<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Normative reasons and the possibility of motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Luco, Andrés Carlos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/19355">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/19355</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>© 2014 South African Journal of Philosophy. This is the author created version of a work that has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in South African Journal of Philosophy, published by Taylor &amp; Francis and NISC (Pty) Ltd on behalf of South African Journal of Philosophy. It incorporates referee’s comments but changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, structural formatting, may not be reflected in this document. The published version is available at: [<a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2014.892679">http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2014.892679</a>].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NORMATIVE REASONS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MOTIVATION

Andrés Carlos Luco
Philosophy Group
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Nanyang Technological University
14 Nanyang Drive
Singapore 637332
acluco@gmail.com

1 This article was completed with the support of a Start-Up Grant awarded by the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
Abstract

This article defends a claim about the conditions under which agents possess normative reasons for action. According to this claim, an agent has a normative reason to φ only if it’s psychologically possible for that reason to motivate the agent to φ. The claim is called ‘Williams’s explanatory constraint,’ since it’s drawn from Bernard Williams’s work on the topic of practical reason. A two-premise ‘master argument’ for Williams’s explanatory constraint is put forward. First, an agent has a normative reason to φ only if that agent has the ability to φ for that reason. The second premise states that an agent has the ability to φ for a normative reason only if it’s psychologically possible for that reason to motivate the agent to φ. It is suggested that the ability to act for a normative reason involves the ability to act from a consequence-sensitive process of practical reasoning. Furthermore, normative reasons for action can motivate agents by being the objects of psychological states—particularly beliefs, desires, and intentions. In reply to the objection that normative reasons can never be objects of psychological states, I contend that all normative reasons are capable of being represented as the objects of psychological states.

Key Words

practical rationality; reason for action; normative reason; reasons internalism; motivation
1. Introduction

This article defends Bernard Williams’s thesis that having a normative reason for action requires the possibility of being motivated to act by that reason. I call this claim Williams’s explanatory constraint on normative reasons. Williams affirms his explanatory constraint in several writings, but he never supplies an argument for it. I intend to show that Williams’s thesis is quite tenable, and that it is a strong consideration in favor of an ‘internalist’ theory of practical rationality.

Below, I review the much-discussed distinction between explanatory and normative reasons for action (section 2). Next, I provide an exposition of Williams’s explanatory constraint. I locate the work in which Williams raises it, and I clarify its role in his argument for internalism (section 3). Then, I present a ‘master argument’ for the explanatory constraint (sections 4 through 6). According to this argument, an agent cannot have a normative reason to \( \phi \), unless that agent has the ability to \( \phi \) for that reason. Moreover, the ability to act for any normative reason is exercised through the agent’s motivations. I stress that normative reasons motivate action by being the objects of agents’ psychological states—specifically, beliefs, intentions, and desires. Finally, in section 7, I insist that if an agent has a normative reason for action, then that reason must be representable as an object of that agent’s beliefs, desires, or intentions.

2. Reasons for action
When people act, they often act for reasons. However, the concept of a *reason for action* can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, there is the explanatory interpretation. An *explanatory reason* for action is something that explains the intentional actions of an agent. Most contemporary philosophers construe explanatory reasons to be either states of an agent’s psychology, or facts about such states.\(^2\) However, some writers—particularly Jonathan Dancy—argue instead that explanatory reasons are facts that explain action independently of the agent’s psychological states (Dancy 1995, 2000). In the philosophical literature, the term ‘fact’ is often used interchangeably with the terms ‘feature of a situation’ and ‘state of affairs.’ For instance: imagine a man, Smith, who picks up his umbrella as he leaves home for work. Donald Davidson (1963) and like-minded thinkers would insist that the explanatory reason for Smith’s action is constituted by his psychological states—states such as the desire not to get wet, and the belief that by using his umbrella, Smith will avoid getting wet. These psychological states are relevant to explaining why Smith takes his umbrella on his way out. But as an alternative, we might say that Smith took his umbrella for the reason that it was going to rain, and he knew he might catch a cold if he got wet. Here we’ve characterized Smith’s reason for action not as a psychological state, but as a fact that explains what he did. Hence, the fact that it was going to rain operates as the explanatory reason for Smith’s taking his umbrella.

Apart from the explanatory interpretation of reasons, there is the normative interpretation. A *normative reason* for action is a fact which *favors* an action by

---

2 Thanks to an anonymous referee for this point.
contributing to its justification (cf. Scanlon 2001: 18). One may have a normative reason to φ even if he or she does not φ—for agents can fail to do what they ought to do. In the literature, normative reasons for action are also called ‘good reasons.’ It is one thing to suggest that Smith takes his umbrella for the reason that it was going to rain; but whether or not this was a good reason is a further matter. It would be a good reason if, among other things, Smith’s beliefs about the coming rain were well-founded. Suppose Smith checked the morning weather report, which had indicated a 90% chance of rain. In that case, it might be said that Smith has a good reason to take his umbrella, since without an umbrella he’ll get drenched and maybe catch a cold. The reason justifies the act, whether or not the act is actually performed. Not getting drenched is a normative reason why Smith ought to take the umbrella, even if Smith does not in fact do so.

Philosophers disagree about whether normative reasons are reducible to the psychologies of agents. Some philosophers take normative reasons to be facts concerning the internal psychological states of agents. For instance, Richard Brandt holds that an agent has a normative reason for action if and only if the relevant action will satisfy desires of the agent that have undergone ‘cognitive psychotherapy.’ Such desires are based on true non-normative beliefs and logically valid reasoning (Brandt 1979: 111 – 113). Other thinkers, such as Dancy (2000), argue that normative reasons are non-psychological. On this view, normative reasons cannot be reduced to the internal psychological states of agents, nor can they be reduced to relations among such states. Accordingly, Dancy maintains that
...normative reasons are in general nothing like psychological states of the agent. The sorts of thing that are normative reasons are things like the pain the other is suffering, the wrong I will be doing her if I persist, and other features of the world that call for certain responses from us (Dancy, 2000, p. 106).

As Dancy emphasizes here, normative reasons are facts that ‘call for certain responses’ from an agent. They are not, in Dancy’s view, psychological states of the agent.

I shall remain agnostic about whether or not normative reasons are reducible to psychological states. Here I primarily aim to defend (E-W), the claim that having a normative reason for action requires the possibility of being motivated to act by that reason. Eventually, in section 7, I argue that having a normative reason requires the possibility of representing that reason as an object of one’s psychological states. Both these claims are consistent with the view that normative reasons are reducible to the psychological states of the reason-bearing agent. Furthermore, none of the coming arguments for these claims are inconsistent with the view that normative reasons are non-psychological in some sense.

