they do is right or wrong . . . Such views are, it seems to me, unacceptable on their surface, for they permit someone who has acknowledged that he should do something, and seen *why* it is the case that he should do it, to ask whether he has any reason for doing it.

Several other writers make such claims. For example, when discussing Moore's alleged normative truths, Nowell-Smith wrote:

No doubt it is all very interesting. If I happen to have a thirst for knowledge, I shall read on . . . Learning about 'values' or 'duties' might well be as exciting as learning about spiral nebulae or waterspouts. But what if I am not interested? Why should I *do* anything about these newly-revealed objects? Some things, I have now learnt, are right and others wrong; but why should I do what is right, and eschew what is wrong?<sup>24</sup>

When words are 'used in the ordinary way', Nowell-Smith goes on to say, such questions are absurd. But they 'would not be absurd if moral words were used in the way that intuitionists suppose'. In 'ordinary life there is no gap between "this is the right thing for me to do" and "I ought to do this"'. But if 'X is right' were taken to mean that X had the 'non-natural property' of being right, we *could* deny that we ought to do what is right.

There is an obvious reply. If these acts had the non-natural property of being the right thing to do, they would have the non-natural property of being what we ought to do. Nowell-Smith's suggested questions would still be absurd. Nowell-Smith's remarks are intended to show that the intuitionists' alleged moral truths could not be normative. But his argument amounts to the claim that, even if we knew that some act was right, or was what we ought to do, we could still deny that this act was right, or was what we ought to do. That is not so.

Nowell-Smith could still have said, 'But what if we are not interested? What if we don't care about what we ought to do?' That reply, however, is no objection to the intuitionists' view. It confuses normativity with motivating force. Even if we don't care, we should.

Consider next a remark of Hare's about the 'alleged moral properties which', on the intuitionist view, 'actions are supposed to have'.<sup>25</sup> If 'it

<sup>24</sup> Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 217.

just is the case that . . . the acts open to a person have the moral property of wrongness, one of their many descriptive properties, why should he be troubled by that?' Hare's remark assumes that there could not be normative truths, since any truth would be merely 'descriptive', and could not provide reasons. On Hare's view, even if it were true that this person had reason to be troubled, he would have no reason to be troubled. As before, that is not so.

Williams similarly writes:

this critic deeply wants this *ought* to stick to the agent . . . This is the right place for the standard emotivist or prescriptivist argument, that even where 'It ought to be that p' has the particular form, 'It ought to be that A does X', if it just tells one a fact about the universe, one needs some further explanation of why A should take any notice of that particular fact.<sup>26</sup>

Suppose that the normative facts were, not only that A ought do X, but also that A ought to take notice of that fact. And suppose we knew why these facts obtained. Perhaps A ought to do X because he promised to do so, and A ought to take notice of this fact because we all have reason to support the practices that make cooperation possible. If these were the normative facts, as this emotivist argument allows us to suppose, we wouldn't need a further explanation of why A ought to take notice of them. That would be one of the facts that we had already explained.

Return now to Nagel's rejection of Moore's view. If some acts had the 'non-natural' property of being right, it would be mysterious, Nagel wrote, that people cared about that fact. And, like Hare and Williams, Nagel suggested that, even if we knew that we *should* do something, we could deny that we had any reason for doing it.

There is one way to make sense of this second claim. Nagel might have been appealing to Internalism about reasons. His point might have been that, if some act had this alleged non-natural property of being right, that would not be a fact about this act's relation to our own motivation. According to Internalists, such a fact could not provide a reason for acting.

This seems unlikely, though, to have been what Nagel meant. He rejected this form of Internalism. Nor was he contrasting moral and non-moral uses of the word 'should'. He seems to have meant that, if some act had

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Ought and Obligation', *Moral Luck*, 122. (I have expanded some abbreviations.)

the non-natural property of being what we should do, we could still ask whether we should do it.

As before, that suggestion makes no sense. Nor was it really Nagel's view. But, because he conflated normativity and motivation, Nagel slipped into endorsing this emotivist argument.

Consider next Nagel's claim that practical reasoning should lead us to decisions and to acts. We can here distinguish three views:

- (A) Practical reasoning does not lead to beliefs. It leads to practical judgments, such as 'I should do that'; and such judgments are not beliefs. The words 'I should' express some decision, or attitude.
- (B) Practical reasoning leads to beliefs, such as 'I should do that'. But, to be practically rational, it is not enough to reach such conclusions. When we believe that we should do something, we should decide to do it, and we should act on that decision.
- (C) To be fully practical rational, it is enough to reach true or justified beliefs about what we should do.

Non-cognitivists accept (A). So, in a way, do certain Kantians—who may include Kant. Despite his remarks about Moore, Nagel's view was, and remains, (B). When he wrote his first book, Nagel seemed to think that some philosophers accept (C). That may be why he insisted that, in judging that we have some reason for acting, we are judging that we have a reason for acting, not merely for believing that we should act. But I can think of no one who accepts (C).

Consider one more passage. Practical judgments, Nagel wrote, do not consist

merely in the observation that certain features of one's situation fall into categories called 'reasons.' . . . [They] are not merely classificatory: they are judgments about what to do; they have practical consequences. If they were merely classificatory then a conclusion about what one *should* do would by itself have no bearing on a conclusion about what *to do*. The latter would have to be derived from the former, if at all, only with the aid of a further principle, about the reasonableness of doing what one should do.<sup>27</sup>

Practical judgments would be merely classificatory, Nagel assumed, if they did not have motivational content. Suppose first that he was using 'motivational' in his justificatory sense. His point would then be that, if the

<sup>27</sup> PA 109.

claim that we *should* do something did not imply a justification for doing it, it would not have normative force. Though true, that is too obvious to be all that, in this passage, Nagel meant.

Suppose next that Nagel had in mind the explanatory sense. His point, in this passage, would then be this. If our judgment that we should do something could not by itself motivate us, such a judgment would not be relevant to a decision about what to do. In other words, if the Humean theory of motivation were correct, practical judgments would not provide reasons for acting. If this were Nagel's point, he would again be conflating normativity and motivating force.

This reading seems to fit the start of this passage. Practical judgments would be 'merely classificatory', Nagel says, if they were merely beliefs about what we should do. In having such beliefs, we would merely be observing that certain features of our situation fell into categories called 'reasons'. That wording suggests that there could not be normative truths. Nagel's claim seems to be that, if our belief that we had some reason could not by itself motivate us, this belief's content would be only that certain natural features of our situation can be correctly called 'reasons'. On such a view, now very widely held, there are natural facts about the world, including facts about our motivation. But there are no other, irreducibly normative facts, or truths.

On Nagel's later view, when we believe that certain natural facts give us reasons for caring or for acting, we are not believing that these facts can be called 'reasons'. These beliefs are *normative*. We are believing that we *should* care, or *should* act. And such beliefs might be, in a strong sense, true. As Nagel wrote:

If I have a severe headache, the headache seems to me not merely unpleasant, but a bad thing. Not only do I dislike it, but I think I have a reason to try to get rid of it. It is barely conceivable that this might be an illusion, but if the idea of a bad thing makes sense at all, it need not be an illusion . . .<sup>28</sup>

At the start of his first book, Nagel claimed that, to rescue ethics, we must regard it 'as a branch of psychology'. Rational requirements must be grounded in motivational claims. But, as Nagel later claimed, this widely held belief is a deep mistake.<sup>29</sup> Unless we distinguish between reasons and motivating states, we cannot claim that, as the young Nagel wrote, 'to

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 145.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 6.

accept a reason for doing something is to accept a *reason* for doing it'. The young Nagel also wrote:

in so far as rational requirements, practical or theoretical, represent conditions on belief and action, such necessity as may attach to them is not logical but natural or psychological.<sup>30</sup>

Though such necessity is not logical, it is not natural or psychological either. This necessity is normative. As Nagel later claimed, it is reason that has the last word.

## 6

We can end by considering Korsgaard's view. Of reductive accounts of normativity, Korsgaard gives the fullest; and she also takes seriously the kind of non-reductive practical realism that, following Nagel, I am trying to defend.

