

The Case for Externalism in Moral Theory

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The Case for Externalism in Moral Theory

The primary goal of this thesis is to determine in what way moral considerations are related to motives and reasons for action.¹ This relation can be characterized in one of two ways. One can adopt an internalist position, which holds that the connection between moral considerations and motives or reasons for action is necessary, or one can adopt an externalist position, which holds that this connection is purely contingent. This thesis will proceed primarily by means of examining and evaluating the arguments put forth by David O. Brink in favour of a very thoroughgoing version of externalism, and to a lesser degree by means of examining the views of Philippa Foot, another prominent externalist. While I am willing to admit that some of the stronger forms of internalism are unacceptable, I am not willing to accept the strong externalist claim that there is no necessary connection whatsoever between morality and rationality.

Following a taxonomy and an examination of the motivations for adopting externalism, I shall consider in detail Brink's direct argument for externalism, the argument from amorism. After examining numerous possible objections to the argument, I shall conclude that it does indeed fail, though not for the reasons for which it is criticized by most internalists.

As any extant unrefuted arguments for internalism would leave

¹Unless otherwise noted, 'reasons for actions' should always be read as 'justifying reasons' rather than 'explanatory reasons' or 'motives'.

externalism a difficult position to maintain, I shall next consider briefly some arguments for internalism put forth by R. M. Hare, and more extensively a recent argument from Michael Smith. These arguments, it will turn out, fare little better than Brink's argument for externalism, and it will be seen that something of a stalemate has developed between the two positions.

In the interests of resolving this stalemate, I shall present a series of arguments which will, I contend, show that thoroughgoing externalism, while not an untenable position, is nevertheless an unattractive position. Its denial of a necessary link between rationality and morality renders it a descriptive rather than evaluative theory, and this results in an externalist moral theory differing substantially, to its detriment, from accepted views on the nature and role of moral theory.

Finally, I shall argue that the externalist, on pain of accepting severe restrictions on what one holds as a theory of good, or implausible views about an agent's reasons to act in her own interest, must make an unmotivated distinction between the nature of prudential reasons for action and the nature of moral reasons for action.

The goal of this thesis will not be to deal a knockout punch to externalism. I know of no way of doing so. Rather, I hope to show that externalism brings with it many difficulties, and that these outweigh its advantages to an extent where few if any moral realists will, after a full consideration of the options, be willing to adopt it.

Before the relative merits of these two positions are considered, a certain amount of groundwork must be done, as this area of philosophy is rife with conflicting ways of drawing distinctions and characterizing positions. I shall, for the most part, follow Brink in the use of terminology, as his views will be the most discussed. In this section I shall also discuss what sort of motivations one might have for adopting an externalist position.

The distinction between internalism and externalism is drawn in different ways by different philosophers. Brink picks out what he considers to be three necessary components of internalism. First, moral considerations necessarily provide reasons or motives for action. Second, this claim about moral considerations is an a priori claim, as it is established by the concept of morality. Third, given this, the rationality or motivational power of morality cannot depend on substantive considerations such as the content of morality, the nature of rationality, or facts about moral agents.² According to Brink, internalism consists in the acceptance of all three of these claims, while externalism consists in the denial of any one or more of them. It should be noted that Brink's characterization of internalism is a very narrow one, and that it in fact eliminates some prominent internalists, most notably Thomas Nagel,³ on the grounds that, while they accept the first claim, they question the second or third. For now I will

²David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 42.

³*Ibid.*, p. 58.

grant Brink the distinction between internalism and externalism as he draws it; it will, however, serve as an avenue of attack on Brink's position.

At this point we must note further distinctions which Brink makes between various forms of internalism. First, he distinguishes between internalism about motives and internalism about reasons. Internalism about motives asserts a necessary connection between moral considerations and motivational factors, or explanatory reasons for action, while internalism about reasons asserts a necessary connection between moral considerations and justificatory reasons for action. By motives we here mean whatever psychological factors explain an agent's choosing to perform a particular action, and by justifying reasons we mean grounds which would justify choosing a particular action, in the same sort of way that a belief that p and a belief that p entails q would justify a belief that q . Second, Brink distinguishes between strong and weak internalism. Strong internalism asserts that moral considerations provide an overriding or sufficient motive or reason for action, while weak internalism claims only that moral considerations provide a motive or reason for action. Finally, Brink distinguishes between agent and appraiser internalism. Agent internalism claims that actually having a moral obligation provides a motive or reason for the moral agent to act. Appraiser internalism claims that moral beliefs or judgments provide the appraiser with a reason or motive for action.

I will for the most part ignore the distinctions between strong and weak internalism and between agent and appraiser internalism. I believe that all forms of strong internalism are rather implausible, and will therefore concentrate nearly

exclusively upon weak internalism. The differences between agent and appraiser internalism are not irrelevant, but rather are such that agent internalism about reasons and appraiser internalism about motives are relatively plausible views, while appraiser internalism about reasons and agent internalism about motives are relatively implausible views. Given all this, I take weak appraiser internalism about motives and weak agent internalism about reasons to be the only plausible forms of internalism.

Throughout this thesis I will, by and large, focus on internalism about reasons rather than motives. This has less to do with whether the case for one rather than the other is stronger than it does with the fact that ultimately I would hope to be able to defend some form of internalist moral realism, under which moral facts would necessarily provide reasons for actions. In contrast, many of this century's defenders of internalism have focused exclusively on internalism about motives because of the simple fact that many of them are noncognitivists and do not admit the existence of moral facts. They are instead interested in the connection between moral commitments and motivation. This is not to say that there is any inherent connection between internalism about reasons and cognitivism or between internalism about motives and noncognitivism. It is merely the case that the plausible form of internalism about reasons is agent internalism, which is concerned with the connection between moral *facts* and reasons for action, while the plausible form of internalism about motives is appraiser internalism, which is concerned with the connection between moral *commitments* and motives. Thus, internalism about motives fits well into a

noncognitivist moral theory, while internalism about reasons fits better with a cognitivist moral theory. Internalism about reasons and motives do seem, however, to be interconnected to some extent. It might well be the case that internalism about reasons entails some qualified form of internalism about motives. If there is a conceptual connection between moral considerations and reasons for action, then it would seem that anyone who is rational and has mastery of moral terms could not recognize a moral obligation without recognizing a reason for action, and would therefore be motivated to comply with the obligation. The reverse, however, is not the case. Internalism about motives can in no way be taken as implying internalism about reasons, since the existence of moral commitments does not imply the existence of moral facts. Having characterized the differences between reason and motive internalism in this way, I will now proceed for the most part to ignore this distinction as well, speaking primarily, but not exclusively, about reason internalism.

The position which Brink adopts with regard to this issue is thoroughly externalist. He denies that there are any necessary connections whatsoever between moral considerations and motives or reasons for action. Brink should not, however, be taken as implying that there are *no* connections between moral considerations and motives or reasons for action, but merely that all such connections are contingent. Whereas internalists hold that anyone who has a moral obligation to perform a given action has a reason or motive to perform that action because of the very nature of moral obligations, Brink holds instead that a person with a moral obligation to perform a given action may or may not have a

reason or motive to perform that action, but, given the content of morality, the nature of rationality, and the facts about moral agents, we will find that most people with moral obligations will have reasons or motives to act most of the time. In this way, Brink wants to keep moral reasoning as a form of practical reasoning, but to keep it without certain unwanted conceptual baggage.

Foot's views are, in general, less explicit on this matter than are Brink's, but it seems clear that she too wants to deny that moral considerations necessarily provide motives or reasons for action. She allows that while it is conceivable that upon coming to better understand what it is to have a reason for action, we might find that moral considerations do provide reasons which are not dependent on an agent's interests or desires, no valid arguments for this proposition have been put forward, and we therefore have little or no reason to endorse it.⁴

I would like at this time to comment on how I intend to use 'internalism' and 'externalism' in this thesis. Given that the externalists whose views are in question are strong externalists about both reasons and motives, I shall mean by 'externalism' this strong form of the view, rather than externalism about only reasons or motives. On the other hand, as most of the objections to externalism which I shall discuss require only that some internalist element be present in one's views, I shall mean by 'internalism' any view which contains any internalist

⁴Philippa Foot, "Reasons for Action and Desires," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 156.

element, be it internalism about motives or about reasons. When it is crucial to the argument, I shall distinguish between the various forms of internalism.

The motivation which Brink cites for adopting externalism is to avoid certain arguments for moral anti-realism which rely on internalist premises. These arguments fall into two basic groups. One group argues for noncognitivism from the premise that no set of facts can necessitate any motivational attitude; that is, it is possible to be indifferent to any given set of facts. Given internalism about motives, which holds that one cannot be indifferent to moral facts, it follows that there are no moral facts, or at least no moral facts in the sense which the moral realist desires.⁵ A second group of anti-realist arguments rely on internalism about reasons. Given internalism about reasons, moral facts must provide moral agents with reasons for action regardless of the agents' interests and attitudes. Such facts are queer, and therefore we should reject moral realism.⁶ I shall refer to these arguments as the argument from indifference and the argument from queerness respectively. Brink wants to admit that these arguments are successful in rendering the conjunction of internalism and moral realism implausible, but instead of adopting

⁵R. M. Hare, "Nothing Matters," in *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), chap. 1, and P. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), pp. 36-43, as cited by Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 43.