Having defined the concept of a normative reason, some more terminology can be pinned down. Practical rationality (or ‘practical reason’) refers to normative criteria by which actions are evaluated and justified. A practically rational agent is an agent who is motivated to act in accordance with his or her best all-things-considered normative reasons. In a given situation, if a rational agent’s best normative reason
favors $\varphi$-ing, all things considered, then that agent will be motivated to $\varphi$. Practical reasoning, inference, or deliberation refers to an agent’s process of thinking about what he or she is to do. In other words, practical reasoning is a process of thinking one’s way to action.

3. Williams’s explanatory constraint

A central debate in the philosophical theory of practical rationality focuses on the relationship between explanatory and normative reasons for action. On one side of the issue are philosophers who espouse reasons internalism. Broadly, reasons internalism states that the existence of any normative reason for action depends on either the actual or possible motivations of the agent who bears that reason. Prominent internalists include Bernard Williams (1979, 1995, 2001), Richard Brandt (1979), and Christine Korsgaard (1986). Williams in particular defends a version of reasons internalism by appealing to a premise I call Williams’ explanatory constraint (abbreviated ‘(E-W)’):

(E-W) If any agent $A$ has a normative reason $R$ to $\varphi$, then it is psychologically possible that $R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$.

An action, motivation, or mental state is psychologically possible when it is permitted by the laws of psychology. In other words, it is psychologically possible for a
normative reason $R$ to motivate an action $\varphi$ if and only if it is consistent with the laws of psychology for $R$ to motivate $\varphi$.\(^3\)

Some things are psychologically impossible for anyone to do. IBM’s Deep Blue, the chess-playing computer that defeated Russian grandmaster Gary Kasparov, was capable of examining 200,000,000 possible chess moves per second. The laws of psychology, such as they are, make it impossible for human brains to perform this calculation. Consequently, (E-W) implies that no human agent can have a normative reason to consider millions of possible chess moves in one second flat. Moreover, according to (E-W), no human agent would have a normative reason to compute chess moves as Deep Blue does, because no such reason would exist. (E-W) is not merely a statement about the conditions under which particular agents have particular normative reasons, but also a claim about the conditions under which particular normative reasons exist at all.

In the above formulation of (E-W), I mean to employ a ‘success reading’ of the phrase ‘to $\varphi$.’ The success reading of ‘to $\varphi$’ assumes that the agent succeeds in doing what she is motivated to do by her normative reasons. It might be psychologically possible that a normative reason motivates an agent to try but fail to $\varphi$, but this is not what I mean by ‘$R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$.’ Rather, ‘$R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$’ is intended to mean that $R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$, and $A$ successfully performs the act of $\varphi$-ing. Thus, it is not psychologically possible that any normative reason motivates me to time travel. This is

---

\(^3\) Ideally, the ‘laws of psychology’ would be those articulated in a true and complete science of psychology. Short of that, we should settle for laws postulated by psychological theories which are, currently, most empirically adequate.
because I’m incapable of successfully carrying out the feat of time travel, and not because I couldn’t acquire a motivation to time travel. (Honestly, if I had the ability to time travel, I’d be strongly tempted to do it!)

There are actions that are psychologically impossible for some particular agents to perform, but not for others. It follows from (E-W) that normative reasons favoring some action may exist for some particular agents, but not for others. Healthy adults can write, but patients with pure agraphia cannot. Pure agraphia is caused by damage to specific areas of the brain which govern the understanding of written and spoken language—particularly the superior and inferior parietal lobe (Joseph 2000). It is a psychological law that these parts of the brain must be intact and functioning normally in order for a person to have the motor control necessary to write. When the relevant brain regions are damaged, it is not psychologically possible for people with pure agraphia to write normally. It follows from (E-W) that no pure agraphia patient with the relevant brain damage can have a normative reason to (for instance) compose a handwritten essay. There is no reason which would favor or justify an act of essay-writing on the part of a pure agraphia patient. This is because the brain damage suffered by the pure agraphia patient damages the mechanism by which any normative reason could motivate the patient to write at the level of sophistication needed to complete an essay. What is psychologically possible can vary from one particular person to the next, but this variation is explained by general psychological laws.
I attribute (E-W) to Williams on the basis of various writings where Williams asserts a necessary relation between normative reasons and explanatory reasons. In his classic essay, ‘Internal and External Reasons,’ Williams emphasizes the ‘explanatory dimension’ of normative reasons (Williams 1979: 18, 22). There, Williams writes:

If there are reasons for action, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action... (Williams 1979: 18)

Williams re-states the same idea in subsequent work. In ‘Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame’ (1995), he argues as follows:

It must be a mistake simply to separate explanatory and normative reasons. If it is true that A has a reason to φ, then it must be possible that he should φ for that reason; and if he does act for that reason, then that reason will be the explanation of his acting (Williams 1995: 38 – 39).

Furthermore, in a postscript to ‘Internal and External Reasons,’ Williams affirms (E-W) once again:

Some writers make a distinction between ‘normative’ and ‘explanatory’ reasons, but this does not seem to me to be helpful, because normative and
explanatory considerations are closely involved with one another...if it is said, in the normative mode, that A has a reason to φ, the speaker must envisage the possibility of A’s φ-ing for that reason, in which case the reason will figure in the explanation of what A does (Williams 2001: 93.).

Williams employs the term ‘motivation’ to refer to an explanatory reason for action. For instance, he writes that ‘...nothing can explain an agent’s (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act’ (Williams 1979: 22). Below, I will follow Wayne A. Davis in suggesting that normative reasons explain or motivate actions by causing them in an appropriate way (Davis 2005, 2010).

Also apparent in Williams’ work is the claim that the existence of a normative reason requires the psychological possibility that the normative reason motivates the action it justifies. Evidence that Williams holds this view can be found in ‘Internal and External Reasons,’ where he most thoroughly presents an argument for reasons internalism. I briefly summarize this argument in order to explain the link Williams draws between normative reasons and the psychological possibility of motivation.

According to the version of reasons internalism that Williams espouses, an agent has a normative reason R to φ only if he could reach the conclusion that he has R on the basis of a ‘sound deliberative route’ from his ‘actual motivational set’ (Williams 1995: 35; Williams 2001: 91). A sound deliberative route is a process of deliberation corrected for ‘any errors of fact and reasoning’ (Williams 1979: 18 – 19; Williams 1995: 36; Williams 2001: 91 – 92). Furthermore, Williams refers to the ‘actual motivational
set’ of an agent as ‘the set of desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects, and so on’ that
the agent actually had prior to judging—via sound deliberation—that he has a

Williams distinguishes his internalist theory of normative reasons from an
‘externalist’ theory. I refer to the latter view as reasons externalism. According to
reasons externalism, Williams writes, ‘it can be true of [an agent] A that he has a
reason to φ even though A has no motivation in his motivational set that
could....through sound deliberation, lead him to φ’ (Williams 1995: 35). Williams
clearly thinks that the externalist picture of normative reasons is refuted by (E-W). For
externalism holds that any claim ascribing to an agent a normative reason R to φ is
‘roughly equivalent to...the claim that if the agent rationally deliberated, then,
whatever motivations he originally had, he would come to be motivated to φ’
(Williams 1979: 24). In other words, reasons externalists would interpret a claim of the
form

(RE) A has a normative reason R to φ

to be ‘roughly equivalent’ to the claim that

(RE’) If A deliberated rationally, then A would come to the conclusion that he
has R and would thereby be motivated to φ, regardless of whatever
motivations he had prior to deliberating.
However, Williams insists that (RE’) is false. He does so on the basis of ‘Hume’s basic point’ in Book III of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, where Hume famously proclaims that ‘reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will’ (Hume, 2.3.3, in Norton & Norton 2000: 265; cf. Williams 1979: 23 – 24). Williams concludes that externalism is false on the grounds that it posits ‘no motivation for the agent to deliberate from, to reach this new motivation’ (Williams 1979: 24).