To introduce Korsgaard's view, it will help to reconsider David Falk's. According to Falk reasons for acting are not normative: they are facts belief in which might cause us to act. Normativity, Falk assumes, belongs most clearly to imperatives. A normative utterance, he writes, 'is one like "Keep off the grass"'. Since such utterances are not statements, they could not be either true or false.

Harder to classify, on Falk's view, are claims that use the word 'ought'. Falk suggests that, while an order like 'Keep off!' is purely normative, a claim like 'You ought to keep off' is partly normative and partly descriptive. Though this claim tells you to keep off, it also implies that you have a reason for doing that. As Falk writes of another such claim—'You ought to go now'—this claim 'needs support from "your bus is leaving" . . . or any other natural feature of the situation which may count as a reason'. Since such statements are backed by reasons, they seek to persuade by rational means. They do not merely *goad*: they *guide*.

Such statements, Falk remarks, are in one way puzzling. The claim 'You ought . . .' does not itself *give* you a reason. Since that is so, Falk writes, such a claim

seems a logically redundant part of this machinery. One persuades by rational methods when one gives reasons, reports those features of the situation likely to count in favour of a doing . . . What else but another reason could add persuasive force to the reasons already given? But

<sup>30</sup> PA 22.

'you ought to' is said after everything to count as a reason has been enumerated. It seems persuasive, and like adducing a reason, and yet is not. It seems both to belong to persuasion by rational methods, and not to be part of it.<sup>31</sup>

Falk here plausibly assumes that, if we ought rationally to act in some way, this fact is not a reason for doing so. It is the fact *that* some fact gives us such a reason, and one that is not outweighed by other reasons. In the same way, something's being good is not a reason for choosing it; it is the fact that this thing has features that provide such reasons. But these points do not make *ought* and *good* logically redundant parts of practical reasoning. Falk comes close to seeing this when, in this passage, he forgets his definition of the concept of a reason. We give reasons for acting in some way, Falk writes, when we report 'those features of a situation likely to count in favour' of this act. In claiming that these features *count in favour*, we do not mean that, if the agent knew about these features, that might cause him to act. We mean that these features *support* his acting, and thereby support the conclusion that he *should* act normatively.

Falk continues:

'persuading by giving someone a reason' is an ambiguous notion. It may mean 'by stating a fact calculated to act as a reason'; and also 'by stating such a fact and stating that, if considered, it will act as such a reason' . . . Prescriptive speech of the guiding type reaches a new level . . . when it turns from purely stating persuasive facts to announcing the claim *that* they constitute reasons, 'good reasons', 'valid' reasons, etc. . . .

Falk's use of the phrase 'good reasons' may seem to be normative. But that is not so. Facts are good reasons, in Falk's sense, if belief in these facts would have persuasive or motivating force. When we use 'ought' to imply the presence of a reason—which is what Falk calls the *motivation sense* of 'ought'—we are making a psychological prediction, which can be proved either true or false. As Falk writes:

I have defended the view that reasons are forces . . . If reasons are choice-guiding because they are forces, then a circumstance that holds a reason for one need not hold a reason . . . for everyone. What . . . can qualify as a choice-determining consideration is in essence an empirical matter.

As he writes elsewhere, when we say 'You ought to go', we want our claim to be 'put to the test . . . we desire the hearer to have the benefit of *experiencing* what we claim'.

<sup>31</sup> W. D. Falk, *Ought, Reasons, and Morality* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

We can now see why, on Falk's view, the concepts *ought* and *good* are logically redundant. They have no distinctive sense, or conceptual role. Falk ignores the possibility that, in making a claim like 'You ought to go', we might be stating a normative truth. When such claims are true, he assumes, their truth consists in a motivational prediction. Insofar as such claims are normative, they are like the imperative 'Go!' Though such claims can be both normative and true, their normativity is not part of what makes them true. 'You ought to go' means, roughly, 'If you knew the truth, you would want to go, so: Go!'

Falk would have rejected this assessment of his view. While he believed that, in some of its uses, the word 'ought' merely expresses an imperative, that is not true, he claims, of the motivational or psychologically predictive use of 'ought'. Rational people, Falk writes, 'are interested in other people's emotive noises' only insofar as these present 'an objectively valid recommendation for them'. And this motivational ought has, he claims, such objective recommending force.

Falk then considers an objection like mine. Critics may say, he writes, 'that "I ought" is different from "I would want if I first stopped to think"'. The one has a normative and coercive connotation which the other has not.' Falk replies that, when we use 'ought' in this motivational sense, our claim may not only be about what we *would* want. It may be about what we would *have* to want. Such a use of 'ought', Falk then writes, meets Kant's criterion of normativity. According to Kant, when we say that we 'ought' to do something, we mean that 'we have, contrary to our inclinations, not only a rational but a *rationally necessary* impulse or "will" to do this thing.'<sup>32</sup>

This reference to rational necessity again looks promisingly normative. But that promise is not fulfilled. On Falk's account, an impulse is *rational* if it is one that 'a person would have if he both acquainted himself with the facts and tested his reactions to them'. Such an impulse is *necessary* if it would be unalterable 'by any repetition of these mental operations'. There is here no practical reasoning. To find out what is rationally necessary in Falk's sense, we merely review the relevant facts and *test our reactions*. Falk continues:

And this is meant by a 'dictate of reason': an impulse or will to action evoked by 'reason' and . . . one which derives a special forcibleness from [the fact that] no further testing by 'reason' would change or dislodge it . . . A conclusive reason would be one [that is] unavoidably stronger than all opposing motives.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

[People are] under obligations when ... they have, contrary to their inclinations, a specially compelling or deterring motive for doing or not doing them.

Both reasons and obligations are here reduced to motivating states, or empirical facts about such states. As Falk notes, 'what are here called ... obligations would in one sense be facts of nature in their ordinary empirical meaning'.

Normativity, on Falk's view, is provided by the gap between our actual motives and the motives that we would have if we reviewed the facts. When someone claims that he 'ought' to do something, in Falk's motivational sense, what this person means is that, though his 'impulse or desire' to do this thing may not now be 'sufficiently strong, dispositionally he was under an effective and overriding compulsion to do it'.

Falk's motivational 'ought' is not, in my sense, normative. There is nothing normative in the compulsiveness or inescapability of our desires. That can be partly shown by considering what Falk's view implies. We have seen that, on Brandt's view, for our desires to be rational, it is enough that we be incurably insane. Similar remarks apply to Falk's view. Suppose that, when I reflect on the facts, I find myself irresistibly impelled, against my other inclinations, to act in some crazy way, such as eating light-bulbs, or leaping over a precipice. On Falk's view, I would then be rationally obliged to act in these ways.

When Falk discusses morality, he notes that we are drawn to a pair of potentially conflicting views. We assume both that, as internalists claim, moral beliefs necessarily motivate, and that that, as externalists claim, morality applies to everyone, whatever their motivational states. These assumptions, Falk writes, produce a paradox. We are inclined to believe that

our doing what we ought to do needs a 'justification' additional to that which we express by saying that we morally ought to do it. We can ask, 'is there ... any real need for my doing it?'

But it can also seem absurd

that moral conduct should require more than one kind of justification: that having first convinced someone that regardless of cost to himself he was morally bound to do some act we should then be called upon to convince him as well that he had some ... sufficiently strong reason for doing this act. 'You have made me realize that I ought, now convince me that I really need to' seems a spurious request, inviting the retort 'If you were really convinced of the first you would not seriously doubt the second.'

This appearance of paradox, Falk then argues, comes from our failure to distinguish between two senses of 'ought': the motivational or reason-giving sense, and the sense that is used by those whom I call Moral Externalists. When we draw that distinction, we shall see that there are 'some people who can maintain . . . as a plain matter of fact that, though admittedly they are morally bound to do some act . . . there is no real need or sufficient reason for them to do it'. In making such a claim, 'what they mean is that there is no thought about this act which has the power to cause them to do it'. Since these people are not motivated, it is a 'plain matter of fact' that they need not do their duty.<sup>33</sup>

Falk then suggests that, since the morally externalist sense of 'ought' breaks the link between morality and reasons for acting, it should be abandoned. The moral sense of 'ought' should be 'identified' with the motivational sense. In this way, Falk writes, 'the connection of duty with sufficient motivation becomes logically necessary'.