⁶G. Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review* 85(1975): 4-11, and Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, chap. 1, as cited by Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 44.

anti-realist views as do most of those who advance these arguments, Brink instead wishes to deny internalism. This should be seen as fitting in well with Brink's general strategy for defending moral realism, which is to argue for the view that moral facts and properties are just as real and just as objective as natural or scientific facts and properties just because they *are* natural facts and properties. Coupled with internalism, this view would run afoul of arguments for moral anti-realism such as the arguments from indifference and queerness. Brink believes that he can avoid such difficulties by rejecting the conceptual commitments of internalism, rendering moral facts and properties as much like natural facts and properties as possible.

A second way of characterizing the motivation for externalism, found more prominently in Foot's writings, is the concern that non-hypothetical imperatives are generally problematic. While the nature of hypothetical imperatives and the way in which they generate reasons for action is straightforward, the same cannot be said for categorical imperatives. The arguments from indifference and queerness are to a large extent developments of concerns about the nature of non-hypothetical imperatives, and so in some respects one might consider these two motivations for externalism closely allied. However, it seems possible that one might have concerns about non-hypothetical imperatives which are independent of the concerns expressed by philosophers such as Mackie, and so it may be advisable to consider these motivations for externalism as distinct to some degree.

Externalism, then, is presented to us as a move which the realist can

make in order to stave off anti-realist pressure. It counters the anti-realist by eliminating a contentious aspect of morality, namely, its necessary connection to rationality and motivation. We shall now move on to considering the merits of adopting such a position.

II

I shall turn first to a discussion of the most prominent argument for externalism, Brink's argument from amorality. It is possible, Brink argues, for a person to recognize a moral obligation and still ask whether she has a motive or reason for action. This amoralist admits the existence of moral facts, but wonders why she should care about them. But, if the amoralist is possible, then internalism must be false, as it holds that the amoralist is a logical impossibility. Brink makes use of two distinct forms of this argument. (1) Amoralism is a significant philosophical position, which past philosophers have taken very seriously, most notably in the form of Plato's Thrasymachus and Hobbes's Fool.⁷ Internalism, which must reject amorality as inconceivable, does not take the challenge presented by amoralist scepticism seriously enough. On the other hand, it is a virtue of externalism that it does take this threat seriously. (2) While actual amoralists may be exceedingly rare, or even entirely nonexistent, their position is still conceivable, and therefore the internalists must be conceptually confused. Amoralism is logically possible, therefore internalism is necessarily

⁷Brink also cites a character from David Mamet's film *House of Games* as an amoralist (*Moral Realism*, p. 47), but says nothing further about him.

false.⁸ Brink uses these arguments against both motive internalism and reason internalism.

It should be noted that a very specific sort of amoralist is required to refute internalism. The amoralist in question cannot be asking whether it is rational to act morally rather than immorally. This is weak amoralism, asking if moral considerations provide overriding reasons or motives to act, and is evidence only against strong internalism, the implausible view that moral considerations necessarily provide overriding reasons or motives to act. In order to provide support for Brink's argument, the amoralist must question whether she has any reason or motive at all to act morally. This strong amoralism is the only sort which challenges weak internalism.⁹ What we must determine in order to ascertain the efficacy of Brink's argument is whether or not the appropriate form of amoralism is possible, and whether or not it presents a significant challenge which must be answered.

There are a variety of possible responses to this argument, some of which are noted by Brink himself, and others put forward by internalists. In evaluating Brink's argument, I would like to consider first Brink's attempt to find support for the amoralist in the works of past philosophers, and then turn to Brink's discussion of possible objections to his argument. Finally, I will briefly survey a

⁸Ibid., pp. 46-48,59-60. The variants of the argument are not clearly distinguished from one another.

⁹All subsequent uses of 'amoralism' should be taken as referring to strong amoralism except where otherwise indicated.

few of the responses with which internalists have attempted to rebut the argument from amorality.

Brink mentions Thrasymachus and Hobbes's Fool specifically only in connection with motive externalism,¹⁰ but, given that he considers amorality about reasons to be a traditional philosophical problem¹¹ while failing to mention any other putative amorality, I can see no alternative to concluding that Brink interprets Thrasymachus and the Fool as amorality about both reasons and motives. However, it is not at all clear that either Thrasymachus or the Fool are amorality in the sense which Brink needs them to be if they are to lend any support to his argument. Let us turn first to Thrasymachus.

In the clearest statement of his position, Thrasymachus declares that, contrary to the conventional view, justice as it is commonly construed is a vice, and injustice a virtue, on the grounds that it pays to be unjust but not to be just.¹² Here, far from questioning the rationality of morality, as Brink seems to suppose, Thrasymachus is arguing that we need to dramatically revise our views about morality because we do not have reason to act in accordance with conventional morality. But this is an argument based upon internalist premises, and can in no way be taken as supporting Brink's argument.

For Brink's purposes, the view defended by Glaucon and Adimantus in

¹⁰Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹Ibid., p. 59.

¹²Plato, *Republic*, 348c-e.

Book II of the *Republic* following the departure of Thrasymachus is somewhat more promising. Glaucon and Adimantus do not want to accept Thrasymachus' position, but remain unconvinced by Socrates' refutation of it. They therefore ask Socrates to demonstrate conclusively that justice is better than injustice, and that justice is good in itself, rather than being merely expedient.¹³ Here Glaucon and Adimantus seem willing to accept that justice is a virtue, and are questioning whether they should favour justice over injustice. It would seem, then, that they are questioning the rationality of morality, as is required of the amoralist if Brink's argument is to receive support. However, once again we run into problems. First, the question being asked throughout this debate is whether we have more reason to be just than to be unjust, and not whether we have any reason at all to be just. This is weak amoralism, however, and is easily handled by internalism. An even greater difficulty for Brink's argument here is that the debate is over whether conventional thought about justice is correct in assuming that we are morally obliged to act justly, and not over whether it is rational to act morally. None of the characters in the *Republic* ever question the rationality of the life of virtue; their inquiry is into the content of the virtuous life.

The interpretation of Hobbes's Fool raises similar problems. The Fool questions whether it is rational to keep covenants once they have been made. However, it is not at all clear that the Fool is adopting a strong amoralist position.

¹³*Ibid.*, 358a-d.

Brink himself notes that Hobbes's position seems ambiguous.¹⁴ The Fool is introduced as denying that there is such a thing as justice,¹⁵ which would render him harmless to internalism. However, the Fool also wonders whether there might be times when injustice stands with reason.¹⁶ This would seem to be the amoralist challenge. However, it is not obvious that the Fool is posing the strong amoralist challenge rather than the weak amoralist challenge. After all, it is perfectly possible to wonder whether it might be rational to commit an unjust act without supposing that there might be *no* reason to be just. And there is no apparent reason for Hobbes to have been concerned with the question of whether we have any reason at all to be moral. It seems more likely that the Fool is concerned with whether he has *sufficient* reason to act a certain way rather than with whether he has *any* reason to do so.

While I do not pretend to have provided conclusive evidence against a strong amoralist reading of either Thrasymachus or the Fool, as sufficient exegetical finesse might provide such readings, the most natural interpretation of both is the weak amoralist reading. Both Hobbes and Plato have obvious reason to be concerned with whether it is rational to do what is moral, but there seems no obvious reason for them to have been concerned with the question of whether we have any reason at all to do what is moral. The form that the

¹⁴Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 47.

¹⁵Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), ch. XV, p. 94.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 95.

amoralist challenge takes throughout philosophical literature is virtually always the question of whether it is rational to choose the moral, virtuous life rather than the immoral life. While the absence of the strong amoralist in philosophical literature in itself should obviously not lead us to reject strong amoralism as inconceivable, it should lead us to question Brink's claim that strong amoralism is a traditional philosophical and popular problem. If we are to be compelled to take the strong amoralist challenge seriously some further reason needs to be given.

I would like next to consider Brink's treatment of two possible objections to his argument. Brink discusses the possibility of arguing, contrary to (1), that internalism can take the amoralist challenge seriously by pointing out that weak internalism can take seriously the person who asks, 'Why should I be moral?' as a person asking not for a reason to be moral, but rather as a person asking for an overriding reason to be moral. Brink responds to this argument by noting that while strong amoralism may be less plausible than weak amoralism, it is nonetheless coherent and remains evidence against weak internalism.¹⁷ This response, however, is merely a retreat to (2), and fails to provide us with any reason to believe that the strong amoralist presents us with a challenge which we ought to be taking seriously. Now I will admit that the question 'Why should I be moral?' is a legitimate one, and any adequate moral theory must be able to respond to it. However, besides the alleged examples of Thrasymachus and the

¹⁷Brink, *Moral Realism*, pp. 48,60.

