

## EXTERNALISM ABOUT REASONS AND THE PROBLEM OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT: A HYBRIDIST SOLUTION

Externalismo sobre razões e o problema do desacordo razoável: uma solução hibridista

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the challenges that externalism about reasons faces in accounting for the source of practical normativity, with particular emphasis on the problem of reasonable disagreement. Externalism seeks ground reasons in objective normative facts, thereby securing their independence from agents' desires or volitional states. Yet this framework struggles to explain cases in which rational, well-informed, and sincere agents reach divergent conclusions about what they have most reason to do. Such cases reveal an explanatory gap in externalism, which tends either to misrepresent disagreement as irrational or to overlook its structural role in our normative practices. The paper argues that hybridism about reasons offers a more adequate account by integrating both discovered and created reasons within a unified framework. Hybridism preserves the objectivity of most reasons while also recognizing the agent's capacity to generate new reasons through acts of commitment when discovered reasons fail to settle the balance. This dual structure not only resolves practical conflicts in incommensurable and parity cases but also provides a richer explanation of how reasonable disagreement can coexist with normative objectivity. Finally, the article highlights the broader implications of this model for debates in moral and legal philosophy, suggesting that hybridism offers a principled way of reconciling value pluralism with the authority of law and morality.

**Keywords:** externalism about reasons; practical normativity; reasonable disagreement; hybridism about reasons; value pluralism.

**Resumo:** Este artigo investiga os desafios que o externalismo sobre razões enfrenta ao explicar a fonte da normatividade prática, com ênfase particular no problema do desacordo razoável. O externalismo busca fundamentar as razões em fatos normativos objetivos, assegurando, assim, sua independência em relação aos desejos ou estados volitivos dos agentes. No entanto, essa estrutura tem dificuldade em explicar casos nos quais agentes racionais, bem informados e sinceros chegam



a conclusões divergentes sobre o que têm mais razão para fazer. Tais casos revelam uma lacuna explicativa no externalismo, que tende ou a deturpar o desacordo como irracional, ou a negligenciar seu papel estrutural em nossas práticas normativas. O artigo argumenta que o hibridismo sobre razões oferece uma explicação mais adequada ao integrar tanto razões descobertas quanto criadas dentro de um arcabouço unificado. O hibridismo preserva a objetividade da maioria das razões, ao mesmo tempo em que reconhece a capacidade do agente de gerar novas razões por meio de atos de compromisso quando as razões descobertas não conseguem definir o balanço da questão. Essa estrutura dual não apenas resolve conflitos práticos em casos de incomensurabilidade e paridade, mas também fornece uma explicação mais rica de como o desacordo razoável pode coexistir com a objetividade normativa. Finalmente, o artigo destaca as implicações mais amplas deste modelo para os debates na filosofia moral e jurídica, sugerindo que o hibridismo oferece uma maneira fundamentada de reconciliar o pluralismo de valores com a autoridade do direito e da moralidade.

**Palavras-chave:** externalismo sobre razões; normatividade prática; desacordo razoável; hibridismo sobre razões; pluralismo de valores.

## Introduction

The question of what makes something a normative reason has shaped much of the contemporary debate in practical philosophy, occupying a central place in discussions about morality, rationality, action, and value. At stake in these debates is not merely how agents in fact deliberate, but what genuinely counts in favour of actions, attitudes, or choices from a normative point of view. Externalism about reasons<sup>1</sup> has been one of the most influential positions, defending the idea that normative reasons are grounded in objective facts that apply independently of an agent's desires, attitudes, or volitional states. This framework captures the ordinary intuition that many claims about reasons can be correct or incorrect irrespective of personal opinion, thereby sustaining the objectivity of the normative domain. Authors such as Jonathan Dancy (2000), David Enoch (2011), Derek Parfit (2011), and Thomas M. Scanlon (2014) have developed versions of this approach, all committed to the idea that there are irreducible normative truths that guide our deliberation. Yet despite its intuitive appeal, externalism faces significant difficulties.