This proposal also has unwelcome implications. According to Moral Internalists morality may not apply to those who lack moral motivation. That is why Harman, for example, claims that Hitler may not have acted wrongly. Falk's proposal is more extreme. Suppose that Hitler's strongest desires would have survived reflection on the facts. On Falk's proposal, fulfilling these desires would then have been Hitler's duty.

We can now turn to Korsgaard's view, which partly overlaps with Falk's. I cannot do justice to this view, whose complexity and scope make it unusually hard both to summarize and classify. Korsgaard combines Kantian, Humean, and existentialist ideas in unexpected, platitude-denying ways. My concern will be only with Korsgaard's account of normativity, and with her objections to practical realism.

Korsgaard asks, 'what, if anything, we really ought to do', and 'what *justifies* the claim that morality makes on us'. She calls this *the normative question*.

Realists, Korsgaard claims, cannot answer this question. Suppose, she writes, that

you are being asked to face death rather than do a certain action. You ask the normative question: you want to know whether this terrible claim on you is justified. Is it really true that this is what you *must* do? The realist's answer to this question is simply 'Yes'. That is, *all* he can say is that it is *true* that this is what you ought to do.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> W. D. Falk, *Ought, Reasons, and Morality* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>34</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources*, 38.

In this and similar passages, Korsgaard's objections seem to be one or more of the following:

- (A) Realists discuss the wrong question.
- (B) Realists cannot convince us that some answer to our question is really true.
- (C) Even if our question had some true answer, that would not solve our problem.
- (D) Ours is not a question to which some truth could be the answer.

These objections, I shall argue, fail. If Korsgaard's question could not be answered by some truth, it cannot be normative. When there are answers to normative questions, these answers must be truths of the kind that realists describe. And, if we cannot convince some people that there are such truths, that is no objection to realism.

Different writers, Korsgaard says, ask her question in different ways, since they differ in what they regard as the *normatively loaded* word. Thus, for Prichard, this word is *obligation*, for Moore, it is *good*, and for Nagel, it is *reason*. Korsgaard therefore gives her question several formulations. In the passage just quoted, Korsgaard's doubter asks

Q1: Is it really true that this is what I must do?

Realists cannot help us, Korsgaard says, because their answer to this question is simply 'Yes'. Realists do not support their answer. As she writes: 'if someone falls into doubt about whether obligations really exist, it doesn't help to say "ah, but indeed they do. They are real things." Just now he doesn't see it, and therein lies his problem'.<sup>35</sup>

On the most straightforward reading, Q1 means

Q2: Is it really true that this act is morally required?

But, if this were Korsgaard's question, realism might provide the answer. It might be really true that this act is morally required. If that were true, it would be no objection to realism that Korsgaard's doubter doesn't see this truth.

Korsgaard's question is, however, different. Thus she writes:

the realist . . . can go back and review the reasons why the action is right. . . . But this answer appears to be off the mark. It addresses someone who has fallen into doubt about whether the action is really required by morality, not someone who has fallen into doubt about whether moral requirements are really normative.

<sup>35</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources*, 38.

Korsgaard's doubter isn't asking whether he is really morally required to face death. He believes that this action *is* required. He is asking whether this requirement is really normative.

Korsgaard's question might be

Q3: *Should* I do what I am morally required to do?

Korsgaard writes, for example, 'Should we allow ourselves to be moved by the motives which morality provides?' For this to be a good question, its sense of 'should' cannot be moral. But it might be prudential. If morality were good for us, Korsgaard claims, that might answer the normative question. She also claims that, for some moral requirement to be worth dying for, violating this requirement must be worse than death. These remarks suggest that her question is

Q4: If I did what is morally required, would that be good for me?

A similar question would be whether, in doing what is morally required, we would be acting on motives that were good for us. As Korsgaard writes:

We can then raise the normative question: all things considered, do we have reason to accept the claims of our moral nature, or should we reject them? The question is not 'are these claims true?' as it is for the realist. The reasons sought here are practical reasons: the idea is to show that morality is good for us.

If Korsgaard's question were Q4, realism could, if true, provide the answer. Realists could appeal to truths about what is good or bad for us. They might not be able, in some cases, to defend the answer Yes. Perhaps, as Sidgwick argued, acting morally could be bad for us. But that would be no objection to realism.

Korsgaard's question is not, however, whether morality is good for us. As she would say, even if some act would be best for us, and were thus prudentially required, we could still ask whether that requirement was really *normative*.

A better suggestion is

Q5: If I did what is morally required, would I be acting on motives that I am glad to have?

When we understand the motives that morality provides, we should ask, Korsgaard writes, whether we *endorse* these motives. And she ties normativity to reflective endorsement. But Q5 is too weak to be the normative question. Return to Korsgaard's first formulation:

Q1: Is it really true that this is what I *must* do?

As Korsgaard writes elsewhere, she is asking what we *have* to do. Normativity, in its clearest form, involves a *requirement*.

Korsgaard's question is not, we have seen, about either moral or prudential requirements. But it might be

Q6: Is this act *rationally* required? Is it what I have most reason, or overwhelming reason, to do?

This interpretation seems the best. Realism fails, Korsgaard argues, because it fails to understand the difference between theoretical and practical reasoning. According to realists, when some act is rationally required, that requirement is a normative fact, which holds 'independently of the agent's will'. On such a view, Korsgaard claims, we could ask

Q7: *Why* should I do what I am rationally required to do?

And to this question, Korsgaard argues, realists would have no answer. Rational requirements, if understood in a realist way, would not have normative force. We might have no reason to do what, according to realists, reason required.

## 7

Korsgaard's strongest critique of realism comes in her discussion of instrumental reasons.<sup>36</sup> According to

*the instrumental principle*, reason requires us to take the means to our ends.

On internalist, desire-based theories, this is the central principle of practical reasoning. On value-based theories, for the instrumental principle to apply, our aims must be rational, or worth achieving. But, when we have such aims, our reasons to pursue these aims give us derivative reasons to take the necessary means. So, on both kinds of theory, some form of the instrumental principle is uncontroversial.

Before giving her own, Kantian account of this principle, Korsgaard criticizes two others. One is the empiricist account, given by writers such as Hume and Falk. This account, Korsgaard writes, 'explains how instrumental reasons can motivate us, but at the price of making it impossible to see how they could function as requirements or guides'.<sup>37</sup> That objection, I have claimed, is justified.

Korsgaard also rejects the realist account, given by writers such as Sidgwick and the later Nagel. This account, Korsgaard writes, 'allows instrumental

<sup>36</sup> In 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason', henceforth *NIR*, in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> *NIR* 219.

reasons to function as guides, but at the price of making it impossible for us to see any special reason why we should be motivated to follow these guides'. Realists 'cannot provide a coherent account of rationality'. According to them:

rationality is a matter of conforming the will to standards of reason that exist independently of the will, as a set of truths about what there is reason to do . . . The difficulty with this account . . . exists right on its surface, for the account invites the question why it is rational to conform to those reasons, and seems to leave us in need of a reason to be rational.<sup>38</sup>

If realists were asked why it is rational to respond to reasons, they could answer: 'That is what being rational *is*. We are rational if we want and do what we have most reason to want and do.'

Korsgaard considers this reply. She writes:

There is one way in which the realist strategy might seem to work. We may simply *define* a rational agent as one who responds in the appropriate way to reasons, whatever they are, and we may then give realist accounts of all practical reasons.

This reply, Korsgaard objects, would make realism trivial.

Realism would indeed be trivial if it were made true by a stipulative definition. Suppose we asked a different question: whether it is always rational to do our duty. In considering that question, it would be no help to define 'rational' to mean 'doing our duty'. Since that is not what 'rational' actually means, our proposed redefinition could not answer our question.

Consider next the question whether it is always right to do our duty. We might claim: 'Yes. That is what moral rightness *is*.' This claim is analytic, since it is implied by the meaning of the words 'right' and 'duty'. And, since we have not redefined these words, our claim answers this question. It is of course trivial to claim that it must be right to do our duty. But that claim is trivial only because it is so obviously true.