Fool, the only reason given by Brink to take *strong* amorality seriously is that it is conceivable. Even if the conceivability issue were conceded, this is hardly grounds for taking the amoralist seriously. There are many conceivable views which do not merit serious consideration. For example, it is conceivable that the Loch Ness monster is in fact an aquatic fire-breathing dragon with the ability to turn itself invisible whenever it is in danger of being seen, but no one would argue that we need give this view serious consideration. Brink admits that internalism can take some forms of amorality seriously, but neglects to tell us why this is not sufficient. Obviously, (2), if successful, can stand on its own, and (1) is in this sense not crucial to Brink's broader argument. And, of course, Brink never does distinguish between the two arguments. However, anti-internalist arguments are not so plentiful that they can be casually tossed aside, and if our intuitions about what is conceivable turn out to be muddled in this particular instance, then (1) takes on much greater significance.

A second possible objection which Brink considers is to argue that when the amoralist is questioning the rationality of morality, she must necessarily be making either a conceptual or a moral mistake. This is, she either is mistaken in thinking that morality requires the action whose rationality she questions, or else is using moral terms in the "inverted-commas" sense, whereby they signify not the amoralist's views about morality but rather conventional views about morality.¹⁸ Brink's response to this objection is that it is a "facile solution to a

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 46-47,59.

traditional philosophical and popular problem."¹⁹ He also reiterates that this fails to take the amoralist seriously enough, presumably on the grounds that it is conceivable that the amoralist is not using "inverted commas" and has not made a moral error. This is not a particularly satisfying response. Surely the intent of this second objection is to assert that the strong amoralist is inconceivable while at the same time explaining what those who appear to be questioning the rationality of morality are in actuality doing. To simply reply that the amoralist is conceivable smacks of dogmatism.

While these problems should lead us to be at least somewhat sceptical of Brink's argument, we have as of yet been given no reason to question the legitimacy of (2). So long as the amoralist is possible, internalism is in trouble. The most popular internalist response to Brink's use of the amoralist is very similar to the responses which Brink himself considers. First, the internalist reinterprets the question that the amoralist is asking in such a way as to avoid having the amoralist do what the internalist must hold is inconceivable while still taking amoralism seriously. Thus, David McNaughton has his amoralist reject morality altogether.²⁰ Jonathan Dancy's amoralist views morality from the outside, not accepting moral considerations as relevant in her case.²¹ These amoralists do not question the rationality of moral considerations which they

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰David McNaughton, *Moral Vision* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 139.

²¹Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 5.

admit are legitimate, and so are conceivable for the internalist. Having countered (1), these internalists can then go on to claim that amorality in the sense which Brink needs to make his argument work is in fact inconceivable, thus countering (2).

While alternative explanations of what the amoralist is doing when questioning the rationality of morality may well be successful in countering (1), this strategy is sadly lacking when it comes to countering (2). The argument here has degenerated to little more than a series of contradictory assertions, in which each side merely asserts the desired conclusion without support. A slightly different response to (2) is put forth by Jeffrey Goldsworthy. He argues that, contrary to what Brink would have us believe, there is no phenomenon which cannot be accommodated by internalism but can be accommodated by externalism. The imagined phenomenon of the genuine amoralist is merely described differently by the internalist. Where the externalist describes the amoralist as questioning the rationality of morality, the internalist holds that the amoralist is conceptually confused.²² This response, if successful, would effectively undermine (2). However, it is in fact no better than simply denying that the amoralist is conceivable. Clearly there is a phenomenon which externalism can allow but internalism about reasons cannot. The internalist cannot allow that it is possible for an amoralist *who is not conceptually confused* to question the rationality of morality. Regardless of how this phenomenon is

²²Jeffrey Goldsworthy, "Externalism, Internalism and Moral Scepticism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 70(1992): 45.

described, it must be regarded as logically impossible by the internalist. Goldsworthy's description of the amoralist is conceivable for the internalist only because it is an inaccurate description of the phenomenon Brink is interested in. What is needed to resolve the impasse we have reached is to somehow determine whether Brink's strong amoralist is conceivable.

One way in which one might attempt to advance the argument at this point is to shift the burden of proof onto the other side. Brink might with some justification take the burden of proof to fall onto the shoulders of the internalist. After all, he can state the position which his amoralist adopts without any obvious contradictions. The amoralist is a person to whom moral obligations apply who nonetheless fails to have good reason to comply with these obligations.²³ Thus, Brink might argue that he need offer no argument for the conceivability of this amoralist, but that it is up to the internalist to show that this amoralist is inconceivable. The internalist, on the other hand, might point to the long history of internalism as the predominant view of ethicists from Plato through Kant to Sidgwick²⁴ and Nagel. Given that Brink cites as evidence of a "traditional philosophical problem" only a losing character in a Platonic dialogue, and an admittedly possibly misinterpreted Hobbes's Fool, neither of whom are obviously

²³We should note, however, that just because a contradiction is not obvious does not mean that it does not exist.

²⁴Although Sidgwick is generally taken to be an internalist, Brink has published arguments purporting to show that Sidgwick was actually an externalist. See Brink, "Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 66(1988): 291-307.

strong amoralists, the internalist might argue that since on internalist assumptions the amoralist is inconceivable, it is up to Brink to convince us otherwise. Neither of these cases is particularly strong, however, and in any event, attempting to shift the burden of proof is generally tantamount to admitting that one is unable to refute one's opponent.

One might also proceed by arguing that Brink's narrow characterization of internalism assists him in the argument from amoralism, and that this characterization can be resisted by the internalist. Brink's characterization of internalism, you will recall, consists of three elements, while externalism consists in the denial of any one or more of them. Moral considerations must necessarily provide reasons or motives for action. This claim is a conceptual, a priori claim. And, given this, the rationality or motivational power of morality cannot depend on substantive considerations such as the content of morality, the nature of rationality, or facts about moral agents.²⁵ This characterization, as was noted earlier, is a very narrow one. According to it, some philosophers who are generally taken to be internalists will be classified as externalists. Brink is aware of this, and notes that Nagel will not count as an internalist about reasons since he arrives at the view that moral considerations necessarily provide reasons for action only after a defence of a particular substantive theory about the nature of reasons for action.²⁶ While Brink himself denies all three of the elements of

²⁵Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 42.

²⁶Ibid., p. 58, see also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

internalism, his classification of those who deny only the second and third as externalists assists in his argument against internalism.

The first element of the argument from amorality is Brink's claim that internalism fails to take the amoralist's challenge seriously, and that only externalism can provide a substantive response to amorality. This is so because, according to Brink's characterization of internalism, the amoralist's question about whether moral considerations supply any reasons for action must be considered incoherent by the internalist, while the externalist can answer it by pointing out various facts about reasons for action and moral considerations. Any substantive argument to link moral considerations and reasons for actions will render one an externalist by Brink's lights, and so Nagel becomes an externalist. Thus, to the extent that one thinks that the amoralist's question makes sense, one is likely to be dissatisfied with the internalist's response to it.

The internalist might challenge Brink here by claiming that while moral considerations necessarily provide reasons or motives for action, this is an a posteriori truth rather than an a priori truth. This can be compatible with an internalist position so long as the a posteriori truths which necessitate the link between morality and rationality are truths about what constitutes moral considerations. This point is made by Goldsworthy, who argues that this stance is perfectly compatible with the internalist's thesis that the rationality of morality cannot depend on anything external to the moral considerations themselves.²⁷

²⁷Goldsworthy, "Externalism, Internalism, and Moral Scepticism," p. 47.

Admittedly, internalism is frequently spoken of as asserting a conceptual link between reasons or motives and morality. However, it is difficult to see how a view which asserts that moral considerations necessarily provide reasons for action due to an a posteriori claim about what constitutes moral considerations or reasons for action amounts to externalism. It is, after all, a view according to which reasons for action will invariably accompany moral considerations, not because of some “deep” contingent facts about moral agents, but because of the very nature of moral considerations and reasons for actions. While this argument may be far from conclusive, I believe that it does weaken externalism’s appeal in one area in which Brink holds that it is far superior to internalism - its ability to provide a substantive response to amorality.

I would like next to examine what is to the best of my knowledge both the most extensive and the most effective internalist response to Brink’s argument for externalism. Michael Smith has argued that Brink’s argument from amorality is unsuccessful on the grounds that it assumes the view for which it argues.²⁸

Smith picks up the argument more or less where Brink leaves it off, with the discussion of the standard internalist, “inverted-commas” response. Smith does share some of Brink’s concerns about the “inverted-commas” response to the amoralist, namely, that it seems somewhat *ad hoc* to insist that the amoralist is using moral terms in an “inverted-commas” sense whereby they refer to conventional views of morality and not the amoralist’s views. However, Smith

²⁸Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 66-71.

does believe that this response is along the right lines. Instead of trying to show that the amoralist makes some sort of non-moral judgments, however, Smith's response to Brink's argument is that the best that can be said of the amoralist is that she tries to make moral judgments but fails.²⁹

In order to defend this view, he uses an analogy with colour judgments. Imagine a person, blind from birth, who has a reliable means of determining an object's colour via some mechanism which provides information about the colour of the object by means of the sense of touch. Such a person will be able to use colour terms in much the same way people with sight do. Her terms will have the same extension as ours, the properties of objects which explain her use of those terms are the same as those that explain our use of colour terms, and it is not the case that she is making judgments about what other people judge to be a given colour. Nevertheless, some contend that such a person does not possess colour concepts or mastery of colour terms on the grounds that "the ability to have appropriate visual experiences under suitable conditions is partially constitutive of possession of colour concepts and mastery of colour terms."³⁰ This is a view parallel to internalism, which holds that having the appropriate motivation³¹ under suitable conditions is partially constitutive of possession of moral concepts and mastery of moral terms. Brink's amoralist argument, Smith

²⁹Ibid., p. 68.