A first difficulty, which has been much discussed in the literature, is what might be termed *the problem of explanatory insufficiency*: externalism often fails to provide satisfying explanations for why certain reasons hold decisive weight in contexts of practical deliberation. More fundamental, however, is *the problem of reasonable disagreement*. In many areas of our practical lives (i.e., whether in choosing a profession, deciding to marry,

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<sup>1</sup> The debate between internalism and externalism about reasons should not be confused with the debate between motivational internalism and externalism. Broadly speaking, motivational internalism holds that there is a necessary connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act in accordance with it, whereas motivational externalism denies this thesis. For a more detailed discussion of the various senses of internalism and externalism in metaethical debates, see Darwall (1992).



or interpreting the law in controversial cases) we encounter situations where rational and sincere agents, equally responsive to the facts, nevertheless reach divergent conclusions about what they have most reason to do. A purely externalist framework, which insists that all reasons are given by objective facts, leaves little conceptual room for such disagreements. As a result, externalism risks portraying disagreement as irrational or mistaken, rather than recognizing it as a pervasive feature of our normative practices.

In this article, I argue that a more adequate account can be found in hybridism about reasons, which proposes that while most reasons are indeed discovered, in line with the externalist view, agents also have the capacity to create new reasons in situations where discovered reasons fail to settle what should be done. By integrating both discovered and created reasons within a single framework, hybridism offers a way of reconciling the objectivity of normativity with the plurality of reasonable courses of action. The result is a richer and more faithful picture of our deliberative practices, one that accounts for the persistence of disagreement among rational agents without collapsing into relativism or arbitrariness.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I shall offer an overview of the commitments and ambitions of externalism about reasons and then examine the problem of reasonable disagreement and explain why externalism is unable to account for it satisfactorily. Next, I shall introduce hybridism about reasons, with special attention to Chang's formulation<sup>2</sup>, and show how it resolves the problem of disagreement while addressing three important objections. I then shall turn to three objections that have been raised against the hybridist position and argue that none of them undermines the core hybridist thesis. Finally, I shall discuss the broader implications of hybridism for moral and legal philosophy, suggesting that it provides a promising middle path between the extremes of externalism and voluntarism.

## **Externalism about Reasons under Scrutiny**

Before beginning the analysis properly, two clarifications must be made. First, the question of the normative source of practical reasons is not addressed by a normative theory such as utilitarianism or deontology. It is not a question about whether some feature *x* of an action is a reason to perform it because *x* maximizes happiness or the well-being of all

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<sup>2</sup> Although I disagree with important aspects of Chang's (2013, 2017, 2020) version of hybridism, I will take her position as the starting point for assessing the hybridist response to the problem at hand. My disagreement with her account does not pose any difficulty for the present discussion.



affected individuals. Nevertheless, this does not mean that one cannot derive a utilitarian or deontological answer to the question of the normative source of practical reasons. Such an answer must, however, be framed in metanormative terms. For this reason, it is crucial to emphasize that this is, above all, a metaphysical question about the foundation of practical normativity in general.

Second, it must also be noted that there are distinct questions that could be confused with this one. The question of the source of practical normativity asks what *metaphysically* determines something as a reason and from where its normative force originates. It aims to understand what makes a consideration a reason for acting (Scanlon, 1998). This is different, however, from the question that asks about the normative content of practical reasons or about the nature of their normative force (Chang, 2013). Although these questions are undoubtedly interconnected, they can be considered independently without theoretical loss.

With these clarifications in place, an influential answer to what makes something a normative reason for acting is offered by externalist theories of reasons. The strength of externalism lies in its capacity to explain the ordinary view that many claims about reasons can be correct or incorrect independently of an agent's opinions. This is because our ordinary normative practices presuppose the existence of right answers to certain questions. For example, we assume that if two people act in the same way under the same circumstances, then either both acted rightly or both acted wrongly. We also assume that if an agent fails to recognize a reason she has to act in a specific way, she may be subject to criticism by others. Moreover, we take it that no one is in a better position than anyone else to recognize certain facts as reasons for action, since they are equally accessible to all. In each of these scenarios, the common-sense view of practical reasons presupposes a strict parallel between the practical and theoretical domains. Just as there are truths about the physical world and about numbers, so there are correct answers to practical questions, which we may come to discover by engaging adequately in rational and critical debate.

Defenders of externalism (e.g., Dancy, 2000; Enoch, 2011; Parfit, 2011; Scanlon, 2014) seek to capture this common-sense view that there are right answers to questions about what we ought to do in particular circumstances. They locate the source of practical normativity in a realm of normative facts that render some non-normative fact a reason for acting. For example, the normative fact that pain is bad gives me a reason not to press my finger against a knife blade, just as the normative fact that we must do everything to stay alive gives me a reason to immediately exit a burning building. In both scenarios, if someone

were to ask me why I acted in one way or another, my answer could point directly to the fact itself or to the particular value associated with it. Of course, there are different versions of externalism about reasons, but what unifies this position is the idea that normative facts are external in the sense that they *categorically* oblige us to act in a certain way, regardless of our epistemic access to them.