The same applies to the realist claim that to be rational is to respond to reasons. When realists make that claim, they are not appealing to a stipulative redefinition. Given the meaning of 'rational' and 'reason', their claim is another analytic truth. This claim is also trivial, because so obviously true. But that does not make realism trivial. According to realists, there are non-trivial truths about what we have reason to care about, and do.

Return now to Korsgaard's claim that, if rationality were a matter of responding to such truths, that would 'leave us in need of a reason to be

<sup>38</sup> *NIR* 240.

rational'. This claim is also far from trivial. According to realists, we are rational if we want, and do, what we have most reason to want and to do. Korsgaard's suggestion therefore is that, if realism were true, we might have no reason to want, and to do, what we had most reason to want and do.

For this suggestion to be coherent, Korsgaard must be using 'reason' in two senses. She cannot mean that, if we have a normative reason to do something, we might have no such reason to do this thing. But her point might be this. According to realists, the fact that we had this normative reason would be a truth that was independent of our will. If that were so, Korsgaard may mean, we might still need a *motivating* reason to do this thing. We might not be motivated to do what we believed that we had this reason to do. If realists could not exclude this possibility, that might seem to count against their view.

Other passages support this reading. Thus Korsgaard writes:

realism about reasons . . . may be criticized on the grounds that it fails to meet the internalism requirement. . . . On a realist interpretation, astonishingly enough, even instrumental reasons fail to meet this requirement. For all we can see, an agent may be indifferent to the fact that an action's instrumentality to her end constitutes a reason for her to act.<sup>39</sup>

Korsgaard's objection seems here to be that, if it were an independent truth that we had reason to do whatever would achieve our ends, we might recognize that truth but fail to be motivated to do these things.

For this to be an objection to realism, Korsgaard would have to be appealing to Belief Internalism. She could then say that, if beliefs about reasons were beliefs about such independent truths, we could not explain how these beliefs necessarily motivate us. As we have seen, however, Korsgaard rejects Belief Internalism. She refers to 'the strange idea that an acknowledged reason could never fail to motivate'.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, when she discusses morality, Korsgaard writes:

If someone finds the bare fact that something is his duty does not move him to action, and asks what possible motive he has for doing it, it does not help to tell him that the fact that it is his duty just is the motive. That fact isn't motivating him just now, and therein lies his problem.<sup>41</sup>

Korsgaard here clearly rejects Moral Belief Internalism.

<sup>39</sup> *NIR* 242.

<sup>40</sup> 'Scepticism about Practical Reason', in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, henceforth *CKE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 331.

<sup>41</sup> *Sources*, 38.

In this second passage, Korsgaard might be appealing to Internalism about reasons. According to Deliberative Internalism, we cannot have a normative reason to do something if, though having deliberated on all the relevant facts, we are not at all motivated to do this thing. Korsgaard's imagined doubter *is* deliberating on the facts, including the fact that he has a certain duty. When he doubts that this duty is really normative, his point may be this: since he is not motivated to do his duty, the fact that he has this duty does not give him any reason for acting. If she were a Deliberative Internalist, Korsgaard would agree.

If this were Korsgaard's point, she would be rejecting some forms of realism. Some realists are Externalist Moral Rationalists, who believe that an act's rightness is always a reason for doing it. Deliberative Internalists reject this view. Other realists, however, also reject this view. Some believe that, though there are some external reasons, these are given only by facts about our own well-being. And, what is more important here, some realists are themselves Internalists, of a non-reductive kind. As that implies, if Korsgaard were appealing to Internalism about reasons, that would not explain why, according to her, realists cannot explain even the simplest instrumental reasons. Her objections to realism must be different.

One of her objections is the following. According to the realists she is considering, it is an independent normative truth that we have reason to do what is needed to achieve our aims. But realists have not explained how our awareness of this truth motivates us. When she discusses moral realism, Korsgaard often makes such claims. The eighteenth-century realists, she writes,

did not explain *how* reason provides moral motivation. They simply asserted that it does. For Samuel Clarke, for instance, it is a fact about certain actions that they are 'fit to be done'. It is a self-evident truth built into the nature of things, in the same way that mathematical truths are built into the nature of things (whatever that way is). But people do not regulate their actions, love, hate, live, kill, and die for mathematical truths. So Clarke's account can leave us completely mystified as to why people are prepared to do these things for moral truths.<sup>42</sup>

Realists might reply as follows. We do not act upon mathematical truths, except in a purely instrumental way. But, when we believe that we ought rationally to accept the conclusion of some piece of mathematical or logical reasoning, it is not a mystery how that belief may lead us to accept that

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 12.

conclusion. Similarly, when we believe that we ought, either rationally or morally, to act in some way, it is not a mystery how these beliefs may lead us to act.

This reply, Korsgaard might say, overlooks the difference between theoretical and practical reasoning. Since mathematics is concerned with truth, it is not mysterious how mathematical reasoning can affect our beliefs. Practical reasoning, in contrast, is not about what we should *believe*, but about what we should *do*. Realists, Korsgaard thinks, misunderstand this difference. They mistakenly regard ethics as another branch of theoretical reasoning, whose aim is knowledge. They assume that, when we ask 'practical normative questions . . . there is something . . . that we are trying to find out'.<sup>43</sup> On their view, 'our relation to reasons is one of seeing that they are there or knowing truths about them'. Realism fails, Korsgaard claims, because no knowledge of such truths could answer normative questions. In her words:

Suppose it is just a fact, independently of a person's own will, that an action's tendency to promote one of her ends constitutes a reason for doing it. Why must she care about *that* fact?<sup>44</sup>

In asking why this person *must* care, Korsgaard might again be asking an explanatory question. She might mean: 'Why must it be true that this person cares? If it is such an independent fact that this person has this reason for acting, how can it be necessarily true that this person cares about this fact?' But, as we have seen, Korsgaard denies that beliefs about reasons necessarily motivate us.

In asking why this person *must* care, Korsgaard may instead be asking a justificatory question. She may mean, 'If it is such an independent fact that this person has a reason to do what will achieve her ends, why is it rationally required that she care about this fact?' Realists might answer: 'If this person's ends are rational, because she has reasons to have them, she has these same reasons to care whether her acts will achieve these ends.'

Korsgaard might now revise her question. She might say:

Suppose it is just a fact, independently of this person's will, that she is rationally required to care whether she will achieve her ends. Why must she care about *that* fact?

Realists would answer by appealing to another normative fact. They might claim: 'If we are rationally required to care about something, we are

<sup>43</sup> *Sources*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> *NIR* 241.

rationally required to care whether we care about this thing,' Korsgaard, however, might reply:

If there is such a rational requirement, why are we rationally required to care about *that*?

Realism, Korsgaard claims, faces an infinite regress. In her words, if the instrumental principle 'is to provide the needed connection between the rational agent and the independent facts about reasons, it cannot in turn be based on independent facts'. In reply to Korsgaard's questions, all that realists can do is to appeal to another such fact, or truth. But, if that truth is also independent of our will, it cannot, Korsgaard claims, have normative force. Such truths cannot answer the normative question.

This objection, I shall argue, fails. But we should first consider Korsgaard's proposed alternative to realism. If Korsgaard were right, what *could* answer the normative question?

There are at least two other possibilities. This question might be answered by a truth that is *dependent* on our will, because it is *about* our will. Or this question might be answered, not by a truth at all, but by our will.

In some contexts, it would be important to distinguish these possible answers to Korsgaard's question. The first is a form of normative naturalism; the second a form of non-cognitivism. But, for our purposes here, it will be enough to consider what these answers have in common: their appeal to our will.

## 8

Modern thought about normativity, Korsgaard suggests, went through four stages. Such thought began, in the seventeenth century, with *voluntarism*, or an appeal to the will. According to Hobbes, Locke, and others, normativity consists in, or is created by, some law or command, issuing from the will of some external power, such as a sovereign or God. Realists like Clarke and Price replied that, if we ought to obey such laws or commands, this must be an independent moral truth. In Korsgaard's third stage, realism was rejected as both metaphysically incredible and incapable of answering the normative question. Sentimentalists, like Hutcheson and Hume, appealed instead to our attitudes and second order desires, or to reflective endorsement. This view, Korsgaard argues, though an advance on realism, cannot fully explain normativity. In her fourth, Kantian stage, an appeal to *rational autonomy* finally answers the normative question.