³⁰Ibid., p. 69.

³¹Smith's response to Brink is based entirely on the case for motive internalism.

contends, is comparable to objecting to “internalism” about visual experiences on the grounds that it fails to take into account the challenge that a blind person could reliably make colour judgments in the fashion envisaged above. This argument fails, according to Smith, because it assumes the view for which it is arguing. Whether or not the blind person who can reliably identify which objects are red and which are green is actually making colour judgments is precisely what is at stake. In a similar fashion, Brink interprets the amoralist’s use of moral language in a prejudicial fashion. By assuming that the amoralist has mastery of moral terms, he is assuming that having the appropriate motivation under suitable conditions is not a condition for mastery of moral terms.³² What is needed, then, is some independent reason for choosing one account of mastery of moral terms over the other.

This is, I believe, precisely the right response to Brink’s argument. Whether or not the amoralist who is not conceptually confused is a contradiction in terms or not depends precisely on whether or not we accept an account of moral concepts which includes an internal link to motivation or rationality. The question of the amoralist is in the end no more than a way of highlighting the conceptual differences between internalism and externalism. This is the reason why the opposing parties generally fail to actually engage the other side’s views with their arguments, resulting in both sides merely asserting their own view and insisting that the opposing side is mistaken. One cannot argue from the

³²Ibid., p. 70.

conceivability or inconceivability of the amoralist to externalism or internalism without begging the question. It would seem, then, that the argument from amorality is not really an argument at all. What, then, explains its apparent force? I believe that Brink's argument gains what plausibility it has from the obvious possibility of the weak amoralist, who asks whether it is rational to be moral. The challenge posed by this amoralist has occupied moral philosophers for centuries, and it is the apparent resemblance between this amoralist and the strong amoralist required for Brink's argument which lends it its apparent force. But in fact, the two are quite different. Where the weak amoralist is trying to decide whether an action recommended by morality is also recommended on balance by rationality, the strong amoralist is trying to decide whether the action picked out by morality is recommended in any degree by rationality.

We might, then, consider the argument from amorality to have been rendered impotent. But the failure of the argument from amorality can in no way be taken as an argument for internalism. All that has been demonstrated up to this point is that one argument for externalism fails.

III

One way in which externalism might be refuted is if there were a sound argument for internalism. Should such an argument be found, it would, of course, spell disaster for the externalist. However, internalism has been assumed far more often than it has been argued for. Still, some arguments for internalism have been presented, and I will here examine two arguments for

internalism about motives and one for internalism about reasons. Although I conclude that these direct arguments for internalism fail, I will go on to argue indirectly for internalism in the following sections.

One of this century's most prominent internalists is R. M. Hare. Hare's internalism about motives plays a central role in his moral theory. Hare proposes to adopt, as a matter of definition, that authentic value-judgments of the type 'I ought to do X' are those in which the speaker would also assent to the command 'Let me do X'.³³ This is, of course, an internalist doctrine, since on Hare's view one cannot assent to the command 'Let me do X' unless one takes oneself as having a motive to do X. While Hare realizes that there are other uses of 'ought' he asserts that the sense which he has specified is that which is of primary interest to the logician studying moral language.³⁴ This is, of course, a description of the purported conceptual connection, and not an argument for it, but Hare attempts to provide us with reason to adopt his view.

One of the ways in which Hare attempts to argue that his sense of 'ought' is primary is by suggesting that uses other uses of 'ought' cannot be primary. For example, a use such as 'There is a principle of conduct which people generally accept, which says "One ought to do X in circumstances of a certain kind", and I am now in circumstances of that kind' cannot exhaust the meaning of 'ought', for if it did, then the sentence within inverted commas in the example

³³R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 168.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 169.

would also have to be expanded, and we would be involved in an infinite regress.³⁵ While this argument seems valid, it can scarcely be taken as establishing internalism, as the primary sense of ought could be spelled out in any number of ways. All that this argument establishes is that the use of 'ought' described above, and possibly some others uses of 'ought', do not exhaust the meaning of the word.

Hare has a further argument to the effect that, if not for the existence of the sense of 'ought' which he suggests is primary, none of the familiar logical puzzles which are generated by the word would arise.³⁶ That is, if 'ought' could be analysed in a naturalistic fashion, then difficulties such as the is-ought gap and others would disappear. To this, I suspect Brink would respond, "Yes, and this is a point in externalism's favour." The most that Hare's argument might establish is that there are some uses of moral language which people actually make which are not picked up by externalism, but the externalist could simply assert that those uses are unimportant or not worthy of our attention for some other reason.

A second argument for internalism about motives is provided by Michael Smith. Smith, recognizing that defeating Brink's argument does little to defeat externalism itself, follows up his critique of the argument from amorality by arguing that internalism can explain better than externalism the fact that a

³⁵Ibid., p. 170.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 170-172.

change in motivation reliably follows a change in moral judgment in the good and strong-willed person.³⁷ This claim itself is, of course, more or less on par with Brink's claim that externalism provides a better account of the practical nature of morality than does internalism, but Smith attempts to provide us with some reason to accept his claim. The best explanation for there being this reliable connection between motivation and judgment in the good and strong-willed person, according to Smith, is that there is an internal connection between the two. The moral judgment either produces or is itself an expression of the corresponding motivation, a motivation which is, Smith insists, a non-derivative motivation to do what is judged right to do, where this is read *de re* and not *de dicto*.

While this does explain the connection between motivation and judgment, there is a very obvious externalist response, as Smith himself notes. The connection between motivation and judgment in the good and strong-willed person exists precisely because the person in question is good and strong-willed. What explains the connection, for the externalist, is the content of the good person's moral motivation. And the content of the good person's moral motivation, according to Smith, must be a motivation to do the right thing where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*.

To illustrate why this is the case I will borrow Smith's example of a good and strong-willed person who had believed that libertarian values were right and

³⁷Smith, *The Moral Problem*, pp. 71-76.

was motivated to vote for a libertarian party in an election, but became convinced that social democrat values were right, and became motivated to vote for the social democrats instead. The internalist explanation of this change in motivation is that the change in moral judgments produced or was itself an expression of a change in motivation. The externalist, however, is committed to explaining the change by means of the content of the person's moral motivation. The motive in virtue of which our agent is to count as a good person must have a content which explains both why she is motivated to vote for the libertarians when her judgment is that libertarian values are right and why her motivation changes when her judgment changes. The self-consciously moral motivation to do the right thing, where this is read *de dicto*, is the only motivation Smith can see that can play the necessary role. This will explain the connection between motivation and judgment because the motivation of the good person will be derived from the agent's judgments together with the moral motivation.

This conclusion, in Smith's view, is an unhappy one for the externalist, as it amounts to a *reductio* of externalism. It is a misrepresentation of the motivation of the good person. It results in the good person having only derivative concern about that which she judges to be right where this is read *de re*. But, argues Smith, "it is constitutive of being a morally good person that you have direct concern for what you think is right, where this is read *de re* and not *de dicto*."³⁸ The externalist explanation for the connection between motivation

³⁸Ibid., p. 76.

and judgment results in a “moral fetish” being elevated to the position of being the sole virtue.

While Smith’s concern here is a legitimate one, I do not believe that it is the knock-down objection to externalism that he takes it to be. There are, after all, a number of possible externalist responses to his argument. First, the externalist might simply bite the bullet here and admit that the moral motivation of the good person is to do what is judged to be right *de dicto*. While this may not seem a very attractive position, it does not strike me as being immediately obvious that it is a *reductio* of externalism. The view that the moral motivation of the good person is to do what is judged to be right *de dicto* is not all that far removed from Kant’s view that it is most admirable to do the right thing out of duty, that is, to do the right thing because that is what one judges to be the right thing to do, and while Kant’s views might not be without difficulties, they hardly amount to a *reductio*. Nor is this description of the motivation of the moral person all that difficult to imagine. Suppose that Smith’s converted libertarian does in fact vote for the social democrats, and that the social democrats in fact win the election. Now when it comes time for our former libertarian to pay her taxes in order to pay for the welfare and health care systems put in place by the social democrats, is it so odd to think that her only motivation to do so will be derived from her new-found belief that promoting the general good justifies some impingement on her individual rights and a desire to do what is judged to be right *de dicto*? While this person may seem less admirable than one whose

motivation to contribute to the social programs is a non-derivative desire to further the general good, this hardly seems grounds for denying that the former libertarian is a good person. Yet she fails to meet the condition of having a direct concern for what she thinks is right, where this is read *de re*, which Smith holds to be a necessary condition for being a good person.