To further clarify this position, consider the work of David Enoch (2011, p. 1). In *Taking Morality Seriously*, he asserts that his robust realism is committed to the existence of irreducible normative truths, which are objective, universal, and absolute: “They are independent of us, of our desires, and of our will (or anyone else’s will). And our thought or discourse about them is not merely an expression of practical attitudes, but a representation of those truths and normative facts”. For Enoch, normative truths are discovered in the same way as empirical or mathematical truths, which means that the former deserve the same epistemic respect as the latter. Just as there are mathematical standards for answering mathematical questions and scientific standards for answering scientific questions, there are also normative standards for answering questions about what we ought to do. Together with other authors, such as Scanlon (2014), Enoch emphasizes the parallel between the existence of truths in the normative domain and their existence in the empirical and mathematical domains.

Enoch’s argument in defense of this theory is complex, but its general structure is as follows. In the philosophy of mathematics and science, *explanatory indispensability* arguments are used to justify ontological commitments to the existence of electrons and numbers. For example, there are many inferences to the best explanation involving electrons, which implies their existence. If our best theories quantify over electrons, then we ought to believe that they are at least approximately true. Having an adequate explanatory role is a necessary condition for justified belief in the existence of some fact. This would present a problem for the thesis of irreducible normative truths, since certain judgments and actions may be better explained by psychological, historical, or cultural facts rather than by the existence of moral facts. However, Enoch (2011) argues that the explanatory indispensability argument is only a particular instance of a more general type of argument, which also has non-explanatory instances, what he calls *deliberative indispensability*. His point is that belief in normative truths is indispensable for the very project in which we are engaged when deciding what we ought to do (McPherson & Plunkett, 2015). The existence of normative truths does not depend on their explanatory role, but on the fact that they provide appropriate meaning to our practical lives. As Enoch states:



Deliberative indispensability is just as respectable as explanatory indispensability and can equally ground ontological commitments. Indeed, I argue that thinking about deliberation naturally leads to the conclusion that irreducible normative facts are indispensable for deliberation (Enoch, 2011, p. 11).

Enoch's position is highly attractive to those who wish to secure some degree of objectivity for the practical domain, as I do. Nevertheless, there seems to be a problem with this view of the source of practical normativity. It may be true that, in most cases, we discover normative truths by being responsive to the relevant evidence. I can discover that I have a reason to leave a building immediately by performing the epistemic exercise of believing that it is on fire. And if someone asks me why I acted this way, a good answer would be to point directly to the fact itself. No further explanation seems necessary, since in many circumstances, the fact that something is a reason for acting is self-grounding. Explanations simply reach bedrock, to use Wittgenstein's (2022) expression. But there are cases in which matters are not so simple. One such example is deciding between pursuing a legal career or becoming a philosopher. In scenarios such as this, the normative relations between competing reasons are highly complex and context-dependent, making it possible for two agents to reasonably disagree about which course of action is better in a given situation.

This does not mean that, *all things considered*, one reason is not stronger than the other. The externalist may argue that if I were to take into account all the relevant variables for decision-making, I would be able to see which reason is stronger. However, in cases such as this, it does not seem satisfactory merely to declare: "Here are the relevant normative facts you must recognize as a reason to pursue a legal career". Such an explanation cannot close the chain of questioning provoked by the "why?" inquiry, since it lacks the explanatory power to resolve the issue definitively. Thus, there is an explanatory gap in scenarios where we may reasonably disagree about what we ought to do. Recognizing the need for additional justification is crucial. In *hard cases*<sup>3</sup>, it is wholly unsatisfactory to settle the matter by saying something like, "That's just how things are". Externalism about reasons is committed to the view that, at least in such cases, no further explanation will be provided.

As I see it, there is a more fundamental problem underlying this explanatory

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<sup>3</sup> Dworkin states that hard cases are those in which the answer to a legal question cannot be found directly in rules or precedents. He argues that "when no clear precedent applies, judges must turn to principles that are implicit in the body of legal doctrine as a whole, aiming for the interpretation that makes the law the best it can be" (Dworkin, 1986, p. 240).

insufficiency. I believe that externalism cannot offer an explanation precisely where it is most needed because it is unable to address what may be called *the problem of reasonable disagreement*. At times, explaining our choices requires considering elements about ourselves (i.e., the kind of person we are or aspire to become). Subjective facts help fill the explanatory gap in scenarios where we cannot satisfactorily answer the “why?” question merely by appealing to an objective fact about the world. I argue that there is a clear difference between cases in which a person has a reason to turn the steering wheel of a car because otherwise she will run over a pedestrian (Scanlon, 2014), and cases in which an agent considers all the relevant facts (e.g., social recognition, financial stability) to determine which career she has a stronger reason to pursue, and ultimately concludes that the balance of reasons does not tilt decisively in either direction (Chang, 2013).