Williams’ appeal to Hume suggests that the argument in ‘Internal and External Reasons’ rests on (E-W), together with a psychological thesis about the motivational efficacy of practical deliberation. According to (E-W), if any normative reasons exist, then there must be some way consistent with the laws of psychology for normative reasons to motivate action. Externalism holds that normative reasons for action can generate motivation in a rational agent purely through practical reasoning, and independently of any motivations the agent had before beginning to deliberate. However, Williams joins Hume in denying that practical reasoning alone has such motivational force. From this psychological claim and (E-W), it follows that there cannot be any normative reasons *as the externalist understands them*. Externalism is therefore false, since the externalist account of normative reasons fails to identify any psychological mechanisms through which normative reasons can motivate action.

What is the philosophical significance of (E-W)? Obviously, since (E-W) constitutes a premise in an argument for reasons internalism, it bears implications for philosophical debates on practical rationality. But (E-W) also has important
implications in its own right. It would imply, for instance, that if there are any agents for whom it is not psychologically possible to be motivated by moral considerations, such agents have no normative reasons to act morally. How far-reaching this implication would be depends on the extent and the limits of what is psychologically possible for an agent. There are certainly some amoralists who do not concern themselves with morality—but whether or not they could have moral concerns is a different matter. As long as there is some psychological mechanism, compatible with the laws of psychology, by which moral considerations can motivate amoralists, (E-W) allows that even the most stubborn amoralist can have normative reasons to act morally. Relevant mechanisms would un-controversially include persuasion and moral education; arguably, though perhaps more controversially, they might extend to social conformism, browbeating, and punitive threats.

On the other hand, some researchers have argued that the emotional and cognitive impairments of psychopaths result in moral deficits (Haidt & Kesebir 2009: 804; Cima et al. 2010). Psychopaths are known for seriously immoral behavior, which ranges over lying, bullying, stealing, fraud, rape, and serial murder. Moreover, psychopaths display little to no capacity for sympathy, guilt, or shame. Indeed, the areas of the brain responsible for regulating these emotions, like the amygdala and the orbital cortex, are shrunken or inactive in psychopaths. These findings suggest that psychopaths have either an impaired capacity for moral judgment, or an impaired ability to be motivated by their moral judgments (Cima et al. 2010: 1, 8). Perhaps there is a psychological law (or set of laws) according to which moral thought and action
requires a normally functioning amygdala and orbital cortex. Since these regions are not functioning normally in psychopaths, it may be psychologically impossible for psychopaths to be moved by moral considerations, in much the same way that it is psychologically impossible for pure agraphia patients to write an essay. This would mean that there is no way consistent with the laws of psychology that psychopaths could act as morality requires. If so, it would follow from (E-W) that psychopaths have no normative reasons to act morally. So it seems that anyone who accepts (E-W) should be prepared to bite some hard bullets, depending on what psychological laws relevant to moral judgment and motivation are discovered. As counterintuitive as these potential implications of (E-W) are, my task now is to show that it would be reasonable to accept them.

4. The ‘master argument’ for (E-W)

As we’ve seen, (E-W) is crucial to Williams’ argument for reasons internalism. But, puzzlingly, Williams never formulates an explicit rationale for (E-W). This has left an unfortunate gap in Williams’ oeuvre—after all, the truth of (E-W) is by no means obvious, given the counterintuitive implications it may generate. I now attempt to fill the gap with a ‘master argument’ for (E-W):

Master Argument for Williams’ Explanatory Constraint

For any agent A, and any normative reason R to perform some intentional action \( \varphi \):

(E1) If A has R, then A has the ability to \( \varphi \) for R.
If $A$ has the ability to $\varphi$ for $R$, then it is psychologically possible that $R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$.

Therefore,

(E-W) If any agent $A$ has a normative reason $R$ to $\varphi$, then it is psychologically possible that $R$ motivates $A$ to $\varphi$.

I will offer an exposition and defense of each premise in the master argument. It is not claimed that this argument for (E-W) is one that Williams himself would endorse. Rather, my efforts are focused on presenting a sound argument in favor of an idea which has a central role in Williams’s case for reasons internalism, and could serve as a foundation for alternative, potentially more defensible versions of internalism.

5. Acting for reasons

Premise (E1) claims that the ability to act for a normative reason is necessary for an agent to have that reason. In adducing evidence for (E1), I will attempt to identify the minimal conditions that an action must satisfy to be evaluated as rational. To evaluate an action as rational is to evaluate it with respect to normative reasons. I will concentrate my analysis on the action of non-human organisms. Compared to human action, the actions of non-humans are relatively simple in terms of their goals and their causal mechanisms. It is illuminating to consider whether non-humans are capable of rational action, because an exclusive focus on humans would risk
overestimating the psychological complexity needed to act rationally. It may turn out that some animal behaviors—behaviors generated by capacities much simpler than those that explain human behavior—can be evaluated as rational. To investigate whether this is so, philosophers and other researchers have engaged in the comparative study of human and animal cognition (Bermúdez 2003; Kacelnik 2006; Hurley & Nudds 2006). Thus, while my objective is an analysis of the concept of a normative reason for action, empirical observations of animal behavior are relevant to this inquiry.

José Luis Bermúdez has pinpointed one conception of rationality as appropriate to evaluating the behavior of humans and other animals with advanced cognitive abilities (e.g., apes, cetaceans, corvids, and parrots). He calls this conception ‘level 2 rationality’ (Bermúdez 2003: 123 – 128). According to Bermúdez, level 2 rationality (henceforth ‘L2-rationality’) comprises a set of normative criteria with two domains of application. First, it applies to the normative assessment of behavioral tokens (i.e., instances of behavior) as opposed to behavioral types (i.e., types of behavior). And second, L2-rationality applies to a process of decision-making or practical reasoning. Agents that are rational in the sense of L2-rationality select their behaviors by a decision-making process which is, at a minimum, sensitive to the likely consequences of alternative behaviors (Bermúdez 2003: 124).