Nor does the externalist need to take this route, as she has other options open to her. She might dispute the fact that there is a constant connection between a change of moral judgment in a good and strong-willed person and a corresponding change in motivation. Could it not be possible, she might ask, that a good person change her judgment without a change in motivation? Note that this need not be a common occurrence for the externalist objection to succeed, as the internalist link is purported to be a necessary link. It need only be barely possible that a good person could change her moral judgments without a corresponding change in motivation. Imagine that our former libertarian is convinced of social democrat values yet fails to be motivated in any way, aside from aversion to legal penalties, to pay her taxes. Smith might object that in this case she has not really been convinced to change her judgment, but he must do so on grounds other than her lack of motivation. To conclude from her lack of motivation that her judgment has not really changed is to assume his conclusion, that there is a necessary link between changes in judgment and changes in motivation. Moreover, if Smith is characterizing the connection between moral judgment and motivation as a necessary connection, then he is committing the same crime of which he accuses Brink, namely, assuming the conclusion for

which he is arguing.

However, Smith need not argue that externalism is false because there is a necessary connection between judgment and motivation. He could instead argue that any externalist explanation for a *high correlation* between changes in judgment and changes in motivation must misrepresent the way in which good people are motivated to do that which they think is right. His argument would then take the form of arguing that internalism is the only satisfactory way of explaining the reliable connection between judgment and motivation. An effective externalist counter to Smith's argument must therefore present an explanation for this correlation which provides a satisfactory characterization of the motivation of good people.

The problem for Smith here is that the reasons for why people almost always are motivated to some extent to do what they think is right are hardly mysterious, and I believe that they can be characterized in an externalist way by an appeal to human psychology. When we examine the moral motivation of a very young child, we will almost always see that it is derived from discipline imposed by authority figures such as parents. As the child grows older and progresses in moral education, we will see that the derivative nature of her motivation diminishes, largely by mere habituation. That which is habitually pursued begins to be viewed as valuable, until she has a non-derivative concern for that which she has been taught is right. One might also note that this connection sometimes operates in reverse. People conform their moral judgments to their motivation, because they have been conditioned to abhor

conflict between their moral judgments and their actions. It is therefore not so remarkable that there is a reliable connection between moral judgment and motivation, and it is not necessary to postulate a conceptual link between the two in order to explain the correlation.

This characterization of moral motivation does not strike me as being particularly objectionable. While it allows that good people might sometimes have only derivative concern for that which they judge to be right, this does not strike me as being a crucial weakness. It is certainly not held up as being the “sole virtue”, as Smith would have it. Rather, it plays a role primarily in instances where one is motivated to conform to a newly adopted moral principle, as in the case of the converted libertarian. If anything, I think this may be a strength of the externalist characterization, as it seems rather demanding to expect that the former libertarian immediately pursue social democratic ends with the same sort of zeal as someone who has held social democratic ideals all along. As time progresses, the former libertarian’s concern for social democratic ideals will very likely become less and less derivative.

The internalist might respond that this is not an externalist explanation, but is rather an explanation of the truth of internalism. However, I do not believe that this view can be defended. In order to defeat Smith’s argument the externalist needs only to demonstrate how the connection between moral judgment and motivation can be explained without appealing to a conceptual connection. This story explains how external pressures are brought to bear on people to act in accordance with what they believe to be right, and not how

people are taught that moral considerations themselves provide motivation to act. There is no obvious appeal to moral concepts with an internal link to motivation, and any insistence on the part of the internalist that there must be such an appeal appears to be question-begging.

So far as I can see, the only response to this that Smith could make would be to claim that in *every* case of a change in moral judgment there is a corresponding change in motivation. While contingent facts about human psychology might account for a high degree of correlation between the two, it is difficult to see how they could explain a universal connection between the two. An explanation along the lines of '*all* judgments are followed by changes in motivation because people's thought patterns and desires *tend* to follow these sorts of patterns' is obviously unsatisfactory. However, as has been noted, if Smith is arguing from the premise that there is a universal connection between judgment and motivation rather than that there is a high degree of correlation, then he is committing the same crime of which he has accused Brink. By assuming that it is not possible to not be motivated to do that which one judges to be right he would be assuming the position for which he is arguing.

Thus, if Smith argues from the weaker premise of a high correlation between judgment and motivation, his argument fails to establish the desired conclusion, while if he argues from the stronger premise of a necessary connection between judgment and motivation, his argument begs the question.

While these arguments for internalism about motives are not successful, they do seem to rely upon a valid intuition. They seem to argue that action is the

test for sincerity of a belief. That is, if one is not prepared to act on a moral judgment, then one does not sincerely believe it. Thus, a person's feeling no motivation to comply with a moral judgment, it is argued, is evidence that that person does not sincerely believe in that moral judgment. However, this intuition seems to hold true of moral and non-moral beliefs alike. For example, we think that if I sincerely believe that my favourite hockey team will win the Stanley Cup then, other things being equal, I will be willing to place a wager on them. Yet no one would argue that beliefs such as this necessarily provide motives for action. So while the intuition that action is a test for sincerity of a belief might seem valid, it is not clear that it provides support for internalism.

Arguments directly for internalism about reasons are relatively scarce. It is perhaps most common to see internalism about reasons argued for in the form of a defence of an entire moral theory, such as Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism*. Consideration of such a defence of internalism about reasons is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis. One direct argument for internalism about reasons is presented by Smith. His argument can be stated as follows:

- (1) Moral requirements apply to rational agents as such.
- (2) It is a conceptual truth that if rational agents are morally required to act in a certain way then we expect them to act in that way.
- (3) Therefore, being rational must be sufficient grounds for this expectation.
- (4) This could only be the case if moral requirements are themselves categorical requirements of rationality.³⁹

Obviously, the critical premise in this argument is the second premise. It seems

³⁹Ibid., p. 85.

that the externalist can simply deny (2), unless it is read as meaning simply that we think agents *should* do what is morally required. But this reading will render the argument invalid. Smith acknowledges this, and attempts to provide the second premise with some support. Smith argues that since we expect agents to do what they themselves judge to be right, and since we can legitimately expect rational agents to judge correctly about what is right, we can therefore expect that agents will do what is morally required of them. But this defence of (2) depends straightforwardly upon the success of Smith's argument for internalism about motives, as Smith explicitly invokes that argument as support for the view that we can expect agents to do what they themselves judge to be right.⁴⁰ And as we have seen, that argument is not without difficulties. Nor is there any obvious non-question-begging way in which this view might be defended. Smith's argument for internalism about reasons seems to amount to saying that, given internalism about motives and the existence of objective truth about morals, internalism about reasons must also hold.

While some other defence of the second premise of this argument might overcome this difficulty, I doubt that any successful defence of Smith's second premise can avoid appealing to internalist assumptions, which will thereby render the argument itself circular. Once again, how plausible one finds the crucial premise of an argument for internalism depends directly upon how plausible one finds internalism itself.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 86.

What has been established, then, is that it is exceedingly difficult to argue convincingly for either externalism or internalism without begging the question. It seems that the intuitions to which these arguments appeal virtually always boil down to intuitions about internalism or externalism themselves. What is needed is some independent reason to prefer one to the other.

IV

The general problem with the debate between internalism and externalism is that almost all arguments for both positions are little more than an assertion that the view being argued for is the correct one. At this point I would like to advance an argument which will, I hope, strengthen the position of internalism about reasons to some extent, without merely assuming it to be true. I would like to argue that, far from being a better way of depicting the practical nature of moral reasoning, Brink's form of externalism completely eliminates the practical aspects of moral reasoning.

Brink argues that externalism can answer the amoralist's challenge by giving an accurate account of how morality is related to rationality, that is, an accurate account of the practical nature of morality. Rather than being a conceptual feature of morality, the reason-giving nature of moral considerations is a matter of contingent fact. This need not be a tenuous link, however, as it could be based on "deep" or widely shared facts about moral agents and the nature of rationality. Most moral agents will find that they have some reason to comply with their moral obligations most of the time. In this way, moral

considerations could provide reasons for action in a fashion which is widespread and predictable, even if not universal and necessary.⁴¹ While this strategy, when joined with a parallel view about the connection between moral considerations and motives, may be successful in eliminating the aspects of moral facts which make them queer according to Mackie, one might be concerned that Brink has rendered moral considerations impotent with respect to practical reasoning. By eliminating the conceptual link between rationality and morality, Brink has turned moral theory into something no more practical than our theories of physics or biology. Biology, after all, contains facts about how the human body works and what conditions are necessary for it to continue functioning. Given “deep” facts about agents and rationality, biology provides us with reasons for actions, many of which are nearly universal and frequently overriding. This is exactly the way in which Brink characterizes the link between moral theory and reasons for actions. Yet we do not want to maintain that moral theory is practical in exactly the same way that biology is, as biology is a descriptive theory, and not a normative theory. Without the necessary connection with rationality, it is unclear what makes Brink’s moral theory a normative theory, and there is therefore no obvious reason why it should be called a *moral* theory at all.

