

# REASONS AND BLAME

## ON THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REASONS INTERNALISM AND BLAMEWORTHINESS



### MASTER'S LETTER BY LOUISE CLOVER

*What is your thesis about?*

My thesis is in metaethics and pertains to a particular conflict which appears to arise between reasons internalism and moral blameworthiness. There are lots of different kinds of reasons internalism, but my thesis focussed on the classical argument for internalism from Bernard Williams. His view is more complex than I can express here but, roughly put, he argues that an agent has a reason for action if they have some desire within their pre-existing motivations which would be fulfilled by that action. He adds some additional conditions (e.g. that the agent has a reason only if they would have that reason following rational deliberation absent from false belief), but all one needs to take from the rough outline I have given here in order to see the problem is that if an agent has no pre-existing desire to perform an action then they genuinely have no reason to perform it. For contrast, an externalist about reasons would say that an agent can have reasons to perform actions irrespective of their desires. So, from an internalist position, if some Caligula-like character truly has no desire to behave morally, then they have no reason to behave morally. And it is this that brings about the conflict with blame, because when we blame someone it seems we usually invoke reasons in our case against them. If the Caligula-like character deliberately kicked you, it is plausible that you would make a claim that he should not have done that – specifically, that he had a reason not to do that. This, I suggest, is because it matters for an agent's justified blameworthiness that an agent did in fact have a reason not to perform the action for which they are blamed. Yet, on internalism, our good friend Caligula does not have a reason, so it seems the internalist has to side either with the unpleasant view that he is not really blameworthy; or to put forward an alternative account of moral blameworthiness which is divorced from reasons.

My thesis attempts to look at the various ways in which reasons internalism might be reconciled with blame.

*What do you argue for/against in your thesis?*

I argue pretty strongly that internalism cannot get around the blame problem. I do this in various ways: One chapter looks at a response Bernard Williams put forward in which he essentially agrees that the problem is a problem but attempts to minimise the damage. One way in which he does this is to argue that part of blame's function is to give people, indirectly, a reason to behave better in future. I counter that this 'proleptic mechanism' of blame has several flaws, but the biggest is simply that it does not actually address the original problem. It seems self-evident that part of blame's function is to make the perpetrator behave better, but what the problem is concerned with is whether it matters for an agent's justified blameworthiness whether they, in actual fact, did have a reason not to perform the wrongful action at the time that they performed it. The fact that an agent might 'gain' a reason later is insufficient as a response to this problem. The third chapter looks at whether an agent might be blameworthy irrespective of their reasons. This is the most promising avenue, I think, but I cannot find a suitably convincing account of this kind which is also compatible with reasons internalism. And the final chapter looks at what happens if the internalist bites the bullet; who would be exempted and whether this seems plausible. I can agree that there are some actors who ought to be excluded, but the pool of non-blameworthy actors on my view does not correspond to all those who would be off the hook for internalism. The problem persists.

*Why should others read your thesis?*

I think my thesis gives a pretty good introduction to the

internalist/externalist debate, so it might even be worth just reading the first chapter if you want some understanding of the various kinds of internalism and the advantages and disadvantages it has to externalism. There are definitely some things that I would change about the more critical part of my thesis, however I think its main virtue is its originality. It marries up two, often distinct, debates: the metaethical debate between internalism and externalism, and debates around conditions of moral responsibility. As such, it raises new questions which others might wish to take up and explore.

*What are your plans for the future?*

I am going to begin my doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in September. It is a great place to study metaethics and plays host to MadMeta, a big metaethics conference, every year. I am looking forward to continuing to explore some of issues that arose in my Master's thesis there.