For instance, L2-rationality can apply to the normative assessment of tool-using behaviors (Bermúdez 2003: 126 – 127). Wild chimpanzees select sticks or vines of varying length and flexibility, which they then fashion into wands specifically suited for
capturing different kinds of insect prey. The wands chimps use for dipping into ant
nests are longer and more rigid, whereas the ones they dip into termite nests are
shorter and more flexible with a bitten end.

L2-rationality is applicable to chimpanzee tool use. First, normative assessment
applies to tokens rather than types of tool-using behavior. Suppose an adult
chimpanzee approaches what she knows to be an ant’s nest, and has knowledge of the
wand design best-suited to catching ants as opposed to termites. When this
chimpanzee fashions a wand suited for catching ants into an ant nest, that particular
behavior is appropriate/rational. But when this chimpanzee fashions a wand
unsuitable for ant-catching into an ant nest, that particular behavior is
inappropriate/irrational. Normative assessment applies to tokens of tool-using
behavior, because chimpanzees can carry out a process of decision-making that selects
one particular act of wand-making over another, depending on the situation at hand.

Decision-making processes are the second domain of application for L2-
rationality. Because chimpanzees are capable of deciding whether to make an ant-
catching wand or a termite-catching wand, the process of decision-making which leads
them to select a particular wand can be evaluated from a normative perspective. It
should also be emphasized that the chimpanzees’ sensitivity to the effects of
differently fashioned tools involves foresight, planning, and the ability to represent the
conditional dependence between actions and their consequences (cf. Bermúdez 2006:
133 – 137). Therefore, the sort of decision-making assessable by L2-rationality is
justifiably regarded as practical reasoning—as thinking one’s way to action.
Bermúdez notes that the ability to act for normative reasons distinguishes creatures that are L2-rational from creatures that are not (Bermúdez 2003: 124). L2-rational agents select token actions for the reason that the action selected is likely to produce some particular consequence rather than another. Additionally, the selection of token actions is the result of a decision-making process. In short: acting for normative reasons is acting from a consequence-sensitive process of practical reasoning. Only humans and a few other species exhibit behavior that is rational in this level 2 sense.4

I will now argue that premise (E1) is implied by the level 2 conception of rationality. I suggest that only L2-rational agents can act for normative reasons, and therefore, only L2-rational agents can possess normative reasons. (E1) tells us that the ability to act for a normative reason is a necessary condition for agent to possess that normative reason. Following Bermúdez, I explicate ‘acting for a normative reason’ as acting from a consequence-sensitive process of practical reasoning. To see why (E1) is true, first note that a token action is favored by a normative reason only if (i) there is some alternative to that action which the relevant agent could have performed instead, and (ii) the relevant agent is capable of deliberating about the alternatives. Regarding (i), it would be absurd to say that I have a reason to inhabit the present moment, rather than transport myself into the past, since I cannot time travel. Similarly, I have no reason to levitate objects around me by sheer force of will, as opposed to letting them stay grounded, because I lack the power of telekinesis. In

---

4 For a comprehensive review of philosophical and empirical investigations into the rationality of non-human animals, see the introduction to Hurley and Nudds (2006).
these examples, a lack of alternative actions implies a lack of normative reasons favoring a particular action. Regarding (ii), an agent that cannot deliberate about alternative actions cannot have normative reasons to take any particular action. For whatever normative reasons are, they are essentially objects of deliberation. As John Searle has aptly observed, ‘you have to be able to reason with reasons’ (Searle 2001: 104). Normative reasons are considerations which guide practical deliberation about what one is to do in the face of alternatives. (I return to this point in section 7 below.) But if an agent is unable to deliberate about potential alternative actions, nothing can be a consideration which guides the agent's behavior. For such an agent, then, there can be no normative reasons for action.

Notice that acting for normative reasons, as I have construed it, is action that is (i) selected from a set of alternatives, and (ii) selected due to a process of practical reasoning. In a process of practical reasoning, the agent deliberates about alternative actions. Thus, if an agent is incapable of acting for normative reasons, then that agent either cannot select token actions from a set of alternatives, or he/she cannot deliberate about alternative actions. In either case, the agent cannot have normative reasons for action. Thus, if an agent cannot act for a normative reason $R$, then that agent does not have $R$. (E1) follows by contraposition.

As an illustration of the points being made here, consider the behavior of the Sphex wasp (Carruthers 2004: 211 – 212). The wasp stings a cricket, paralyzing it, and then places it in a burrow with its eggs to provide a food source for the hatchlings. When the mother Sphex captures a cricket, it drags the prey to the entrance of the
burrow. It then leaves the cricket at the entrance and goes inside the burrow, apparently to check for intruders. But when an experimenter moves the cricket away from the burrow’s entrance while the wasp is inside, the wasp will repeat the same sequence of behaviors: drag the cricket to the entrance, check inside the burrow, and so on. By repeatedly moving the cricket back, an experimenter can make the wasp repeat this sequence an indefinite number of times.

The rigid and automatic nature of the Sphex wasp’s burrow-checking behavior suggests it is not generated by any consequence-sensitive process of practical reasoning. Instead, the Sphex’s behavior is better explained as an innate and automatic behavioral program which evolved through natural selection operating on past generations of wasps. So, the Sphex is apparently incapable of acting for normative reasons. Since the Sphex cannot decide to check the burrow versus not check it, it cannot have normative reasons which favor checking the burrow rather than not checking it. Additionally, since the Sphex cannot deliberate about whether or not to check the burrow, it cannot have normative reasons to check it.

The Sphex wasp seems to provide a clear illustration of a creature that does not have normative reasons for action because it cannot act for normative reasons. On the other hand, the Sphex may provide grist for an objection to (E1). Even if the Sphex cannot check the burrow for normative reasons, might the Sphex still have normative reasons to achieve the goal of avoiding dangerous intruders? If so, wouldn’t the Sphex be a counterexample to (E1)?
Admittedly, there is something intelligible in the thought that the Sphex ought to check the burrow before dragging its prey inside, since it arguably wouldn’t be as reproductively successful if it didn’t do that. However, the Sphex can only be construed as having normative reasons from a perspective quite different from the one relevant to the subject of this discussion—namely, the theory of practical rationality. That alternative perspective is designated as ‘level 0 rationality’ in Bermúdez’s classification (Bermúdez 2003: 116 – 120). Level 0 rationality (hereafter, ‘L0-rationality’) is a set of normative criteria with only one domain of application: types of behavior. Unlike L2-rationality, the criteria specific to L0-rationality apply neither to behavior tokens nor to decision-making processes. Instead, L0-rationality applies to types of behavior that can be explained as invariant, automatic responses to environmental stimuli. According to Bermúdez, these behaviors include ‘tropistic behaviors such as those produced by reflexes, innate releasing mechanisms (such as imprinting mechanisms), or classical conditioning’ (Bermúdez 2003: 116). The Sphex wasp’s burrow-checking behavior would qualify as behavior assessable by L0-rationality. It is not the product of decision, and the Sphex’s automatic behavioral program only disposes it to manifest one type of behavior—namely, always checking a burrow before dragging in one’s prey.