One might think that Brink need not succumb to this argument so easily. After all, Brink does present his moral theory as a normative theory. In fact, Brink claims that his externalist moral realism provides a better account of the

⁴¹Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 49. See also Brink, “A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 6(1992):7-10.

practical nature of moral theory than do standard versions of noncognitivism, on the grounds that, unlike noncognitivism, realism can explain the practical force of moral judgments by pointing out that the judgments are or purport to be true and that the objects of those judgments are objectively valuable.⁴² Any theory which is about what is valuable is clearly a normative theory. Here, however, we run into a major difficulty. If one values an action or the consequence of an action, it necessarily follows that one has a reason to carry out that action. It seems, then, that Brink's above claim is internalist, for while we might want to allow that it is not immediately obvious that a moral property such as rightness necessarily entails a reason for action, the only plausible way of maintaining that something can be valuable in the absence of a reason to pursue it that I can see is to move from reason internalism to motive internalism, where valuing something would entail having a pro-attitude toward it. Obviously, however, this strategy is unavailable to Brink.

One possible externalist move at this point is to distinguish between the moral sense of 'ought' and the rational sense of 'ought', or, in this case, between moral value and rational value.⁴³ Where the latter properties do necessarily entail reasons for action, the externalist argues, the former do not. The belief that a question such as 'I know it is valuable, but should I value it?' is absurd stems from a failure to distinguish between the two uses of 'value'. It is unclear,

⁴²Ibid., p. 78.

⁴³A similar move is made by Brink in "Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason," p. 297.

however, how this manoeuvre will save Brink's argument. If, when Brink claims that moral judgments have practical force because their objects are valuable, he is using 'value' in its moral, non-reason-giving sense then it is unclear why we should think that moral judgments have any greater practical force than do, for example, judgments about the nature of physical objects. On the other hand, if Brink is using 'value' in its rational, reason-giving sense, then it is unclear why we should think that it is the moral judgment and not the rational judgment about the object's value which is providing the practical force. Brink cannot simultaneously hold that externalism is true and that moral considerations are practical in any significant sense. If externalism is true, then moral considerations are no more practical than are any other considerations based on nonmoral facts. If moral considerations are to be significantly practical, they must provide reasons or motives to act in certain ways.

There remains a consistent position which Brink could adopt. He could remain an externalist and allow that moral theory is non-normative and is no more practical than biology or sociology. On this view moral theory is practical only in the sense that its content frequently happens to pick up things we care about. But while such a view may be consistent, I can see little reason to call it a view about moral theory. Moral theory is, I believe, essentially evaluative, and any account of moral theory which denies this is unacceptable. Moreover, Brink himself continually presents his moral theory as being normative and practical in a more substantive way, although I do not believe that he can consistently describe his moral theory as normative while remaining thoroughly externalist.

It seems, then, that if we want to be moral realists we have two choices. We can abandon the normative and practical aspects of moral theory and adopt an externalist position, or we could remain internalists and face the challenge of the anti-realist arguments from indifference and queerness. Due to the worries I have discussed above, I believe that the latter is the better position. While the anti-realist challenge may prove exceedingly difficult to overcome, attempting to avoid this challenge by adopting an extreme form of externalism provides us with an answer to the anti-realist only at the cost of abandoning the elements of moral realism which make it interesting and worthwhile.

V

While moving to a non-normative moral theory may be a consistent position for the externalist, the acceptability of such a position is not entirely clear. I shall therefore discuss two models of what such a moral theory might look like, examine how much support for such views may be found in Brink's writings, and evaluate the merits of adopting such positions. I shall examine first a natural science model for moral theory, and then an etiquette model.

The key element in modeling moral theory after the natural sciences is that it must be entirely about facts and not about values at all, or at least not about values in the sense in which values are generally understood. Given this, the defining characteristic of moral theory cannot be its normative nature but must rather be its subject matter. After all, it is about perfectly ordinary facts, and the only possible way in which they can be distinguished from other facts is

by their being about particular sorts of things. And indeed, this is seen by Brink as being one of the central elements of externalism.⁴⁴ However, a problem arises when one attempts to stipulate just what the content of a moral theory is. Our natural inclination is to describe the content of moral theory as consisting of facts about which actions are right and which are wrong, but this characterization of moral theory's subject matter smuggles in evaluative content. One might suggest that moral theory is about what one ought to do, but this is either false, if the ought is a rational one, or else trivial, if the ought is a moral one. Another strategy one might adopt is to describe the subject matter of moral theory as a systematization of our considered moral beliefs. However, this merely moves our problem one step further back, as we must then determine how to differentiate between moral and non-moral beliefs.

To delimit the subject matter of moral theory in a manner acceptable to externalism, one must adopt a distinction between ordinary value claims and moral value claims. It will turn out that the externalist must hold that moral value claims, unlike other value claims, are not evaluative at all, but are merely descriptive. Therefore, the most important difference between a consistent externalist moral theory and more conventional moral theories will be in the nature of its use of evaluative language, or in the meanings it gives for evaluative terms. Where under conventional views a statement such as 'x is good' means something like 'x is worthy of being pursued' or 'we have reason to act in a

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 296-8.

manner which will promote x ', externalism must hold that it means something more along the lines of x having the property or group of properties which are picked out by whatever naturalistic definition of 'good' is espoused by the externalist in question. Given the sort of utilitarianism which Brink adopts, it is likely that this subject matter will turn out to be well-being. Note, however, that this is not an evaluative claim at all. To say that one thing is better than another is not to say that it is more worthy of being pursued, but rather that it has a higher content of a given property. It is an entirely ordinary factual claim with no formal difference from ' x is a deeper shade of red than y '. Given all of this, we can see that the content of moral theory will depend entirely upon what definitions are chosen for central moral terms such as 'good' and 'right'. The subject matter of moral theory will be about which actions are right and which are wrong after all, but only if 'right' and 'wrong' are used in an externalist non-reason-giving sense which is purely factual and not evaluative.

While one might without contradiction define moral theory by reference to its content, such a policy is not without problems. First, those who have advocated such a view in the past have generally taken such a criterion to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The reason for this is that whatever the subject matter of morality is taken to be, it would seem entirely possible for there to be non-moral rules about it. For example, legal rules could logically be about the same things as moral rules, could justify action in the same way, and could

have the same purpose.⁴⁵

A second problem with defining morality by reference to its content has a long philosophical tradition. The difficulties with providing naturalistic definitions of moral terms have been outlined at length by numerous philosophers. The most famous of these difficulties is, of course, the open-question argument. In brief, the open-question argument states that for any naturalistic definition *x* of a moral term such as good, the question "I see that it is *x*, but is it good?" will be open, and therefore all naturalistic definitions of moral terms are unsatisfactory. The open-question argument has various well documented problems, most notably that it rests on the mistaken assumption that synonymy is required for co-referentiality. But while the challenge to naturalistic definitions of moral terms posed by the open-question argument is far from unanswerable, proponents of naturalism take it very seriously. Brink himself devotes an entire chapter to the subject. While a full consideration of the intricacies of this argument must remain beyond the scope of this thesis, the open-question argument and variants of it should be noted as a potential source of difficulties for the externalist.

A third difficulty with defining morality by reference to its content is perhaps the most serious. Hare has argued that, while the meanings of evaluative terms might contain descriptive elements, in no case is the description

⁴⁵G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker, "Introduction," in *The Definition of Morality*, eds. G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 17.

inseparable from the evaluation. For example, a word such as 'rude' has a relatively fixed descriptive content, and yet is an evaluative word. The naturalist might argue that we can therefore derive an evaluation of an act from the descriptive statement that an act meets the conditions of being rude. In response, Hare cites an example in which an action is conceded to satisfy the descriptive conditions of being rude without it being evaluated adversely.⁴⁶ There is simply no case, Hare argues, in which describing something in a particular way commits one to evaluating it in a particular way. Therefore, any naturalistic definition of moral terms is unacceptable, as it eliminates the evaluative aspect of the meaning of moral terms. Now one might think that this is not a particularly strong objection to externalism, as I have portrayed it as explicitly abandoning the evaluative content of moral language. The externalist could therefore respond to this argument by holding that moral language on her account has no evaluative content, and that therefore Hare's argument presents no difficulty for providing naturalistic definitions for moral terms. However, Hare's argument does cut off the one hope externalism might have had of retaining some form of evaluative content. While the externalist could simply accept that moral language, on her view, is non-evaluative, we do in fact use moral language in evaluative ways, and these evaluative uses seem to be the primary uses of moral language. In order to retain this aspect of moral language, the externalist would need to abandon the project of defining morality by reference to its

⁴⁶R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method, and Point* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 74-75.

content.

Should these difficulties with defining moral theory solely by reference to its content be overcome, moral theory would on this model look much like any other social science. The only difference between moral theory and, say, sociology will be that where sociology examines the structure of human society, moral theory would examine something like human actions with social consequences. This is not, however, the way in which Brink presents his own moral theory. Throughout his book, Brink presents his moral theory as evaluative in a much more substantial sense. While Brink does argue extensively for externalism, he still presents his moral theory as an important aspect of practical reasoning, apparently without realizing that once the practical aspect of moral theory has been downgraded from necessary to contingent moral theory is not practical in any real sense at all. In short, aside from his explicit arguments for externalism, Brink continues to speak about moral theory in the same way that moral theorists always have. However, adopting the strict externalism which Brink argues for is nothing short of a revolutionary change in the structure of moral theory. As Harry Silverstein suggests, it changes moral theory from a theory about what to do into a theory about what to believe.⁴⁷ Silverstein argues that this renders it impossible to speak of actions being in conflict or conformity with moral views. I do not know that one can go that far, but it is certainly an odd consequence of thoroughgoing externalism that claiming that an action is

⁴⁷This argument comes from Harry S. Silverstein, "Brink's *Moral Realism*," *Nous* 28(1994): 124-125.

justified might not count as a claim in favour of the action. This sort of change in the way that our moral theory works is very seldom evident in Brink's writing.

