

# *Practical Reason and Motivational Scepticism*

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In her influential and challenging paper “Skepticism about Practical Reason” Christine Korsgaard sets out to refute an important strand of Humean scepticism as it concerns a Kantian understanding of practical reason.<sup>1</sup> Korsgaard distinguishes two components of scepticism about practical reason. The first, which she refers to as *content scepticism*, argues that reason cannot of itself provide any “substantive guidance to choice and action” (SPR, 311). In its classical formulation, as stated by Hume, it is argued that reason cannot determine our ends. Our ends are determined by our desires and reason is limited to the role of identifying the relevant *means* to these ends. The second component, which Korsgaard calls *motivational scepticism*, suggests doubt about the scope of reason as a motive. The claim here, as Korsgaard interprets Hume’s view on this matter, is that “all reasoning that has motivational influence must start from a passion, that being the only possible source of motivation” (SPR, 314).<sup>2</sup> Korsgaard’s fundamental objective in “Skepticism about Practical Reason” is to show that motivational scepticism must always be based on content scepticism. In other words, according to Korsgaard, motivational scepticism has no *independent* force. In this paper I argue that Korsgaard’s attempt to discredit motivational scepticism is unsuccessful.

## I

Korsgaard’s approach to this problem turns on a fundamental distinction between “internalist” and “externalist” moral theories. According to internalist theories the knowledge (or acceptance) of a moral judgment implies the existence of a motive. In contrast with this, externalist theories hold that “a conjunction of moral comprehension

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(1) Hereafter abbreviated as SPR, with page references to Korsgaard 1996.

(2) Hume expresses the basic idea behind the distinction between content and motivational scepticism in a passage of his *Treatise* where he criticizes Samuel Clarke’s ethical rationalism. The relevant passage begins: “These two particulars are evidently distinct. ‘Tis one thing to know virtue, and another to conform the will to it...” [Hume, 2000; 3.1.1.22].

and total unmotivatedness is perfectly possible: knowledge is one thing and motivation another” (SPR, 315).<sup>3</sup> The obvious worry about externalist theories is that they allow for a gap between *recognizing* reasons and *responding* to them. That is to say, there is, on the externalist account, no requirement on practical reasons that they are actually capable of motivating the agent. Clearly, however, unless reasons provide motivation they cannot prompt or explain any action. As Korsgaard points out, where there is doubt about whether a given consideration is able to motivate an agent, there will be doubt about “whether the consideration has the force of a practical *reason*” (SPR, 317).

Hume’s motivational scepticism takes the form of the objection that even if *content* scepticism can be answered (e.g. by way of identifying some relevant moral principles that serve as measures of right and wrong) we would still be left with *external* reasons that cannot *motivate* the agent. Whereas a Humean theory of practical reasons locates their motivational source in our passions and desires, the Kantian theory imposes no such limitation on the sources of motivation. According to the Kantian theory, the operations of reason can, by themselves, provide us with practical conclusions that carry their own motivational force. Humean motivation scepticism questions how this can be done.

Korsgaard maintains that Humean sceptical doubts about the motivational source of pure practical reasons do not present any genuine difficulty for the Kantian theory, independent and distinct from Humean content scepticism. On the contrary, the doubts raised, she maintains, are a product of confusion about what “internalism” actually requires. Korsgaard agrees that it is a requirement on practical reasons that they be capable of motivating us. However, it does not follow from this, contrary to what Hume and his followers suppose, that if a consideration fails to motivate the agent then it cannot be (for her) a *reason* for action. To explain this point Korsgaard describes the

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(3) Cp. Korsgaard’s account of externalism with the passage from Hume cited in note 2 above.

“internalism requirement” in the following terms:

Practical-reason claims, if they are really to present us with reasons for action, must be capable of motivating *rational* persons. (SPR, 317 – my emphasis)

When the internalism requirement is interpreted this way, Korsgaard argues, it is evident that it does not require “that rational considerations always succeed in motivating us” (SPR, 321).