Korsgaard's use of the word 'rational' can make her view look like the realism that she rejects. Thus she writes of our being 'guided by what reason presents as necessary'. But she calls that only a 'preliminary formulation'; and she goes on to argue that 'a rational agent is guided by herself, that is, that being governed by reason amounts to being self-governed'.

On this Kantian view, Korsgaard claims, it turns out that

voluntarism is true after all. The source of obligation is a legislator. The realist objection—that we need to explain why we must obey that legislator—has been answered, for this is a legislator whose authority is beyond question and does not need to be established. It is the authority of your own mind and will . . . It is not the bare fact that it would be a good idea to perform a certain action that obligates us to perform it . . . it is the fact that we *command ourselves* to do what we find it would be a good idea to do.<sup>45</sup>

The reflective structure of human consciousness requires that you identify yourself with some law or principle that will govern your choices. It requires you to be a law to yourself. And that is the source of normativity.<sup>46</sup>

These are not rhetorical claims. Korsgaard means what she says. On her view, there are no independent truths about reasons which should guide our decisions and our acts. Like normativity, reasons are created by our own will.

Korsgaard sees the implications of this view. As a result, her concept of a reason is very different from the one that realists use. Return, for example, to a passage that I have discussed before. Korsgaard writes:

According to internalists, if someone knows or accepts a moral judgment then she must have a motive for acting on it. The motive is part of the content of the judgment: the reason why the action is right is a reason for doing it. According to externalists: this is not necessarily so: there could be a case in which I understand both that and why it is right for me to do something, and yet have no motive for doing it. Since most of us believe that an action's being right is a reason for doing it, internalism seems more plausible.<sup>47</sup>

When I first read this passage, I found it baffling. For this passage to make sense, I assumed, Korsgaard must be using the words 'motive' and 'reason' to mean the same. When she says that, according to externalists, we might have 'no motive' for doing what we knew to be right, she must mean that we might not be motivated to act in this way. This use of 'motive' must refer

<sup>45</sup> *Sources*, 104–5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 104.

<sup>47</sup> *CKE* 43.

to a psychological state. But when she says that, according to internalists, an action's being right is a reason for doing it, she must be using 'reason' to mean 'normative reason'. Since these uses of 'motive' and 'reason' cannot mean the same, I could not imagine what, when she wrote this passage, Korsgaard was intending to claim.

I overlooked the obvious way in which this passage would make sense. Korsgaard may believe that, though the words 'motive' and 'reason' do not always mean the same, what they refer to is the same. If that is so, though the concept of a normative reason is not the concept of a psychological state, normative reasons *are* psychological states. They are states of our will, or states that our will creates.

Here is one simple argument for this view. We might claim:

Normative reasons, when we act upon them, are *motivating* reasons, or the reasons why we acted as we did.

Motivating reasons are psychological states.

Therefore

Normative reasons are psychological states.

This argument, however, wrongly conflates two views about motivating reasons. On what we can call the *non-psychological view*, our motivating reasons are what we believe, or what we want, when these beliefs and desires explain our decisions and our acts. In the cases that are most relevant here, our motivating reason is what we believe to be our normative reason. In such cases, when our belief is true, the same fact is both our normative and our motivating reason. For example, suppose we know that

(A) by telling some lie, we would save someone's life.

If we tell this lie, and are later asked why, we would say, 'Because it saved someone's life'. On this view, the fact reported in (A) is both a normative reason for doing what we did, and our motivating reason for doing it. On the *psychological view*, motivating reasons are not what we believe, or what we want, but the psychological states of having these beliefs or desires. Thus, in this example, our motivating reason was not (A) itself, but our belief in (A). (If they held this view, Humeans would add that this belief was only part of our motivating reason, since, for beliefs to motivate, they must be combined with desires.)

In the argument just sketched, the first premise assumes the non-psychological view, but the second assumes the psychological view. Since these are different views, the argument is invalid. It cannot show that, when we have normative reasons to act in some way, these reasons are motivating states.

Though Korsgaard does not appeal to this argument, she seems, I have said, to accept its conclusion. Consider, for example, her account of how her internalist view differs from that of externalists like Ross. Suppose that you act rightly, for some moral reason. Korsgaard writes that, according to these externalists,

- (1) 'The reason why the act is right and the motive you have for doing it are separate items',<sup>48</sup>

whereas, on her internalist view,

- (2) 'the reason why the act is right is the reason, and the motive, for doing it'.

It seems clear that (2) means

- (3) the reason why your act was right was both a normative reason for doing what you did, and your motivating reason for doing it.

Korsgaard's claim is that, while externalists like Ross distinguish between normative and motivating reasons, internalists like her reject that distinction.

There is one obvious way to explain this claim. Korsgaard might mean that, while externalists like Ross accept the psychological view of motivating reasons, internalists like her accept the non-psychological view. Suppose that, as in our example, you tell a lie because you believe that

- (A) this act would save someone's life.

If Ross accepted the psychological view, he might have claimed: 'The reason why your act was right was the fact that, as you believed, it saved someone's life. Your motivating reason was not (A) itself but your believing (A).' If Korsgaard accepted the non-psychological view, she might claim: 'On the contrary, the fact reported in (A) was not only the reason why your act was right, and a normative reason for doing what you did. This fact was also your motivating reason for doing it.'

This cannot, however, be what Korsgaard means. If she were thinking of the distinction between these two views, she would have known that Ross did not accept the psychological view, and that nothing in externalism supports that view. Similarly, many internalists do accept that view, as internalism allows them to do.

There is a better way to explain Korsgaard's claim. First, like these other internalists, she may accept the psychological view. She may regard motivating reasons as motivating states, such as beliefs, or desires, or

<sup>48</sup> This quotation continues, 'although it is nevertheless the case that the motive for doing it is "because it is right"'.

states that involve the agent's will. Korsgaard may also hold another, more important view. As I have said, she may believe that *normative* reasons are motivating states. Her point may then be this. According to externalists like Ross,

- (4) the reason why your act is right is not the same as the psychological state that motivates you to do it,

whereas, on her internalist view,

- (5) the reason why your act is right *is* the state that motivates you to do it.

Other passages support this reading. Thus Korsgaard writes:

Ross in effect separates the justifying reason—the fact that the action is right—from the motivating reason—the desire to do what is right . . . .

Korsgaard then criticizes Ross's view. This suggests that, on her view, we should *not* separate the fact that some act is right from the agent's being motivated to do it. Such a claim would be too loosely worded, since the *fact* that some act is right cannot be a motivating state. Facts and states are in different categories. But, as before, Korsgaard's point might be that the *reason* why the act is right is a motivating state.

Korsgaard's view, so described, may seem obviously false. Would not Korsgaard agree that, in my example, the reason why your act was right was the fact that it saved someone's life? And, if this reason was a fact, then, as I have just implied, it too cannot be a motivating state.

This objection, Korsgaard might say, mis-states this moral reason. Suppose that, though your act did indeed save someone's life, you believed falsely that it would kill that person. Your act would then have been wrong. So the reason why your act was right was *not* the fact that it saved someone's life. It was your belief in this fact. And that belief *was* a motivating state.

This reply shows the need for another distinction. I have suggested that, on Korsgaard's view,

- (5) the reason why your act is right is the state that motivates you to do it.

But this claim is ambiguous. When applied to our example, (5) might be making a pair of claims:

- (6) The reason why your act was right was your belief that it would save someone's life.  
 (7) This belief was the state that motivated you to act.

If this were Korsgaard's view, however, she would not be disagreeing with externalists like Ross. Ross could have accepted both these claims.

For (5) to describe a view that Ross would have rejected, it must have a different sense. On the view just described, even though your belief was a motivating state, that is not what made your act right. In the sense that I intend, (5) means

- (8) The reason why some act is right—or what makes it right—is the agent's being in a certain motivating state.

Though (8) is suggested by some of the claims by Korsgaard quoted above, those claims may also have been too loosely worded. Like Ross, Korsgaard would reject (8). Thus she would agree that, in our example, the reason why your act was right was your belief that it would save someone's life. (8), however, points us towards what I believe to be Korsgaard's view. She could agree with Ross about the reasons why certain acts are morally right. She and Ross disagree at another, deeper level.