The first of these cases, which constitutes the majority of decision-making instances in our lives, captures the objective nature of practical reasons. We assume that a debate in which agents reason properly will lead to a convergence of opinions among them. If all participants act in good faith and are sensitive to the weight of reasons presented, there will necessarily be agreement on the issue at hand. In the example above, it seems implausible to imagine any reasonable disagreement about whether a driver has (or does not have) a reason to turn the steering wheel of the car, since failing to do so would result in running over a pedestrian. The state of affairs in this scenario categorically determines what the driver has reason to do. Although the pluralism of conceptions of the good is a central feature of contemporary societies, there are significant areas of convergence in the use of *thick ethical concepts* (Williams, 1985). We converge in our judgment, for example, that brutality and recklessness are wrong, and that loyalty and kindness are right.

In contrast, in the case of choosing a profession, it seems entirely plausible to imagine the possibility of reasonable disagreement between different individuals. Opposing parties in the debate may offer equally justified reasons. Situations of this nature do not merely involve disagreements arising from an agent’s lack of information or inability to carry something out, such that the practical conflict could be resolved by simply adding a new fact about the world to the balance of reasons. Rather, in these cases, the disagreement is profound in the sense of being rooted in a fundamental dispute over certain values. And there is no way to circumvent this difficulty other than by invoking the normative powers we possess to create new reasons for acting. Of course, most ordinary practical conflicts may be resolved if we consider the relevant facts and establish a qualified rational debate. But the point is that the common-sense view assumes that practical conflicts are a pervasive

feature of the phenomenon of practical normativity, which externalism does not seem capable of adequately explaining.

Following Ruth Chang's (2022) position, my hypothesis for explaining this shortcoming is that externalism operates with a trichotomous picture of practical normativity. It considers only three options for evaluating choice alternatives: (1) reason *a* is stronger than reason *b* with respect to achieving goal *c*; (2) reason *a* is weaker than reason *b* with respect to achieving goal *c*; or (3) reason *a* and reason *b* are equally good with respect to achieving goal *c*. We assume the same holds for basic normative relations in general. When we compare two items with respect to any normative consideration, we assume that, if they can be compared with respect to that consideration, they must stand in one of the normative relations analogous to "greater than", "less than", or "equal to".

There are no difficulties with (1) and (2), since, *all things considered*, objective facts about the world categorically determine what ought to be done in both cases. The problem, however, lies with (3), since the externalist's resolution of the conflict simply asks the agent to select one course of action without providing any reason-guided orientation for doing so. While this might be tolerable in contexts of trivial and practically irrelevant decisions, option (3) fails to capture the normative significance of practical conflicts when we face genuine reasonable disagreements. There are situations in which two options may stand in a relation such that it is rational to choose either, yet where the choice is far from arbitrary, it is bound up with who the agent is and what she values most deeply.

In general, practical conflicts occur in situations where fundamental values are at stake. In intrapersonal cases, this might mean choosing a profession or deciding whom to marry; in interpersonal cases, it may mean defending one social value over another or granting one person a right at the expense of another. In such cases, option (3) does not illuminate the possibility that opposing parties are considering incomparable alternatives (Raz, 1986) or alternatives that stand in a relation of parity (Chang, 2017). Not infrequently, we encounter situations in which no normative relation exists between the alternatives to determine which one gives us a conclusive reason to act. No objective fact about the world can categorically settle the balance of reasons, placing the burden of decision upon us. Choosing in such a context requires considering what makes our lives good and meaningful.

In intrapersonal cases, consider Maria's situation, who is a friendly colleague, highly respected for her judgment and deep knowledge of various topics (Tenenbaum, 2024). Over the years, she has helped many colleagues make decisions about early retirement, carefully analyzing their situations and concluding that the options were on a par. Now, however, it is



her turn to retire. She faces alternatives that seem equally good, with no conclusive reason to favor one over the other.