Hume grants that passions and actions may be described as (indirectly) “irrational” in so far as they are founded either on false beliefs about the existence of objects or false beliefs about causal relations in respect of choosing some relevant means to our end.<sup>4</sup> Korsgaard argues, however, that there is another possibility that Hume has overlooked. An agent may fail to choose “obviously sufficient and readily available means to [her] end” (SPR, 318). In these circumstances the agent fails to respond appropriately to a reason she recognizes. This is a case of what Korsgaard calls “true irrationality”. The important point here is that true irrationality, where an agent is not motivated by her reasons, can occur even when the reasons involved are *instrumental* reasons, which are concerned with taking an action recognized as the relevant means to our end as given by desire.

Even the sceptic about practical reason admits that human beings can be motivated by the consideration that a given action is a means to a desired end. But it is not enough, to explain this fact, that human beings can engage in causal reasoning. It is perfectly possible to imagine a sort of being who could engage in causal reasoning and who could, therefore, engage in reasoning that would point out the means to her ends, but who was not motivated by it. (SPR, 319)

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(4) Hume, 2000; 2.3.3.6.

It is a weakness in Hume's position, Korsgaard maintains, that he cannot account for "true irrationality". According to Hume, when we are not motivated to pursue the means to a given end what this shows is that we do not in fact desire this end, or that we desire something else more. We are, in other words, always motivated to take what we believe to be the relevant means to our end. Korsgaard argues that this way of understanding the internalism requirement clearly "malfunctions" (SPR, 318)

The internalism requirement does not imply, Korsgaard argues, that nothing can interfere with "motivational transmission" whereby our practical reasons "set the body in motion" (SPR, 320). On the contrary, a number of different things can interfere with the motivational influence of some rational consideration. When interruptions of this kind occur, generally we are able to provide some explanation for the failure beyond the fact that the person in question is simply practically *irrational*. More specifically, we can, in principle, say something about how this person's "motivational path" was blocked. This involves citing specific psychological mechanism that explains why the failure has occurred. Among the various kinds of explanation that Korsgaard refers to are rage, grief, and physical and mental illness. Nevertheless, however we may explain failures of this kind, the fact that reasons sometimes fail to motivate us is not itself inconsistent with the internalist requirement that reasons must be capable of motivating us *in so far as we are rational*.

It is, of course, true that if *content* scepticism is correct, then we have no reasons for action that extend beyond the limits of our existing passions and desires. But if pure practical reasons do exist, then we must allow for the possibility that agents may fail to be motivated by them simply because they are "truly irrational". Indeed, as we have already noted, this observation applies to instrumental reasons no less than to pure practical reasons. There is, therefore, no basis for motive scepticism if it is grounded merely on the observation that agents are not always motivated by considerations that are presented to them as "reasons for action". It is mere confusion to suppose that since reasons must be capable of motivating us, considerations that fail to motivate us cannot be reasons for action.<sup>5</sup>

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(5) If I understand Korsgaard correctly, this constitutes the gist of her objection to Bernard Williams' position in "Internal and External Reasons". Korsgaard takes Williams to slide,

It is evident that Korsgaard's way of interpreting the internalism requirement renders the relationship between reasons and motivation conditional in character. More specifically, on Korsgaard's account, a reason for action is capable of motivating an agent only if the agent actually "listens to reason" and is rationally disposed (SPR, 324). Rationality, she points out, is not a condition that we are always in. Clearly the disposition to be rational is necessary if reasons are to be able to motivate us. (Much as a rational disposition is necessary if good arguments are to lead us to belief in their conclusions.) We do not, however, need any (further) "special psychological mechanism" to explain the linkage between reasons and motivation – the condition of rationality already does this work for us.<sup>6</sup>

## II

The question that arises from Korsgaard's discussion is whether she has effectively discredited motivational scepticism, understood as a distinct and independent concern from that of content scepticism. I believe that Korsgaard has not accomplished this task. To see why this is so, consider again Korsgaard's account of cases where agents fail to respond to rational considerations. Korsgaard, as we have noted, acknowledges that it will not do to explain such cases by saying simply that the person concerned is "irrational". The force of the internalism requirement, as she notes, is *psychological*, and it places a "psychological demand" on ethical theories (SPR, 329). When the motivational influence of a rational consideration is interfered with, and the "transmission of motivation" does not occur, it is perfectly in order to say something

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illegitimately, from the (correct) internalist claim that reasons for action must be capable of providing motivation, to the (incorrect) claim that considerations that fail to motivate cannot be reasons for action. The background assumption, making this slide look plausible, is that only our existent ends and desires (i.e. the agent's "subjective motivational set") can provide any source of motivation. (I return to Korsgaard's reply to Williams further below.)