Writers differ, Korsgaard says, in what they regard as the *normatively loaded* words, or concepts. For Ross, these are such words as 'right' and 'morally required'. For certain other normative realists, they are such words as 'reason' and 'rationally required'. But, for Korsgaard, these words are merely classificatory. When these words are correctly applied, they can be used to state truths about what is morally or rationally required. But such truths do not, in themselves, have normative force. The normatively loaded words are, for Korsgaard, 'obligatory', 'binding', and one use of 'necessary'.

Return to Korsgaard's imagined doubter who is morally required to face death. This person does not doubt that this act is morally required. He is asking whether this requirement is really normative. Is it really true that he *must* face death? The answer to this question, Korsgaard claims, cannot be provided by some truth that is independent of this person's will. It must be provided either by a fact about his will, or by his will. Though Korsgaard would reject (8), she would, I believe, accept

- (9) The reason why some act is *normatively necessary* is the agent's being, through an act of will, in a certain motivating state.

Such a state is partly passive. For a law to be normative, Korsgaard writes: 'It must get its grip or hold on me.' 'To be obliged to the performance of an action is to believe that it is a right action and to find in that fact a kind of motivational necessity.'<sup>49</sup> But *we* are the source of such necessity. As Korsgaard also writes, 'Nothing except my own will can make a law normative *for me*.'

Korsgaard's account of normativity, as she often claims, differs deeply from a realist account. This difference, as I have said, is sometimes veiled by her

<sup>49</sup> My italics.

use of certain words. Thus she writes that she uses 'the term "normativity" to refer to the ways in which reasons direct, guide, or obligate us to act', or 'to what we might call their authoritative force'. Realists would accept all of that. Similarly, Korsgaard claims that the normativity of morality consists in

its power to bind, or justify, and its power to motivate, or excite.

If Korsgaard were using 'justify' in its ordinary sense, this use of 'normativity' would differ only verbally from a realist's use. While Korsgaard would be taking normativity to have two elements—justifying and motivating force—realists use 'normativity' more narrowly, so that it refers only to justifying force.

This disagreement, however, is more than verbal. Like the young Nagel, Korsgaard often uses 'justify' to mean 'persuade' or 'motivate'. When we do moral philosophy, she writes, we are asking 'what *justifies* the claims that morality makes on us', or 'whether we are justified in according this kind of importance to morality'. But she then writes:

A moral sceptic is not someone who thinks that there are no such things as moral concepts, or that our use of moral concepts cannot be explained, or even that their practical and psychological effects cannot be explained. Of course these things can be explained somehow. Morality is a real force in human life, and everything real can be explained. The moral sceptic is someone who thinks that the explanation of moral concepts will be one that does not support the claims that morality makes on us. He thinks that once we see what is really behind morality, we won't care about it any more.<sup>50</sup>

For Korsgaard, as for Nagel, moral sceptics are not people who doubt the *truth* of moral claims. Korsgaard does not even say whether, according to her sceptic, moral concepts can be truly applied. And, when her sceptic doubts that we can *support* morality's claims on us, thereby *justifying* these claims, what he doubts is whether, when we understand these claims, or what lies behind them, we shall care about morality. We justify morality's claims, in Korsgaard's sense, if we get people to care about these claims, thereby motivating them.

It matters greatly whether we can support morality in Korsgaard's sense. Suppose that, unless Korsgaard's doubter does what is morally required, several other people will die. Those other people's lives would then depend on whether Korsgaard's doubter can be motivated by morality's claims—or whether, in Korsgaard's phrase, morality is normative *for him*. But this

<sup>50</sup> *Sources*, 13–14.

sense of 'normative', like Korsgaard's sense of 'justify', does not even partly overlap with the sense that realists employ. Normativity, on their view, neither includes nor requires motivating force.

Consider next another passage. Internalism, Korsgaard writes,

captures one element in our sense that moral judgments have *normative* force: they are *motivating*. But some philosophers believe that internalism, if correct, would also impose a restriction on moral reasons. If moral reasons are to motivate, they must spring from an agent's personal desires and commitments. This is unappealing, for unless the desires and commitments that motivate moral conduct are universal and inescapable, it cannot be required of everyone. And this leaves out the other element of our sense that moral judgments have normative force: they are *binding*.<sup>51</sup>

For moral judgments to be binding, Korsgaard here implies, they must be *universal* and *inescapable*. That suggests the familiar claim that, whatever our desires or commitments, moral judgments apply to all of us. But that is not what Korsgaard means. Korsgaard's doubter does not deny that he is morally required to face death. He is asking whether this requirement is really *binding*, or whether it *obligates* him. And Korsgaard does not use those words in their moral sense. She writes:

'obligation' refers to . . . the *requiredness* of an action, to its normative pull.

An obligatory action is one that is binding—one that it is necessary to do.

When Korsgaard calls obligatory actions *required* or *necessary*, she does not mean that they are morally required, or morally necessary. Nor does she mean that they are rationally required, or necessary. That is why she claims that realism, even if true, could not answer the normative question. Suppose that, as realists believe, there are irreducibly normative facts, or truths, which hold independently of our will. And suppose that, as one such fact, we are morally and rationally required to act in some way. Korsgaard would say, 'Why must we care about *that* fact?'

If we are obliged or bound, in Korsgaard's sense, that is a fact about our own wills. As she writes:

The primary deliberative force of saying 'I am obliged to do this' is . . . 'my judgment that it is right impels me to do this.'

Though Korsgaard claims that normativity has two elements, the power to motivate and to bind, she does not regard these as two separate elements.

<sup>51</sup> CKE 43.

Normativity, on her view, is one kind of motivating force: it is what she calls the 'motivational necessity' of normative beliefs.

As before, the disagreement here is deep. According to realists, normativity consists in truths about reasons, or about what is morally or rationally required. On Korsgaard's view, no such truths could be in themselves normative. When such truths are normative, it is we who make them so, either by an act of will, or by finding that our will is already irresistibly engaged.

## 9

Which of these is the better view?

There are here three questions:

- Q1: How should we understand the normative concepts that we actually use?
- Q2: Could there be concepts that were, as realists claim, irreducibly normative?
- Q3: If there were such concepts, could they be truly applied?

The first question is, in a way, the least important. We might start by asking what the word 'normative' means. But this word has many uses; and both Korsgaard and the realists are entitled to theirs. It is more fruitful to ask how we should understand such words as 'should', 'right', and 'reason'. When we ask whether we should do something, or have a reason to do it, are we asking a question about our own motivation? Are we asking whether we *will* this act, or whether we find ourselves impelled to do it?

The answer, I believe, is No. But that answer would not refute Korsgaard's view. She could claim to be describing, not what we do mean, but what we should mean. Her view, she might say, gives the right account of what practical reasoning really involves. In the same way, even if Korsgaard describes what we do mean, that would not refute realism. Nor would it refute realism if most of us use such words in some other non-realist sense, such as those described by non-Korsgaardian naturalists, or by non-cognitivists. Even if that is true, it might be possible to use these words in a different, irreducibly normative way.

We should ask whether that is possible. *Could* words like 'should' and 'reason' have the sense that realists take them to have? Is practical realism intelligible? And, if the answer here is Yes, we can turn from meaning to truth. Do these concepts apply to reality?

There are grounds for answering No to both these questions. Irreducibly normative concepts could not, I have said, be explained in other terms. Such concepts, it is often claimed, could not be learnt or understood. Nor, it is claimed, could there be irreducibly normative properties or truths. Normativity, as realists understand it, is a mere dream.

Before I turn to these claims, I shall consider Korsgaard's own distinctive objection to practical realism. Korsgaard claims that realism, even if true, would be irrelevant. Normative questions must be answered, not by truths about reasons, or about moral and rational requirements, but by truths about ourselves. And these are truths that we create, by acts of will.

Korsgaard's objection is, I believe, mistaken. Perhaps there are no irreducibly normative truths. If that is so, Korsgaard's account of normativity may be the best that we could hope to defend. But realism, if true, would be the better view.

In defending this claim, I shall continue to use the word 'normative' in what I shall call the realist sense. But the disagreement here is not about what this word means. It is about what practical reasoning, at its best, either does or could involve.