L0-rationality is a set of normative criteria grounded in the notion of ‘proper function’ (Millikan 1989). If an organism has some trait T, and T has some effect F which explains why the organism’s ancestors were selected, then F is the proper function of T. For instance: the proper function of the Sphex wasp’s automatic
program is to check burrows, because the Sphex’s ancestors had similar programs, and the effect of these programs—namely, avoidance of deadly intruders—enhanced the reproductive success of those ancestors. The notion of proper functioning is a normative one. As Ruth Millikan observes, an item with a proper function can be evaluated with respect to its success or failure in performing its proper function (Millikan 1989: 294, 296). Moreover, an item with a proper function ought to perform that function in the specific sense that an item which does not perform its proper function is ipso facto defective. We can say, for instance, that under normal circumstances the Sphex’s behavioral program ought to make the insect check burrows, because this is the proper function of the program. If the program fails to bring about the relevant fitness-enhancing behavior, it is defective. Thus, so far as it’s intelligible to suggest that the Sphex checks burrows for a normative reason, the relevant reason would be that the insect ought to check its burrows, if it is to survive and reproduce in its environment.

Unlike Bermúdez, however, I am unwilling to classify L0-rationality as a kind of practical rationality. Suppose a particular Sphex wasp failed to check its burrow before dragging in its prey, and then it’s eaten by a lurking intruder. This is indeed a failure in some normative sense, but it is not a failure I would describe with the sentence, ‘The insect has acted irrationally.’ Instead, I would more naturally describe a particular Sphex’s failure to check its burrow either as a ‘maladaptive’ lapse or ‘malfuinction’ in its automatic behavioral program. Given the availability of an alternative normative concept—the concept of proper functioning—to describe the failure of the Sphex, I
think it is unnecessarily confusing to also describe this failure in terms of rationality.

When the concept of rationality is applied to the domain of behavior, it is more clear and parsimonious to reserve the concept for the assessment of token behaviors motivated by consequence-sensitive processes of decision-making. In short, when we speak of rational action, we should speak narrowly about action that is rational in the sense of L2-rationality. Moreover, normative reasons for action should be understood strictly in terms of L2-rationality.

However, before it can finally be concluded that (E1) is true, we must appreciate how strong a claim it makes. (E1) states that if an agent, A, has a normative reason R to φ, then A must have the ability to act for R. Thus, (E1) is true on the condition that an agent would lack a normative reason R to φ, if that particular agent cannot φ for that particular reason. To show that this condition holds, consider an experiment conducted with a New Caledonian crow named Betty (Kacelnick 2006: 101 - 102). In preliminary trials, Betty had been provided with two wires, one straight and the other hooked. With the hooked wire, she was able to lift an out-of-reach basket of food sitting at the bottom of a plastic well. Then, in test trials, Betty was given the straight wire only. After repeated attempts, Betty could eventually use several different techniques to bend the wire into a hook, and then retrieve the food basket. Biologist Alex Kacelnick describes just one of Betty’s wire-bending methods as follows (Kacelnick 2006: 102):
After failing to lift the basket with the straight wire, she took it to a fracture in a nearby plastic tray, wedged the tip there and pulled perpendicularly from the proximal side, bending the wire until it formed a hook. She then returned to the well, retrieved the basket and ate the food.

Betty’s responses to the problem she faced seem readily explained in terms of a process of practical reasoning. Betty is thinking her way to action. An alternative hypothesis might be that Betty’s tool-making in these experiments was not the product of reasoning, but rather an automatic stimulus-response behavior which evolved as a biological adaptation in members of her species. However, Kacelnick argues that Betty’s behavior is much too flexible and context-specific to flow from an innate, automatic routine. Although New Caledonian crows are known for being ‘consummate tool-makers,’ in their natural environments the birds ‘normally do not have access to pliable material that can be bent into a shape’ (Kacelnick 2006: 102). Indeed, the ability to alter an unnatural material for tool-using purposes has not been observed in any other animal (Emery & Clayton 2004: 27). Therefore, the most plausible hypothesis is the one which explains Betty’s behavior as a product of consequence-sensitive practical reasoning. On this hypothesis, Betty would have formed the belief that bending the wire would help her get to the food. This belief participates in a practical inference which motivates Betty to bend the wire, and thereby achieve her goal. A capacity for consequence-sensitive practical inference such as this would more adequately explain Betty’s tool-making behavior, since the ability
to make practical inferences and act upon them would enable Betty to respond flexibly to novel circumstances.

We should also notice that Betty’s actions seem entirely justified by normative reasons. Betty has a good reason to make a tool as a means to getting the food beyond her reach. Furthermore, Betty acts for normative reasons insofar as her wire-bending behavior is controlled by a consequence-sensitive process of decision-making. That process of decision-making tracks Betty’s normative reasons in the unique, never-before-encountered situation she faces.

Now we’re ready to assess whether the condition for (E1) holds. Is it the case that an agent has a normative reason R to φ only if that agent can φ for that particular reason? Imagine that the experiment carried out with Betty is repeated with a bird of a different species—one which has similar tool-making capabilities, but lacks Betty’s cognitive capacity to design tools from artificial substances. A New Zealand kea would be a suitable subject; these birds do not use tools in the wild, but in experimental settings they have been observed using balls and stick-like objects to obtain food (Auersperg et al. 2011). However, as noted above, only the New Caledonian crow has been seen fashioning tools from artificial materials not encountered in the wild. Evidently, bending a wire into a hook would be beyond the kea’s reasoning capability. It follows that the kea lacks the ability to bend the wire for the normative reason that it could be used to reach food. The kea cannot bend the wire for this reason, because it cannot carry out a process of consequence-sensitive practical reasoning that would lead it to bend the wire. Moreover, precisely because the kea can’t figure out how to
bend the wire by a process of reasoning, it lacks a normative reason to bend the wire. The contrast between a kea and Betty constitutes evidence that the condition for (E1) holds: if an agent, $A$, has a normative reason $R$ to $\varphi$, then $A$ must have the ability to $\varphi$ for that particular reason.

The preceding discussion of Betty should not be taken to suggest that Betty has any concept of a normative reason for action. Betty is just a crow—she cannot contemplate her situation and think anything analogous to the thought that ‘I have a good reason to bend this wire in order to get the food.’ Still, Betty’s behavior in the experimental task demonstrates that she is capable of acting for normative reasons, even if she cannot form the judgment that she has a normative reason. Betty would not have been able to carry out such novel tool-making, unless she had an ability to control her actions through a decision-making process that tracked her normative reasons for action.