- (6) It is worth noting that on the Humean account the relationship between reasons and motivation is also conditional, but in a different way. The Humean view suggests that a reason for action is conditional on having some relevant desire. We have no reason for action where our existing desires are not engaged. Since on this account reasons for action are always based on existing desire, there is no difficulty in explaining the linkage between reasons and motivation. Where motivation based on desire is absent, so too, on this view, are reasons for action.

about the way in which the psychological mechanism involved has been disrupted (e.g. by grief, rage, illness etc.). At the same time, however, Korsgaard suggests that it is a mistake to seek out a “special psychological mechanism” of any kind in circumstances where an agent effectively responds to her reasons (i.e. when she is motivationally guided by them). There is, therefore, on this account, an *asymmetry* in respect of providing an explanation when it comes to cases where our reasons succeed or fail to “transmit motivational influence”. Although it is possible to identify some relevant “psychological mechanism” when failure occurs, there is no corresponding “psychological mechanism” required to explain why an agent is successfully motivated by her reasons. The standing condition of *rationality* provides sufficient explanation for the fact that the (rational) agent is *motivated* by her reasons for action.<sup>7</sup>

What argument does Korsgaard offer in defence of this asymmetry? In defence of this view Korsgaard leans heavily on an analogy between theoretical and practical reason. It would, she argues, clearly be “odd” to demand “the intervention of special psychological mechanisms” to convince human reasoners that the conclusion of sound arguments are true (SPR, 316; cp. 320). A rational person is not only capable of performing logical and inductive operations, but is also “appropriately convinced by them” (SPR, 320). If we are rational we *believe* the conclusion of a sound argument. In the same way, if we are rational we will be *motivated* by our practical reasons. It is true, of course, that we will not always be motivated by our reasons just as we may not always believe the conclusion of a good argument (i.e. because we are not always rational). However, it does not follow from this that we require any “special psychological mechanism” to explain either how sound arguments *convince* or to explain how (pure) practical reasons *motivate*. Just as we do not require any special psychological mechanism to bridge a gap between being presented with a good argument and believing its conclusion, so too we do not need any special psychological mechanism to bridge a gap between being presented with good reasons and being motivated by them.

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(7) The asymmetry in Korsgaard’s position reflects her (Kantian) view that the right approach to ethics is to assume that our “investigations into what it is to be a rational person [...] will have psychological conclusions” (SPR, 334n17). She contrasts this approach with the (Hobbesian) view that we take the psychological facts as given, and then derive our ethics from them.

Does this analogy between theoretical and practical reason serve to discredit motivational scepticism? This analogy is at its weakest at the very point where motivational scepticism finds pure practical reason particularly problematic. That is to say, in the case of practical reasons what we are concerned with, as Korsgaard points out, is the generation of “motivational force” which is capable of “setting the body in motion”. As described, this is a (natural) effect of pure practical reasons. It is this power or capacity that the motivational sceptic finds it difficult to account for. Although Korsgaard speaks *metaphorically* of being “moved” or “driven” to belief, belief involves no *movement* of any kind (much less voluntary action). Moreover, whereas beliefs are a matter of how we view and interpret the world, practical reasons are directed at making *change* in the world. In other words, practical reasons *do work in the world* in a way that beliefs, as such, do not. It is this specific feature of practical reasons that we are trying to account for.

In the case of pure practical reasons what the motivational sceptic is asking for is some model or theory that explains how motivation is produced. We are told that changes of a particular kind in the world – voluntary actions – are brought about by the activity of pure practical reason (just as beliefs are produced by the activity of theoretical reason). We are also told that the agent’s desires and established inclination are not the source of this power to *move* the agent. Reason by itself brings about change of this particular kind. Nevertheless, whatever the content of our reasons may be, we need to know how it is possible that reason alone can *move agents* in this way. Motivational scepticism is nothing more than the demand that defenders of pure practical reasons provide some explanation of the (natural) process involved.