Korsgaard's account of normativity is, as she would agree, reductive. It is not as bleak as that of most naturalists or non-cognitivists. Most naturalists appeal merely to certain facts about our own motivation, or about the effects of our acts. Most non-cognitivists appeal merely to certain attitudes, or mental acts, such as the acceptance of some imperative. Korsgaard's view makes both these appeals, but she carries them to a deeper level.

Korsgaard shows that, despite their other differences, there are striking similarities between the views of Hume and Kant, and, among more recent writers, Sartre, Hare, Williams, Brandt, and Gibbard. These writers all reject realism, and they all place normativity, in Korsgaard's words, not 'in the metaphysical properties of actions' but 'in the motivational properties of people'. Similarly, according to all these writers, nothing is in itself good or bad. Just as 'moral properties are the projections of human dispositions', 'our relation to values is one of creation and construction'.

Of this family of views, Korsgaard's Kantian version may be the least reductive. Some of the strengths of her view I shall barely mention here. One example is her appeal to what she calls *practical identity*. On her view, it is not merely reasons and values that, by our acts of will, we create.

We even create ourselves, as free and rational agents. If it were not for these acts of will, we would not exist as agents, but would be only places where events occur, or bodies that were governed by conflicting instincts and desires. In these self-creating acts of will, we give ourselves laws, or endorse normative principles. The 'function' of these principles, Korsgaard claims, 'is to bring integrity and therefore unity—and therefore, really, existence—to the acting self.' Though we are the source of normativity, if we impose this category on reality in the kind of way in which, on Kant's view, we impose the categories of space and time, that might be claimed to go some way towards fulfilling the realist's dream.

While this view offers more than most other forms of naturalism or non-cognitivism, Korsgaard's account of normativity is still, I believe, bleak. And her objection to realism does not, I believe, succeed.

Consider first Korsgaard's claim that, to answer the normative question, we must appeal to the motivational necessity of normative beliefs.

After claiming that realism 'seems to leave us in need of a reason to be rational', Korsgaard continues:

To put the point less tendentiously, we must still explain why the person finds it *necessary* to act on those facts, or what it is about her that makes them normative *for her*. We must explain how these reasons get a grip on the agent.

Normativity, so understood, is a kind of unavoidable and irresistible motivation. Korsgaard's doubter asks whether he really *must* face death. And Korsgaard says that, according to some writers, the word 'right' is 'normatively loaded', so that we should not call some act right unless we are 'sure that we really *have* to do it'.

Korsgaard's account of such necessity partly overlaps with Falk's. According to Falk, when we ask 'Must I do that?', we can best be taken to be asking whether there is any belief 'sufficiently compelling to make' us do it. Rational necessity is the presence of a motive that is both 'an effective and overriding compulsion', and a compulsion that no further reflection would dislodge. We are rationally compelled to act in some way when it is true that, if we reflected on the facts, we would be irresistibly and unchangeably moved to do so.

Falk's view, I have claimed, abandons normativity. An irresistible impulse is not a normative reason. Nor can such an impulse be made normative by its ability to survive reflection on the facts. Moreover, since Falk appeals only to the strength of the agent's motives, his proposed equation of morality with such 'rational necessity' yields incredible conclusions. Thus it could imply that it was Hitler's duty to act as he did.

Korsgaard's view differs from Falk's in ways that she claims avoid such objections. On her view, for our strongest impulse to give us reasons for acting, we must reflectively endorse that impulse. Thus she writes:

given the strength of the moral instinct, you [might] find yourself overwhelmed with the urge to do what morality demands even though you think that the *reason* for doing it is inadequate ... Then you might be moved by the instinct even though you don't upon reflection endorse its claims. In that case the ... theory would still explain your action. But it would not *justify* it from your own point of view. This is clear from the fact that you would wish that you didn't have this instinct.

And she writes that, according to Kant,

the test of reflective endorsement is the test used by actual moral agents to establish the normativity of all their particular motives and inclinations. So the reflective endorsement test is not merely a way of justifying morality. It is morality itself.

Hitler's strongest motives would be likely to have passed this test. Korsgaard adds, however, 'I am not saying that reflective endorsement—I mean the bare fact of reflective endorsement—is enough to make an action right'.

I shall not consider here what else, on Korsgaard's view, would be enough to make some action right. My question is only about her claim that, unlike the realist's appeal to normative truths, her appeal to motivational necessity answers the normative question.

In assessing Korsgaard's claim, we should distinguish three kinds of practical necessity: or three senses in which, in practical reasoning, we might conclude that we *must* act in some way.

Consider first a claim like

- (A) If you want to catch your train, you must leave now.

This use of 'must' expresses what we can call *instrumental* necessity. As several writers argue, such claims are not normative, since they merely report the causally necessary means to the achievement of some aim. (A) means, roughly, 'Given the distance to the station, catching your train would be impossible unless you leave now.' This non-normative use of 'must' is irrelevant here.

Consider next

- (B) Since the building is on fire, you must jump into the canal.  
 (C) Since those children are your responsibility, you must rescue them.

These uses of 'must' are fully normative, since they claim that the acts in question are rationally or morally required. This gives 'must' what we can call its *requirement sense*.

An act is rationally required if it is not merely what we have most reason to do, but is what, as Williams writes, 'the weight of reasons overwhelmingly supports'. The same is true of some moral uses of 'must'. But moral requirements can also come, not from an overwhelming weight of moral reasons, but in a more direct way. Thus it might be morally necessary never to violate some constraint.

The word 'must' can also have what Williams calls the *incapacity sense*. We must do something, in this sense, if we could not possibly act differently. In the cases that are most relevant here, such incapacity is not physical, since this different act would be within our powers. Our inability depends instead on facts about our motivation, and may be the result of deliberation. It is in this sense that, for example, we may be unable to shoot some innocent person. When we ask what we ought to do, it becomes clear to us that there is something that we must do, because we couldn't act differently even if we tried, or because we couldn't even try. And what makes us incapable of acting differently might be our beliefs about what, in the requirement sense, we must do. Thus we might find it impossible to shoot this person because that would violate what we regard as an absolute constraint. Such cases involve what Williams calls *moral incapacity*.<sup>52</sup>

This incapacity sense of 'must', even when it takes this moral form, is quite different from the requirement sense. Williams notes a simple proof that these necessities are different. Suppose we claim that we must keep some promise, because that is morally required, or morally necessary. If we fail to keep our promise, because we give in to some temptation, we are not forced to withdraw our earlier claim. We can still believe that what we failed to do was indeed morally necessary. Things are different with the use of 'must' which states an incapacity. Suppose we say: 'I must keep my promise, since I couldn't possibly let her down'. If we fail to keep this promise, because we give in to some temptation, we must withdraw our earlier claim. 'I had to do it' implies 'I did it'. If we *did* act differently, we can't still claim 'I *couldn't* have acted differently'.

This point also shows that, as Williams argues, the incapacity sense of 'must' is not normative. Whether we have a reason to do something, or ought to do it, or are required to do it, cannot depend on whether we actually do it. In contrast, whether we must do something in the incapacity sense,

<sup>52</sup> 'Moral Incapacity', in *Making Sense of Humanity*. See also 'Practical Necessity', in *Moral Luck*.

because we couldn't act differently, does depend on whether, when given the opportunity, we do this thing.

Return now to Korsgaard's claim that, if there were normative facts that were independent of our will, realists could not explain why we find it 'necessary to act on those facts'. In trying to explain this necessity, Korsgaard might appeal instead to facts that are *not* independent of our will, because they are *about* our will. And her appeal might be to psychological necessity, or to the use of 'must' that reports an incapacity. But, if this were Korsgaard's view, it would not provide a better account of normativity. As we have just seen, this kind of necessity is not normative.

This point is easy to miss, since such psychological necessity may have both normative origins and normative implications. It may be our normative beliefs that make us incapable of acting differently. And, if we could not act differently even if we tried, or if we couldn't even try, that may undermine the claim that we ought to act differently. But psychological necessity, though it may have normative significance, is not normative necessity. That is most obvious in those cases in which such necessity is not produced by normative beliefs. If kleptomaniacs could not act differently, that doesn't make their stealing morally or rationally necessary.