On the other hand, some commentators hold that having normative reasons for action requires the agent to not only be able to track normative reasons in her practical deliberations, but also to understand herself as having normative reasons. Let us call this latter understanding the ‘meta-representation of reasons’ (cf. Hurley & Nudds 2006: 46 – 47; Bermúdez 2003: 166). An agent with the capacity to meta-represent normative reasons must have the concept of a normative reason, in order to be able to form the judgment that a given action is favored, or disfavored, by normative reasons. If meta-representation is necessary for having normative reasons, then Betty could not possess normative reasons, since she lacks the concept of a
normative reason. My view, however, is that meta-representation is not necessary for having normative reasons. This view is shared by Robert Audi, who has pointed out that young children seem clearly to have and act for normative reasons, even before they acquire the concept of a normative reason (cf. Audi 1986: 517 – 518). Yet even if it were true that a creature has normative reasons only if it can meta-represent such reasons, this would actually support rather than undermine (E1). (E1) says that an agent can possess normative reasons for action only if she is capable of acting for those reasons on the basis of a process of practical reasoning. The meta-representation of reasons is just an extremely sophisticated form of practical reasoning—a form of practical reasoning that involves the agent’s reflexive understanding of herself as a bearer of normative reasons. So, if true, the view that meta-representation is necessary for having normative reasons would support (E1).

6. **Normative reasons as sources of motivation**

Premise (E2) of the master argument states that if an agent, A, has the ability to φ for a normative reason, R, then it is psychologically possible that R motivates A to φ.

To establish (E2), I offer the following ‘subsidiary argument’:

**Subsidiary Argument for (E2)**

For any agent A, and any normative reason R to perform some intentional action φ:

(E2-i) If A has the ability to φ for R, then it is psychologically possible that R explains A’s φ-ing through a process of practical reasoning.
(E2-ii) If it is psychologically possible that \( R \) explains \( A \)'s \( \varphi \)-ing through a process of practical reasoning, then it is psychologically possible that \( R \) motivates \( A \) to \( \varphi \) through \( A \)'s psychological states.

Therefore,

(E2) If \( A \) has the ability to \( \varphi \) for \( R \), then it is psychologically possible that \( R \) motivates \( A \) to \( \varphi \) through \( A \)'s psychological states.

The first premise in this argument, (E2-i), is derived from the analysis of 'acting for reasons' offered in the previous section. There, it was argued that to act for reasons is to act because of a process of consequence-sensitive practical reasoning. A process of practical reasoning is a psychological process in which inferences among intentional states generate action. For instance, one familiar form of practical reasoning is instrumental reasoning, which can be represented as follows:

\[
A \text{ desires that } \psi \text{ be the case.} \\
A \text{ believes that if } \varphi \text{ is done, then } \psi \text{ will be the case.} \\
\Rightarrow A \text{ either desires or intends to } \varphi. \\
\Rightarrow A \varphi's.
\]

The practical inference depicted here is an operation among the agent’s intentional states—beliefs, desires, and intentions. From existing intentional states, the inference generates a new intentional state—either the desire or intention to \( \varphi \). In
turn, the new intentional state produces an action—the act of $\varphi$-ing. The terminal act of $\varphi$-ing is, in this way, explained by the practical inference. Since intentional states are states of an individual’s psychology, instrumental practical reasoning produces changes in an agent’s psychological states. This is also true of other processes of practical reasoning. But if, somehow, it were not psychologically possible for an agent to effect the changes in psychological states involved in any process of practical reasoning, then that agent couldn’t carry out any process of practical reasoning. Consequently, that agent wouldn’t have the ability to act for normative reasons.

Next, consider (E2-ii). When changes in an agent’s psychological states take place as a result of practical reasoning, these changes can explain the agent’s action by motivating it. I understand motivations to be psychological states that are capable of causing intentional action in an appropriate way. That is, if an agent is motivated to do something, then she is in some psychological state that is a contributing cause of her doing it. Immediately, however, we arrive at a thorny question: How can normative reasons motivate intentional action? This question must be addressed, since the consequent of (E2-ii) says that a normative reason can motivate action through the agent’s psychological states. My answer, briefly put, is that normative reasons can motivate by being objects of thought. As Wayne Davis has argued, ‘[w]e can explain a person’s action by saying that certain normative reasons were the reasons for which he or she acted’ (Davis 2005: 57). I summarize Davis’s argument for this view in the remainder of this section. Then, in the following section, I defend Davis’s view against an objection from Jonathan Dancy.
Davis’s position rests on three premises: (D-i) intentional actions are motivated by beliefs and desires; (D-ii) normative reasons can be the objects of beliefs and desires; and (D-iii) beliefs and desires can be individuated by their objects. The first premise, (D-i), is grounded in a causal theory of action. Under this theory, intentional actions are caused (i.e., motivated) by the agent’s beliefs and desires (Davis 2005: 54, 57 – 59; Davis 2010). It’s beyond the scope of this article to present a complete rationale for the causal theory. However, this theory has been exhaustively defended by a number of philosophers including Davis, Alfred Mele (2005), and classically, Donald Davidson (1963). Davis, for instance, remarks that ‘all the properties featured in the best known theories of causation are present’ in the relationship between an agent’s act of φing, on the one hand, and that agent’s beliefs and desires, on the other (Davis 2005: 81). In particular, Davis points to observable functional dependencies among actions and intentional states. These include the fact that ‘the likelihood of A’s φing tends to be directly related to how much A wants to φ, which in turn is directly related to how much A wants to ψ when that is A’s reason for wanting to φ’ (Davis 2005: 82).

In defense of the second premise, (D-ii), Davis allows that normative reasons can indirectly cause intentional actions through the agent’s beliefs and desires (cf. Dancy 2000: 101). This is because beliefs and desires are intentional states, and normative reasons can be the ‘objects,’ or ‘contents,’ of such states. The object of a person’s belief is what that person believes, and the object of a person’s desire is what that person desires. To use Davis’s example, suppose that I’ve been saving money for
my son, now one year old, since the day he was born. I have a normative reason for saving: namely, that my son will need money for college. According to the causal theory of action, my intentional act of saving money is caused by my belief that my son will need money for college, along with my desire to fulfill my son’s needs. Notice, however, that the normative reason for which I ought to save is represented as the object of my belief. The reason I ought to save is that my son will need money for college, and this reason is what I believe.

Finally, the third premise in Davis’s argument, (D-iii), emphasizes that beliefs and desires can be identified and distinguished from one another by citing their objects (Davis 2005: 59). For instance, compare the following:


(C) A believes that Cassius Clay beat George Foreman in 1974.