What may encourage Korsgaard’s view that there is no real difficulty here is the suggestion that a person must be motivated by her practical reasons in so far as she is rational (i.e. as stipulated by the internalism requirement). Be this as it may, however, the question remains about how it is that the operations of pure practical reason are able to move the agent (i.e. without the appearance of “occult” causation). It is here that we require some psychological bridge-building, if we are to explain how motivation is generated whereby *reasons result in action*. The Humean theory identifies the source of motivation as being located with some relevant passions or desires. Since reasons always

attach to existent desires and inclinations of some kind, it is possible, on this theory, to explain how our reasons carry motivational force. When we are presented with pure practical reasons, however, the situation is not so clear. Without any motivational source in existent inclination and desire, we are asked to accept that pure practical reasons nevertheless carry motivational power in virtue of their rational “authority”. When the Kantian theorist is challenged to explain how this is possible the relevant reply, Korsgaard argues, is to say simply that rational agents, in so far as they are *rational*, must be motivated by their reasons (i.e. just as rational beings must believe the conclusion of a good argument). The concern that drives Humean scepticism about motivation is that this is not any kind of an answer to the problem posed. More specifically, Korsgaard does not tell us how pure practical reasons actually provide *motivation*; what she tells us is only what is required to *be a rational agent* (namely, that they must be motivated by their reasons). No *source* of motivation has been identified or described except the standing condition of rationality itself.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear, I believe, that the analogy that Korsgaard aims to draw between theoretical and practical reason does not serve to relieve the Kantian position of the burden of explaining how pure practical reasons actually generate “motivational force” (for rational agents). It may be suggested, however, that Korsgaard has something to say on this issue that goes beyond the theoretical/practical reason analogy. In the closing sections of her paper Korsgaard criticizes the (Humean) arguments advanced by Bernard Williams in his influential paper “Internal and External Reasons”. Williams argues that for a reason to be capable of motivating an agent it must do this on the basis of the agent’s existent “subjective motivational set”. Motivation, in other words, cannot be created *ex nihilo*; it must draw on some source already present in the agent’s psychological disposition. Williams concludes from this is that pure practical reasons cannot exist, since in the nature of things they are disconnected from the agent’s

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(8) There is some parallel between this form of explanatory evasion and Hobbes’s description of the kind of explanation provided by the scholastics: “...Nay for the cause of understanding also, they say the thing Understood sendeth forth *intelligible species*, that is an *intelligible being seen*; which coming into the Understanding, makes us Understand.” [Hobbes, 1994: 1.5.]

subjective motivational set as constituted by her given ends and desires. The mistake here, according to Korsgaard, is the (undefended) assumption that the agent's "subjective motivational set contains only ends and desires" – as clearly that would eliminate all practical reasoning except the means/ends variety (SPR, 328). Contrary to this view, Korsgaard argues, all we need to suppose, consistent with the existence of pure practical reasons, is that a capacity to be motivated by considerations stemming from pure practical reason belongs to the subjective motivational set of every rational being. This is, moreover, consistent with the fact that people sometimes fail to be motivated by reasons of this kind because of "interference" in the "transmission of motivational force" (i.e. people are not always *rational*).

Does this reply to Williams serve to explain how the operations of pure practical reason carry "motivational force"? It is evident, I think, that no relevant answer has been given to this problem. When Korsgaard's argument is boiled-down, what it comes to is this: If pure practical reasons exist (i.e. granted that content scepticism is unfounded) then, in so far as an agent is rational, she will be motivated by reasons of this kind. If the agent is not so motivated, this is not evidence that these reasons do not exist or are not "valid" for the agent, but only that in the circumstances the agent is not *rationally* disposed (i.e. she is not "listening to reason"). While we can provide some explanation for failures of this kind, Korsgaard maintains, there is no need to say anything more about how it is that motivational force is generated in the case of those agents who are responsive to reason.