When psychological necessity is produced by moral beliefs, there is a further complication. Consider some conscientious SS officer, whose oath to Hitler makes him incapable of disobedience. When this officer obeys some order to slaughter civilians, what he does is, in one sense, very wrong. But, according to Aquinas and others, it would also be wrong for this officer to do what he believed to be wrong. On this view, when it is psychologically necessary that we act on our moral beliefs, that may also be, even if our beliefs are mistaken, morally necessary. In such cases, whatever we did would be wrong. But even though these two necessities did in this way coincide, that would not make psychological necessity in any sense normative. It is this officer's moral belief that, according to Aquinas, would make it wrong for him to disobey his order. That belief would make this act wrong even if he were psychologically capable of such disobedience. And, if he did not have that belief, such incapacity would not have made it wrong.

Return now to Korsgaard's doubter, who asks whether he really must face death. This doubter could be using 'must' in either of these ways. He might be asking whether facing death is either morally or rationally necessary. These questions are normative; and, if they have answers, realists could give the answers. Korsgaard could not claim that, even if her doubter knew that facing death was, in those senses, necessary, he could still ask whether that was true. Korsgaard's doubter may instead be asking whether he is

capable of acting differently. But, as Williams shows, that question is not normative.

Though Korsgaard sometimes appeals to psychological necessity, she would agree, I believe, that such necessity is not normative. As she writes elsewhere, 'This answer does not have the structure of reason-giving: it is a way of saying "I can't help it".'

## 10

There is a powerful objection, Korsgaard claims, to any realist view. Realists face an infinite regress, from which they cannot escape. That is why realism, even if true, could not answer the normative question.

'Justification', Korsgaard writes, 'like explanation, seems to give rise to an infinite regress; for any reason offered, we can always ask why.' We can indeed go on asking 'Why?' And, when we are asking for an explanation, the question 'Why?' sometimes has no answer. Most explanations must, in the end, appeal to some brute fact. But that does not, as some suggest, undermine these explanations. It shows only that not everything can be explained.

When we ask for a justification, things are different. Justifications can end with some irreducibly normative truth. And such truths are *not* brute facts. The most important normative truths could not have been false. If we ask why these truths are true, we can sometimes give no further answer. But, since these truths are not brute facts, they can provide full, or complete, justifications.

Korsgaard would reject these claims. On her view, even if there were such normative truths, they could not provide justifications. But, like several other writers, Korsgaard does not take seriously the possibility that there may be such truths. When she describes the justificatory regress, she ignores the answers that realists would give. She writes, for example:

I ask to know why you are doing some ordinary thing, and you give me your proximate reason, your immediate end. I then ask why you want that, and most likely you mention some larger end or project.

I can press on, demanding your reason at every step, until we reach the moment when you are out of answers. You have shown that your action is calculated to assist you in achieving what you think is desirable on the whole, what you have determined that you want most.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> CKE 163-4.

Korsgaard here assumes that, in judging something to be most desirable, we are judging that we want it most. If we had that conception of desirability, Korsgaard would be right to claim that we would soon run out of answers. We would soon reach some desire for which we could give no further desire-based justification. Realists can appeal instead to a value-based conception. Our aims are desirable, realists can claim, when these aims have features that give us reason to have them, or to want to achieve them.

Korsgaard continues:

The reasons that you have given can be cast in the form of maxims derived from imperatives. From a string of hypothetical imperatives, technical and pragmatic, you have derived a maxim to which we can give the abbreviated formulation:

'I will do this action, in order to get what I desire'.

According to Kant, this maxim only determines your will if you have adopted another maxim that makes it your end to get what you desire. This maxim is:

'I will make it my end to have the things that I desire'.

Now suppose that I want to know why you have adopted this maxim. Why should you try to satisfy your desires?

That is a good question, which rightly challenges desire-based theories. But, if you were a practical realist, you need not appeal to your desires. You could appeal to claims about what we have reason to want, and do. Your maxim might be:

I will make it my end to achieve whatever I have most reason to try to achieve, because these are the ends that are most worth achieving.

Korsgaard's question would then become:

Why should you try to achieve what you have most reason to try to achieve?

Such a question has no force. If we know that some aim is what we have most reason to try to achieve, we could not ask whether we have reason to try to achieve this aim.

Korsgaard continues:

We are here confronted with a deep problem of a familiar kind. If you can give a reason, you have derived it from some more fundamental maxim, and I can ask why you have adopted that one. If you cannot, it looks as if your principle was randomly selected. Obviously, to put an end to a regress like this, we need a principle about which it is impossible, unnecessary, or incoherent to ask why a free person would have chosen it.

As before, Korsgaard ignores the realist's view. Any reason, she assumes, must be derived from some maxim, or principle, which we have *adopted*. To end the justificatory regress, we must find some principle about which we need not or cannot ask why we have *chosen* it. According to realists, however, we can appeal to normative truths about what we have reason to want, and do. And, if there are such truths, they are not principles that we adopt or choose. We *believe* truths.

We could of course be asked why we believe these truths. We might answer: 'Because they are true'. We might then be asked why, if some normative claim is true, that gives us a reason to believe this claim. But that is not a question about practical reasons, or the justification of our desires and acts. So, if there are such normative truths, they would end Korsgaard's justificatory regress.

There is another kind of question that Korsgaard might ask. Suppose, for example, that we are trying to relieve our own or someone else's suffering. Korsgaard asks why we are trying to achieve this aim, and we appeal to the truth that suffering is bad, or is a state that we have reason to try to relieve. Rather than asking why we believe this truth, Korsgaard might ask why it is true. Why is suffering, in this sense, bad?

When realists discuss this question, as Korsgaard notes, they have not found much to say. The badness of suffering, most realists would claim, is a fundamental truth, which neither has nor needs any further explanation. Korsgaard's answer to this question is more original. But we are not now asking why suffering is bad. We are asking whether, if there are truths of the kind to which realists appeal, these could answer normative questions, and end the justificatory regress. And, as before, the answer is Yes. If suffering really is bad, or is a state that we have reason to prevent and relieve, that justifies our wanting and our trying to achieve this aim. We could still ask why it is true that suffering is bad, or what, if anything, makes that true. But that is a theoretical or philosophical question. Though it is a question about practical reasons, it is not a practical question. In asking why suffering is bad, we are not asking what we have reason to want, or to do. So, as before, practical realists do not face a damaging infinite regress. Suppose we know that, as realists claim, we have reason to want, and to try, to relieve suffering. We might be asked, 'Why do you want to relieve suffering?' But, since 'Why?' asks for a reason, we can answer this question. We have this aim because we are rational, and we have a reason to have it. As Korsgaard says, we could always be asked further questions. Someone might say, 'If you have a reason to have this aim, why is that a reason for having it?' But that is even easier to answer. Any truth is true. If we have a reason, we have a reason.

In trying to answer the normative question, Korsgaard writes, we are engaged in what Kant called 'the search for the unconditioned'. We are looking

for something which will bring the reiteration of 'but why must I do that?' to an end. The unconditional answer must be one that makes it impossible, unnecessary, or incoherent to ask why again . . .

The realist move is to bring this regress to an end by *fiat*: he declares that some things are intrinsically normative. . . .

It isn't realists who end this regress by *fiat*. Unlike Korsgaard, realists do not believe that we can make something normative by willing that to be so. Nor do realists merely *declare* that some truth is normative. They believe that, as Korsgaard writes, when we ask normative questions 'there is something . . . that we are trying to find out'. On their view, these questions can have true answers, and these truths are normative, not because we declare them to be so, but because they are truths about reasons, or about what we are rationally or morally required to do.

On Korsgaard's view, even if there were such truths, they could not answer normative questions. To end the justificatory regress, we must appeal to motivational necessity, and to our own will. That, I have argued, is not so. Motivational necessities are not reasons, nor are they normative. And the regress could only be ended in the way that Korsgaard rejects. If we knew that we must do something, and why we must do it, we could not then ask, 'But why must we do it?'

As Korsgaard rightly claims, practical reasoning should not end with beliefs. To be fully practically rational, we must respond to reasons in our desires and acts. But it is the content of certain beliefs that provide the answers to practical questions. Normativity is not created by our will. What is normative are certain truths about what we have reason to will, or ought rationally to will.