Another possible way of spelling out in greater detail how an externalist moral theory might appear is to draw an analogy with etiquette. Morality might be described as being similar to etiquette in that both are systems of non-hypothetical imperatives which do not fail to apply to a person even if that person does not have the appropriate sorts of ends, although of course moral people will have reason to comply with morality and manner-conscious people will have reason to comply with etiquette. Such a view is suggested at times by Foot,⁴⁸ but it is not clear that she in fact adopts it. However, this position has recently received support from Brink.⁴⁹ According to this view, moral rules, like rules of etiquette, do not fail to apply to an agent because of her indifference to them, but do fail to provide her with reasons for action. What Brink is attempting to establish here is a distinction between the scope of an imperative and its reason-giving force. The scope of moral imperatives will thus be categorical, but their reason-giving force will be contingent. The reason that moral rules have generally been accorded greater rational authority than rules of etiquette, according to Brink, is that "the moral point of view is more centrally implicated in human interests and desires than is the point of view of etiquette."⁵⁰ While this

⁴⁸Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," *Philosophical Review*, 81(1972): 305-16.

⁴⁹Brink, "A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality," pp. 7-10.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 10.

would allow morality a “special” authority in a sense, although that authority would of course be contingent, describing morality as a system of institutional imperatives does not seem to be a particularly attractive position.

We should first of all note that this position does not regain any evaluative content for morality. To see that this is so we need only look at the judgment that a person is well-mannered. This judgment is purely descriptive; it merely states that the person in question behaves according to a number of stipulated rules. While we might commend someone for being well-mannered, that commendation is moral in nature, and has little to do with the rules of etiquette themselves. Second, most sets of norms such as etiquette are strictly conventional. If Brink is to avoid having morality be merely a matter of convention, he must provide an explanation for the categorical scope of these norms. It cannot originate from their being approved by reason, nor from the existence of a given social structure, for the former leads to internalism, and the latter to a moral theory based entirely on convention.

Presumably, Brink will argue that the categorical scope of moral norms originates in the logical nature of moral language. For example, a norm such as ‘One ought to promote the common good’ applies to everyone, not just those who have an independent reason to promote the common good, and this is so because of the way in which moral language is used. However, if Brink wishes to appeal to the form which moral language takes in order to explain how it is that moral norms have a categorical scope, then he must also provide a reason for not adopting the evaluative content of moral language. If we are to look to

the use of moral language in order to determine its logical characteristics, then it would seem that we are committed to endorsing all of the logical characteristics present in the actual use of moral language, and not just those which fit nicely into our moral theory.

A further problem which might be raised for an externalist moral theory, whatever it is modeled after, is that it fails to fit with usual conceptions of what morality is. I have already noted that defining morality solely in terms of its content runs contrary to general practice. I would also like briefly to mention one other way in which externalism flies in the face of common views of morality. Moral theory has virtually always been taken to be essentially practical in a much more robust sense than externalism allows. That is, it has been taken to be a theory about what to do, and not just about what to believe:

We may begin with a point about morality on which all contemporary moral philosophers seem to be agreed, namely, that morality is and should be conceived as something 'practical' in Aristotle's sense, i.e. as an activity, enterprise, institution or system...whose aim is not just to know, explain, or understand, but to guide and influence action, to regulate what people do try to become or at least what oneself does or tries to be.⁵¹

In fact, even Brink appears to endorse such a view, without realizing that his externalism eliminates the practical nature of moral theory. Here, it seems, externalism completely fails to pick up what is commonly viewed as an important, indeed essential, aspect of moral theory. The externalist might argue that other

⁵¹William Frankena, "The Concept of Morality," in *The Definition of Morality*, eds. G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 151.

aspects of the nature of moral theory preclude it from being able to be practical, and that an externalist theory is the best that can actually be achieved, but she must nonetheless admit that in this respect externalism fails to pick up the common usage of moral language.

Finally, if Hare and others are right in arguing that naturalistic definitions of moral terms fail to capture an important aspect of the actual use of moral language, then it would seem that the meaning of moral terms, if based upon how moral language is actually used, will not be naturalistic. Given this, how could the externalist defend the adoption of naturalistic definitions of moral terms? The externalist might reply that while we do have uses of moral language which appear to be essentially evaluative, these sorts of uses necessitate the adoption of untenable meta-ethical views, and so should be abandoned. In a sense, this is what Brink is admitting when he rejects internalist moral realism as having been defeated by the arguments from indifference and queerness. Of course, Brink presents externalism as being preferable to internalism on independent grounds, but in a real sense, he appears to be saying that a realist moral theory which is authentically evaluative is unattainable, and so we must settle for a descriptive moral theory. But then would it not be more honest to admit that the anti-realists are telling the right story about moral language, that is, that it is essentially evaluative but that there is no moral reality which it describes? Brink's preemption of moral language for use in a descriptive venture seems in this light rather unjustified.

An externalist moral theory, then, appears to be a tenable position with

the benefit of being a realist view more or less immune to the anti-realist arguments from indifference and queerness. However, it achieves this status at the cost of diverging rather dramatically from traditional views of what a moral theory is, and once this cost is fully tallied up there may be few realists willing to pay it.

VI

I would like, finally, to discuss one last difficulty which the externalist, and specifically the externalist about reasons, must face. Both Brink and Foot seem to allow that prudential considerations do provide an agent with reasons for action. Brink is not entirely clear on the matter, but does speak of rational egoism explaining our beliefs about prudential reasons for action.⁵² He goes on to defend an agent-relative theory of rationality and the principle that sacrifice requires compensation, noting that prudential considerations comply with sacrifice requiring compensation, as the future interests for which an agent sacrifices her present interests are *hers*.⁵³ It would seem, then, that Brink is committed to the view that the future good of an agent provides her with reasons for action.

Foot, too, holds that prudential considerations provide agents with reasons for action. In fact, Foot argues that prudential considerations provide

⁵²Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 70.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 242.

reasons for action independently of an agent's desires.⁵⁴ So in Foot's view, it seems, there is at least one exception to the rule that all rationality is instrumental. While Brink does not likewise explicitly allow that prudential considerations provide reasons independently of desires, it seems obvious that he is committed to such a view. After all, Brink endorses an objective list theory of a person's good. He argues that "reflective pursuit and realization of agents' reasonable projects and certain personal and social relationships [are] the primary components of valuable lives."⁵⁵ Yet if this is the case, then it is surely possible for my present desires to diverge radically from what is good for me. And it then follows that the reasons for action provided by prudential considerations must be independent of an agent's desires.

Given this, Brink and Foot are going to need a theory of rationality other than the instrumental one, since if there were only instrumental rationality, one might fail to have a reason to pursue one's own good. Brink does appear to question a purely instrumental theory of rationality when discussing it as a premise in an anti-realist argument.⁵⁶ Here Brink goes so far as to say that not all desires provide justifying reasons for action, suggesting that desires must reflect value judgments which would survive the process of reflective equilibrium if they are to provide reasons for action. But if one accepts a non-desire-based

⁵⁴Foot, "Reasons for Action and Desires," pp. 148-151.

⁵⁵Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 231.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 63-66.

theory of rationality, it would seem that one has eliminated much of the motivation for externalism. In other words, if there are going to be reasons for action independent of desires in the realm of prudence, why should there not be reasons for action independent of desires in the realm of morality? This is in some respects similar to the argument put forward by Nagel in which he attempts to demonstrate that agents have reason to pursue the good of others in exactly the same way that they have reason to pursue their own future good.⁵⁷ However, where Nagel intends his argument to establish a particular theory of rationality, I intend mine only to provide a challenge to the externalist. What non-arbitrary reason can the externalist give for allowing prudential reasons for action independent of desires, but not moral reasons for action independent of desires?

Brink believes that he has an answer to this question. Brink's view appears to be that reasons for action are dependent either upon the desires or upon the interest of the agent.⁵⁸ He can then answer that prudential reasons in the absence of present desires are legitimate because they promote *my* interests, while moral reasons in the absence of present desires are not necessarily legitimate because they do not necessarily promote my interests. Foot seems to echo this line in the postscript to "Reasons for Action and Desire," where she suggests that all reasons for action depend either the interests or

⁵⁷Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*.

⁵⁸See, for example, Brink, "A Puzzle About the Rational Authority of Morality," p. 1, and *Moral Realism*, pp. 240-242.

desires of an agent.⁵⁹ It seems, then, that there is a ready response to my challenge. Moral considerations do not necessarily refer to what is objectively good for me, and so do not provide reasons for action where prudential considerations do.