What is lost here is any (plausible) *theory* concerning the source of motivation as provided by pure practical reason. That is to say, we have no account of how it is that reasons of this kind are capable of "setting the human body in motion". The *work* that practical reasons of this kind are supposed to do in the world remains a metaphysical *mystery*. What the Humean is looking for, and cannot find in Korsgaard's discussion, is how it is that pure practical reason acquires *causal traction* in the world. Even if it is true

that rational agents must be motivated by their (pure) practical reasons, in so far as they are rational, we are left entirely in the dark about the source of motivation and how it get “transmitted” into *action*.<sup>9</sup>

Those of a Kantian disposition may still be unconvinced on the ground that what we are looking for is a (crude) *psychological* theory of practical reason - one that aims to reduce human rationality to a system of hydraulics. I want to show that our concerns are not in any way inappropriate or illegitimate by describing a parallel example, where similar issues and problems present themselves. Consider the relationship between flames, flammable things and burning. There are circumstances where a flame is applied to a flammable object and, for some reason, it fails to ignite and make it burn. We may, in these circumstances, investigate what has interrupted the (normal) process of ignition and burning. The sort of explanations that we are searching for will refer to specific conditions, such as that the object was wet or damp, and so on. On the other hand, we may also be interested to know how it is that flames, when applied to flammable objects, (successfully) ignite them and cause them to burn. What we are looking for, in this case, is some theory that describes the relevant general “mechanism” involved. One such theory is that flames are hot or contain heat, and that this accounts for the process involved. Assume, for our present purposes, that this suggestion (i.e. that flames contain heat etc.) is adequate. Suppose now, that it is claimed that there exist flames that are *cold* or without heat, but that they are, nevertheless, capable of igniting flammable objects and causing them to burn. When we ask how *this* is possible we are told: “Flames, including ‘cold flames’, must ignite flammable objects, otherwise those things are not flammable. It is true, of course, that in some circumstances flames fail to produce ignition and burning – but that does not show that they are not flames. In cases like this, where flames fail to ignite and burn, we will be able to say something about why the *failure* has occurred (e.g.

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(9) There is a striking difference between Korsgaard’s approach and Kant’s in respect of this issue. That is, for Kant it is a fundamental problem to explain how the *causality* of pure practical reason can be accounted for. He deals with this problem primarily through his (infamous) distinction between phenomenal and noumenal causality. According to Kant, when we consider human beings from an empirical (phenomenal) perspective there is no available source of motivation provided by pure practical reason. Contemporary Kantians, including Korsgaard, have generally abandoned this approach. The problem, however, as I have argued, plainly remains with us.

the object is wet or damp etc.). Beyond this, however, we do not need to provide any general theory about how flames manage to make flammable objects ignite and burn - except to remember that when this fails to happen the object is not *flammable*.”

It is evident, I think, that this way of responding to the problem comes across as evasive. Korsgaard’s way of handling scepticism about motivation, however, seems to have the same general form. The problem posed is certainly structurally similar. The Humean has a general theory about how reasons are able to provide and “transmit” motive force. The explanation, on their account, is that our reasons derive their motive force from our passions and desires, and this is how reasons are capable of *moving* us. When a consideration fails to draw on any of existing passions or desires then it cannot motivate the agent and so it cannot be a practical *reason*. Korsgaard wants to show that the scope of our practical reasons need not be limited in this way. The operations of reason may be able to yield conclusions that do not depend on our existing ends and desires (i.e. contrary to content scepticism). Granted this is the case, reasons of this kind will motivate us in so far as we are *rational*. However, when we ask how this is done – noting the parallel between (cold) flames and pure practical reasons – we are told simply that *if* reasons of this kind *exist* then they *must* be able to motivate rational agents, otherwise the individual in question is *not rational*. As in the first case, concerning flames, this seems little more than explanatory evasion. The motivation sceptic has not been given *any* (relevant) answer to the issue that concerns him.