Cassius Clay is the same individual as Mohammed Ali. But suppose the subject, A, is unaware of this fact. Consequently, A believes that Ali beat Foreman in ’74, but he doesn’t believe that Clay beat Foreman in ’74. In that case, (M) is a true description of A’s beliefs, but (C) is not true of A’s beliefs. It follows that the beliefs described by (M) and (C) are different. They are different, because their objects are different—A believes that Mohammed Ali beat Foreman in 1974, but he doesn’t believe that Cassius Clay beat Foreman in 1974.
Sentences formed with constructions like ‘A believes that p’ or ‘A desires that p’ are called intensional contexts, because the truth of such sentences does not only depend on the reference of ‘p,’ but also on the subject’s attitude toward p. The names ‘Mohammed Ali’ and ‘Cassius Clay’ refer to the same individual, but the fact remains that someone could take a believing attitude toward the proposition <Mohammed Ali beat George Foreman in 1974>, without taking the same attitude toward the proposition <Cassius Clay beat George Foreman in 1974>. Similar comments apply to desire. Given A’s ignorance about the reference of the name ‘Cassius Clay,’ A may desire to read a biography of Mohammed Ali, without having a desire to read a biography of Cassius Clay. Hence, beliefs and desires can be individuated by citing their objects.

Davis’s crucial point is this: normative reasons can motivate (i.e. cause) action by being the objects of beliefs or desires. Returning to Davis’s example, suppose that I have a normative reason to save money. The reason is that my son will need money for college. And suppose I do save money. Now, my act of saving money may be caused by my belief that my son will need money for college, plus my desire to meet my son’s needs. But as we saw, this belief can be individuated through another description; we can describe it as the belief whose object is that my son will need money for college (Davis 2005: 59). The object of that belief is my normative reason for action—namely, that my son will need money for college. Since my belief (partly) causes my action, and that belief can be individuated by citing its object, my normative reason for saving money can be cited in a correct causal explanation of my saving
money. In this way, normative reasons can explain intentional actions by motivating them. Thus, Davis’s causal theory of action substantiates (E2-iii).

7. **Normative reasons are representable objects**

There is, however, a serious difficulty with Davis’s account of how normative reasons can motivate. Davis insists that normative reasons are causally relevant in motivating action by virtue of being the objects of beliefs and desires. But Jonathan Dancy argues that normative reasons cannot be the objects of beliefs and desires (Dancy 2000: 112 – 120). Dancy’s idea is that if normative reasons were the objects of psychological states like beliefs and desires, then normative reasons must be capable of being propositions. For instance: if normative reasons were objects of belief, they ‘must be the sort of thing that can be believed and not believed, and can be believed both truly and falsely’ (Dancy 2000: 114). Propositions are the kind of thing that can be believed or not, and can be believed truly or falsely. But, Dancy insists, normative reasons cannot be propositions:

...intuitively it seems to be not so much propositions as states of affairs that are our good [i.e., normative] reasons. It is her being ill that gives me reason to send for the doctor, and this is a state of affairs, something that is part of the world, not a proposition (Dancy 2000: 114 – 115).
In sum, Dancy thinks that normative reasons are not propositions. Instead, he thinks normative reasons are states of affairs or facts that are not reducible to the psychological states of agents (cf. section 2 above). Dancy argues for this claim—that normative reasons are not propositions—by describing two dominant accounts of propositions. He then asserts that there is no way to make sense of how, on either account, propositions could be normative reasons. Consider the sentence, ‘Canberra is hot in February.’ On the first dominant account of propositions, the proposition expressed by that sentence is the class of possible worlds in which the sentence is true. On the second account, the proposition expressed by the sentence is an abstract object whose constituent parts are related to each other in a way similar to the constituents of the sentence (Dancy 2000: 115). But Dancy thinks it obvious that propositions, on either construal, cannot be reasons for action. Propositions, as he puts it, are ‘the wrong sort of beast’ to be normative reasons:

…a class of worlds is hardly the right sort of thing to make an action sensible or right. And an abstract object with a structure that mirrors that of a sentence seems no better off... (Dancy 2000: 115).

Davis is well-aware of this challenge, and has explicitly responded to it (see Davis 2005: 52 – 54, 57 – 59). In fact, Davis agrees that normative reasons are non-psychological. At the same time, he suggests that normative reasons can be both non-psychological and objects of beliefs and desires, but not propositions. Whatever the
merits of Davis’s rebuttal to Dancy, I wish to pursue a different one. I will contend that at least some normative reasons are propositions. In addition, I will argue that normative reasons—whatever they are—must be capable of being objects of psychological states.

Agents can have normative reasons to act by virtue of a justified, but false belief. The object of such a belief would not be a fact, but rather a false proposition that is justifiably believed. For example: suppose Smith has peacefully walked the same route to work every day for many years without incident. On this basis, Smith believes the proposition, <When I walk my usual route to work today, I will reach work safely>. But today, an unwelcome misfortune is going to occur. While on his way to work, Smith will be mauled by a tiger that has escaped from the local zoo. Let us assume that there is no information that Smith could have accessed to provide him with an evidentiary basis for anticipating this stroke of bad luck. Smith, then, believes a false proposition, as he will not reach work safely today. Although false, that proposition is still justifiably believed, given that the chances of being mauled by a tiger on an otherwise safe walking route are so slim. Also notice that in this scenario, it is not the case, and hence it is not a fact, that no harm will befall Smith on his way to work. And yet, Smith still has a good reason to go to work. That reason is the proposition that Smith falsely, but justifiably believes.

One might object here, and argue that the Smith’s belief is justified by a set of facts—e.g., the fact that zoo animals hardly ever escape their enclosures, the fact

---

5 Among other things, we may assume that the authorities have not yet broadcasted any warnings about an escaped tiger, that word of the escape had not traveled fast enough to reach Smith, and so on.
Smith’s route has proven to be safe in the past, etc. Could it be these facts, and not the proposition justifiably believed by Smith, which give Smith a good reason to walk his usual route to work today? Alan H. Goldman has remarked that reasons for action are never based on justified beliefs per se, but rather on the facts which justify beliefs (cf. Goldman 2009: 32 – 33). That cannot be correct, however, since there are cases where an agent’s reasons for action cannot adequately be described without reference to what he or she believes. It would be incomplete to suggest that Smith has a good reason to go to work, merely in virtue of the facts that zoo animals hardly ever escape, and that Smith’s route to work had been safe in the past. Those facts alone do not suffice to establish a good reason why Smith ought to go and endure a tiger mauling. They do not suffice, because what Smith believes is an indispensable part of the explanation of why Smith has a good reason to leave home, even though doing that will put him in harm's way. Smith is justified in believing the proposition that I will reach work safely today, since this proposition is backed by probability and past experience. It becomes clear that Smith has a good reason to walk his usual route to work only when we appreciate that he is justified in believing the proposition that he’ll reach work safely, and we appreciate that Smith’s true future is epistemically inaccessible to his present beliefs. Smith has good reason to leave home because he has a good reason to let his actions be guided by what he believes, even though what he believes is false. And what Smith believes is not a fact, but a false proposition justifiably believed. Therefore, normative reasons can be propositions.
Although the foregoing comments suggest that some normative reasons are propositions, I do not claim that all normative reasons are propositions. Some normative reasons might also be non-psychological, while others might even be identical to psychological states. I do not supply a complete taxonomy of normative reasons, since it is unnecessary to my argument for (E-W). However, the argument for (E-W) does call for one more firm ontological claim about reasons:

(NRR) If any agent, $A$, has a normative reason $R$ to $\varphi$, then it is psychologically possible that $R$ is an object of $A$’s mental representations.