Despite this answer to my challenge, I am not certain that Brink can escape so easily. The reason Brink seems eager to deny that moral considerations necessarily provide reasons for actions appears to be the same reason for which Mackie denies that moral facts exist. That is, he is concerned that facts about things which are objectively valuable independent of anyone desiring them are queer. But surely it is just as queer to suppose that what is best for me might be something which I not only do not desire, but actually have an intense desire to avoid, and yet still provides me with reasons for action. But this is obviously a possibility given an objective theory of the good. Brink must answer not only why there cannot be necessarily reason-giving moral considerations when there are necessarily reason-giving prudential considerations. He must also explain why a fact about objective value which necessarily gives any person in a given situation reason to act regardless of her desires is queer while a fact about objective value which necessarily gives a specific person reason to act regardless of her desires is not queer. I do not see any reason to suppose that objective value with regard to a person's good is any

⁵⁹Foot, "Reasons for Action and Desires," p. 156. Foot is rather noncommittal here, allowing that it may be the case that all reasons are desire-dependent or that there may be reasons independent of both desires and interest, but that there are no good arguments for either view.

less mysterious than objective value with regard to moral good. Please note that I am not trying to argue that objective value *is* mysterious, only that the two sorts of value are on par with each other.

While this criticism might affect Brink's position, it does seem clear that a committed externalist could avoid it in one of two ways. She could stand firm in denying any non-instrumental rationality, and admit that prudential considerations might not provide reasons for action. Or she could adopt a desire-satisfaction theory of good, under which it would necessarily be the case that one has good reason to pursue one's own good just because what one's good is depends upon what one desires. Of course, straight desire-satisfaction theories of good are notoriously implausible and most such theories are advanced with conditions concerning what an agent would desire in some epistemically preferred condition, and so the preferred externalist option here would be to adopt some sort of informed-desire-satisfaction theory of good. However, this option is clearly unavailable to Brink, as he argues against informed-desire-satisfaction theories of good on the grounds that the conditions they place on which desires are to count render them objective theories.⁶⁰ And if Brink is willing to accept that there is objective value in the case of personal good, then it would seem that his motivation for rejecting objective value in the case of moral good is lost.

The problem for the externalist is this. If we want to hold a theory of good

⁶⁰Brink, *Moral Realism*, p. 230.

other than a desire-satisfaction theory, and we want to hold that agents have reason to act in their own best interest, then we must adopt a theory of rationality other than a purely instrumental one. But if we are going to go beyond purely instrumental rationality, it seems difficult to specify a reason for including prudential reasons for action but excluding moral reasons for action. This is, once again, a less than crippling objection to externalism. However, it does pose yet another difficulty for the externalist, and raises the cost of adopting externalist views.

VII

Throughout this thesis I have argued both that Brink's case for externalism is much weaker than he takes it to be, and that externalism itself comes at a much higher cost than he admits or realizes. I believe that it has been successfully demonstrated that the argument from amorality fails to establish that internalism is founded on a conceptual error. The question of the amoralist merely highlights the conceptual differences between internalism and externalism, and attempts to enlist for the externalist our intuition that it makes sense to ask whether it is rational to be moral by portraying the strong amoralist as being just as respectable as the weak amoralist.

Further, I believe that I have shown that the move to a descriptive, naturalistic moral theory such as the one which Brink endorses eliminates entirely the practical aspect of moral theory. While an externalist moral theory can be practical in the same way that other descriptive theories such as biology

and physics are, namely, in describing how to achieve certain ends most efficiently and in describing the consequences of a given action in a given situation, it fails to be a theory which recommends actions. It does not say of actions, "This one is better than the other," but rather merely describes them.

Externalism therefore represents a major departure from traditional conceptions of morality, which have nearly universally assumed moral theory to be a prescriptive enterprise. It also constitutes an abandonment of a significant aspect of the actual usage of moral language, namely evaluation and commendation. This change in the very nature of moral theory results in an externalist moral theory being different, to its detriment, from traditional internalist theories in almost every respect.

None of these considerations, taken by themselves, need be taken as conclusive reason to reject externalism. Externalism still does have something going for it. Brink's stated motivation of avoiding internalist arguments for anti-realism provides perhaps the greatest support for externalism. If one is committed to being a moral realist, yet cannot shake the conviction that the arguments from indifference and queerness are essentially sound, then externalism would seem to be the only direction one could go, as it avoids reference to the mysterious categorical oughts and odd metaphysics which are the focus of those arguments' attack. However, in doing so it renders itself completely compatible with anti-realism. The anti-realist will be happy to allow Brink his descriptive theory, as it does not infringe upon the prescriptive, normative territory which the anti-realist insists is not a matter of fact. The typical

anti-realist response to externalism will be “go ahead and be a realist about *those* sorts of truths, I have nothing to say about that.” This should strike any serious moral realist as a rather hollow victory.

What I hope to have demonstrated is not that we have conclusive reason to reject externalism, but that adopting an externalist view comes at a very high price. This price, I would argue, is higher than the moral realist should be willing to pay. It is better, I believe, to face the anti-realist challenge head on than to avoid it by abandoning those aspects of moral realism which the anti-realists find objectionable.

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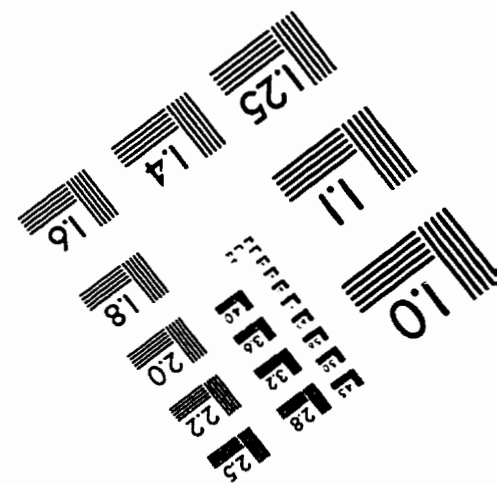
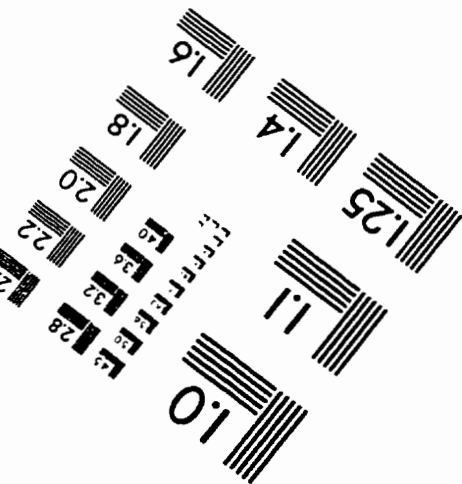
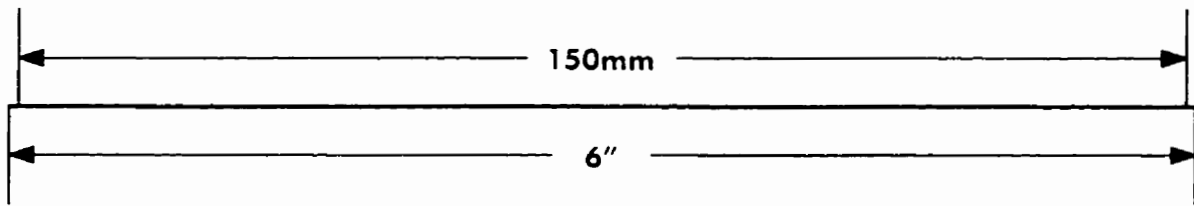
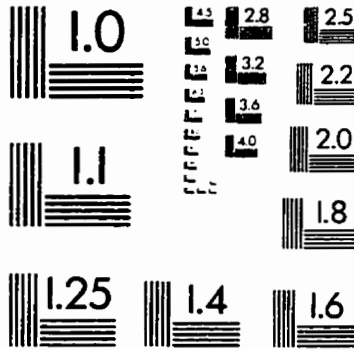
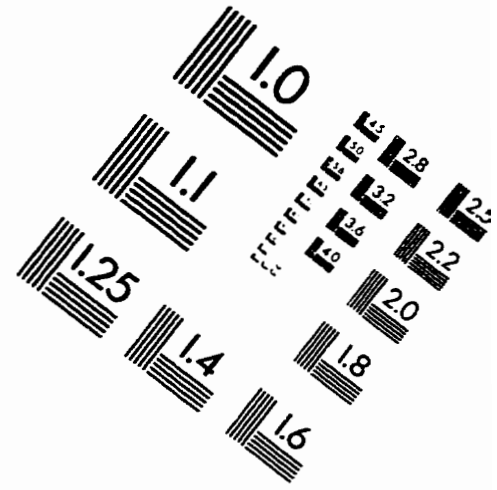
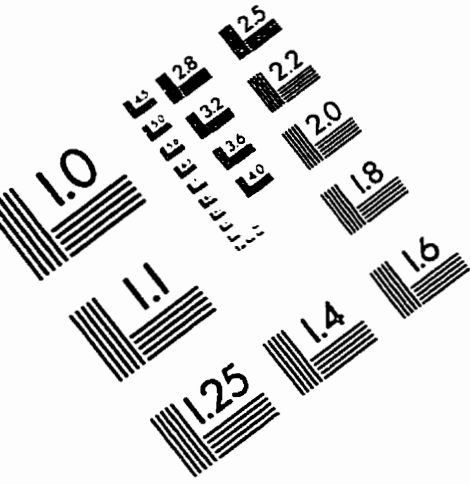
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