It is possible, I believe, to identify more precisely where Korsgaard’s answer to the motivational sceptic goes wrong. Let us return to the point where we entered this discussion. Hume’s motivational scepticism, I suggested, takes the form that even if content scepticism can be answered (i.e. under some interpretation pure practical reasons exist) we would still be left with *external* reasons that are incapable of providing motivation. Korsgaard maintains that this is *impossible*. The basis of her confidence, it seems, is that she accepts the internalism requirement as a constraint on *all* practical reasons. That is to say, according to her position, nothing counts as a practical reason unless it is capable of motivating rational persons. It does indeed follow from this that if pure practical reasons exist they *necessarily* motivate persons in so far as they are rational (SPR, 320). However, the trouble with this reply to the motivational sceptic is that it

simply begs the question. The answer provided is driven by observations about the *logic* of “reasons” based on the *assumption* that the internalism requirement holds for pure practical reasons. This rules out the very *possibility* of pure practical reasons being *external* reasons. That is to say, on Korsgaard’s account, pure practical reasons must be capable of motivating rational persons or else they cannot be *reasons*. Here again we find that what is offered is not any (psychological) account of the source of motivation but the (logical) claim that if pure practical reasons are incapable of providing motivation they cannot be reasons (i.e. given the constraints imposed by the internalism requirement).

Humeans are, of course, internalists in so far as there is, on their account, an “internal” relation between reasons and motivation because our reasons are based upon our existing desires and inclinations. What the motivational sceptic finds missing in Korsgaard’s account, therefore, is any counter-part to desires that can explain how it is that pure practical reasons are capable of providing motivation. From the perspective of the motivational sceptic, we cannot simply *assume* that the internalism requirement holds with respect to pure practical reasons until some (psychological) account of the internal relation between reasons and motivation is provided. To assume that the internalism requirement holds for pure practical reasons is simply to beg the question as to whether or not reasons of this kind carry any motivation.<sup>10</sup>

### III

Let me conclude this paper by describing the significance of my criticisms of Korsgaard’s answer to motivation scepticism. Nothing that I have said shows that Humean ethics is correct and/or that Kantian ethics is mistaken. My aims and objectives are much more limited than this. What has been shown is that Korsgaard’s attempt to discredit Humean sceptical doubts as they regard motivation and practical reason does

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(10) Faced with these difficulties the motivational sceptic may turn-the-tables on Korsgaard: Since we are unable to identify any plausible source of motivation for pure practical reasons they cannot *exist* – assuming, that is, that all reasons must be capable of providing motivation. (Similarly, if we assume that flames must be capable of burning and there is no intelligible theory about how “cold flames” can do this, it follows that “cold flames” cannot exist – i.e. are not really “flames”.)

not succeed. While Korsgaard is committed to an internalism requirement that has “psychological force”, she offers an account of motivation by pure practical reason that lacks any psychological *substance*. That is to say, as I have argued, on analysis, Korsgaard has no theory of motivation at all in so far as it concerns pure practical reason. What Korsgaard aims to do is to show that the demand for some general psychological theory of this kind (i.e in terms of “special psychological mechanisms”) is in some way misguided or illegitimate. Nothing she says, however, shows this to be the case. Even when we set aside content scepticism, the puzzle about motivation by pure practical reason remains. In itself, this does not show that the (alternative) Humean view of practical reason is correct. Nor does it show that no adequate Kantian answer can be found. What it does show is that scepticism about motivation is a real, distinct problem and that Korsgaard has failed to provide any convincing answer to it.<sup>11</sup>

Our analysis and discussion of Korsgaard’s argument shows that when we sever the link between reasons and desires we encounter a problem about whether the internalism requirement holds for pure practical reasons. Granted that the internalism requirement, as Korsgaard suggests, is a *psychological* demand on our ethical theories, what is needed is a *richer* moral psychology. If Kantian ethical theory is to find some way to explain motivation, as it concerns pure practical reason, it needs to say more about this problem. Certainly it cannot evade it on the basis of the *assumption* that pure practical reasons must be capable of motivating rational persons. Any assumption of this kind simply begs the question against the motivational sceptic.

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(11) In a later paper “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason” Korsgaard claims that in “Skepticism about Practical Reason” she may “give the impression” that she attempts to account for the power of pure practical reason to motivate simply by *stipulating* “that in so far as we are rational we must be motivated by the (alleged) principles of reason, and in this way meet the internalism requirement” (p.219n11). It is my contention in this paper that her argument against motivational scepticism does indeed turn on a stipulation of this kind and that there is no other argument on offer (or, if there is, we need to look beyond “Skepticism about Practical Reason”).

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