(NRR) claims that all normative reasons for action can be the objects of mental representations. The acronym ‘NRR’ stands for ‘all normative reasons are (mentally) representable.’ (NRR) contributes to my master argument for (E-W), since (E-W) presupposes that normative reasons can motivate action. Furthermore, in my rationale for (E2-ii) (cf. section 6), I suggested that normative reasons motivate action by being the objects of agents’ psychological states—in particular, beliefs and desires. (NRR) would be false in the case that normative reasons cannot be objects of the relevant agent’s psychological states. In that case, it would follow that either normative reasons cannot motivate action at all, and (E-W) is ipso facto false, or normative reasons can motivate action, but my rationale for (E2-ii) mischaracterizes the mechanism by which normative reasons motivate. I can extinguish these threats
by demonstrating that normative reasons, whatever they are, must be possible objects of psychological states.

According to the representational theory of mind, mental representations are psychological states with semantic properties like content, truth-value, reference, and intension (Pitt 2008). Examples of mental representations include concepts, percepts, and thoughts. Intentional states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions are various attitudes one could take toward mental representations. I can have a mental representation whose object is the proposition that \(<I\ \text{arrive to the meeting on time}>\). And, through various intentional states, I could have various attitudes toward this representation—by believing that I arrive to the meeting on time, by desiring that I arrive to the meeting on time, by intending to arrive to the meeting on time, etc. For convenience, I will speak of beliefs, desires, and intentions as mental representations, although strictly speaking they are attitudes towards such representations.

Mental representations have ‘objects,’ or ‘contents.’ The objects of mental representations include abstract objects—e.g., properties, relations, sets, and, notably, propositions. Mental representations may even have facts as their objects, though this depends on the ontology of facts. One influential proposal in this regard, classically put forward by Frege, is that true propositions are facts (cf. Skorupski 2010: 7, 61 – 63). If this proposal is correct, then facts can be mentally represented as long as true propositions can be mentally represented. On the other hand, if facts are not propositions, they may still be objects of mental representation if radical externalism about mental representation is correct. Radical externalists, such as John McDowell
(1986), hold that some objects of mental representations are mind-independent; such mind-independent objects may include facts (Pitt 2008: §7). Of course, it is possible that these proposals will turn out to be mistaken, and that facts cannot be objects of mental representation after all. In that case, (NRR) would carry the implication that normative reasons are reducible to the psychological states of their bearers. In light of considerations I am about to put forward in favor of (NRR), however, I think this is implication is entirely acceptable.

Briefly, we should appreciate what (NRR) does not claim. For one thing, it does not say that normative reasons are mental representations. Rather, (NRR) does say that whatever normative reasons are, it is psychologically possible that they are objects of psychological states. Normative reasons might be propositions, psychological states, facts, or any other sort of thing capable of being the object of mental representation.

Also, (NRR) neither claims nor denies that normative reasons must be meta-represented as normative reasons by the agent who bears them. As we saw in section 5, to meta-represent normative reasons is to understand oneself as having normative reasons. However, it was also suggested in section 5 that some agents—such as animals and young children—can have and act for normative reasons, even if they lack the capacity for meta-representing normative reasons. This is consistent with (NRR), provided that agents lacking the capacity for meta-representation can still represent normative reasons another way.6 For instance, suppose some normative reasons are

---

6 I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue.
facts not reducible to psychological states. Then an agent lacking the ability to meta-represent normative reasons can still have normative reasons of this kind in a way that satisfies (NRR), provided that he or she can mentally represent the relevant facts. Such an agent would just not be able to represent those facts as normative reasons. Thus, if Betty the crow can mentally represent the fact that bending a wire will enable her to reach the food basket, and this fact is a normative reason to bend the wire, then Betty can have a normative reason to bend a wire in a way that is consistent with (NRR). Betty can have this normative reason, even though she is unable to meta-represent the fact that bending a wire will be useful in reaching food as a normative reason. Similar comments apply in the case that some normative reasons are propositions, or psychological states.

Now I turn to an argument for (NRR). Consider unpredictable future events as examples of things that are beyond mental representation. We often hear tragic stories about people dying in freak accidents. A freeway bridge collapses on a car carrying a whole family. The lifting apparatus on a garbage truck breaks, and shoots out a shard of metal that kills a boy riding in a school bus nearby. There was no way that the victims of these accidents could reasonably anticipate what was going to happen. Hence, such unpredictable events are facts that cannot be objects of mental representation; they are *un-representable facts*.

---

7 Glock (2009) argues that, indeed, some animals such as chimpanzees can mentally represent and deliberate about facts. But chimpanzees surely don’t conceive of themselves as bearers of normative reasons.
Being un-representable, unpredictable future events can’t be sources of normative reasons. Recall Searle’s apt phrase: you have to be able to reason with reasons. In other words, normative reasons must be able to play the role of considerations that guide one’s practical thinking. This means that a reason to φ must be able to make a difference to the practical inferences that lead the agent to decide to φ. But if there is no psychologically possible way that a reason could make such a difference, there is no sense in which the reason could be a consideration for the agent. Unpredictable facts about the future can dramatically alter our lives, even doom us. But because they are beyond mental representation, they cannot inform our deliberations about what we ought to do. Lacking a faculty of precognition, there was no psychologically possible way that people about to die in unpredictable freak accidents could consider the fact that they would soon meet their end. Therefore, unpredictable future events can’t give us reasons for action.

Indeed, this point generalizes to any un-representable fact. Normative reasons are the sort of thing that an agent could possibly consider and deliberate about. In order for an agent to deliberate about a normative reason, it must be possible for that reason to be the object of the agent’s mental representations. And, since mental representations are psychological states, a normative reason can be the object of an agent’s mental representation only if this is consistent with the laws of psychology. On the foregoing grounds, (NRR) is true. Whatever normative reasons are, they are capable of being objects of mental representation.
8. Conclusion

Williams’s explanatory constraint, or (E-W), carries far-reaching implications for the theory of practical rationality. It suggests that an agent cannot have a normative reason to \( \varphi \), if there is no psychologically possible way for that reason to motivate the agent to \( \varphi \). The question of what is or is not psychologically possible for an agent to do can only be answered empirically. It’s a difficult question at that. Depending on how the empirical discoveries go, (E-W) could generate the counterintuitive implication that violent psychopaths have no good reason not to harm others. However, I think that implication should be accepted. Perhaps it will be found that whenever there intuitively seems to be a normative reason a person ought to do something, there is also a psychological possibility of that person being motivated to do that very act by that very reason. In this scenario, (E-W) would not threaten intuition. But if empirical discoveries about the space of psychological possibility are not so fortuitous, we should bite the bullets that (E-W) deals us.

References