In cases such as this, it seems entirely plausible to imagine two agents reasonably disagreeing about what Maria has reason to do in those circumstances. It seems rationally permissible to choose either option. Unlike most cases where we assert that if one person believes that  $p$  and another believes that  $not-p$ , only one can be correct, this type of reasoning appears to reach a clear limit in Maria's case. This is because the difficulty in making decisions in cases of practical conflict is not due to a lack of information or uncertainty, but to the fact that the available alternatives cannot be ranked in terms of what is *objectively* better.

For this reason, I contend that the externalist solution to the problem of reasonable disagreement neglects the role of the agent in determining what reasons she has to act. Cases of practical conflict are not merely cases in which the agent recognizes objective facts about the world. They also involve the consideration of values central to the kind of person we aspire to be. To some extent, each agent expects to remain faithful to her practical identity, which requires taking subjective aspects into account when determining how she ought to act. Although I disagree with the internalist path followed by Bernard Williams (1973) in the debate on the normativity of reasons, I believe it is essential to draw on one of his lessons to address the phenomenology of normative conflicts. Williams opposes act-utilitarianism to show that practical reasoning involves more than simply maximizing aggregate utility. For example, there is such a thing as the agent's integrity that must be taken into account. In cases of practical conflict, the agent identifies "with his actions as deriving from projects and attitudes [...] which he takes seriously at the deepest level, and which give meaning to his life" (Williams, 1973, p. 101). This point by Williams is fundamental because it highlights a nuance about the source of practical normativity that must be explained by different theories, but which, as far as I can see, is inadequately addressed by externalism.

If what I have argued makes sense, then externalism about reasons cannot adequately explain the nature of practical conflicts, since it insists that objective facts about the world provide all reasons for acting. There seems to be no space for reasonable disagreement in a full externalist approach. But things need not be this way. The positive aspect of my proposal lies in arguing that hybridism about reasons resolves the problem of reasonable disagreement by combining aspects of externalism and voluntarism about



reasons<sup>4</sup>. While maintaining that most reasons are discovered, as externalism proposes, hybridism also holds that under certain circumstances, agents must create new reasons through volitional acts, a central feature of voluntarism. Thus, when an agent faces a situation where objective reasons are exhausted and needs to create new reasons to decide what to do, there may be good reasons to follow any of the available courses of action. In such scenarios, the decision must be guided by the agent's own commitments and volitional acts. However, this does not imply that the non-chosen course of action is irrational or unjustified, nor that there are no good reasons for following it. In cases of normative conflict, the available courses of action are not better, worse, or equal in value relative to one another, because the qualitative differences between the relevant values create situations in which these values cannot be hierarchically ordered. This is the nature of practical conflicts: the agent cannot decide what to do merely by appealing to objective facts about the world.

Therefore, to explain cases of reasonable disagreement, it is necessary to revise the externalist view that “the mark of rational agency is the ability to recognize reasons and to be responsive to them” (Raz, 1986, p. 372). This conception of rational agency is challenged by scenarios of practical conflict, for it would inevitably lead to a kind of decision paralysis. Yet even in situations of disagreement, a decision must be made, and it is up to the agent to assume responsibility for it based on who she is or who she is supposed to be (Williams, 1981). In general, this idea is sufficiently familiar. We need only recall situations in which we commit ourselves to a cause, a person, or a personal project. In these cases, the reasons created by our commitments make it true that we now have a stronger reason to adhere to a particular party, marry a certain person, or pursue a specific career. The reasons created by commitment place us under an obligation to act in accordance with our own goals and intentions, which ultimately tip the balance of reasons in one direction.

## Hybridism about Reasons as a Solution

As we have viewed so far, externalism conceives normative reasons as objective and

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<sup>4</sup> Voluntarism about reasons is the view that the source of practical normativity lies in acts of will or in the agent's reflective endorsement, rather than in independent normative facts. Unlike internalism about reasons, which grounds reasons in contingent desires or inclinations, voluntarism emphasizes the active role of rational will in generating reasons. At the same time, it differs from externalism, since it does not appeal to objective properties or to an autonomous realm of normative facts. In Christine Korsgaard's formulation (1996), the ultimate normative source is the reflexive structure of agency itself, which requires each agent to regard themselves as capable of evaluating, endorsing, or rejecting their motivations and principles. Practical reasons thus derive from the way in which agents reflexively constitute themselves as beings who act in light of practical identities and, ultimately, in light of humanity as a constitutive value

independent of the will or of any particular internal states of agents. On this account, reasons are determined by normative facts that categorically impose themselves upon us. This view secures a sense of objectivity but reveals serious difficulty when confronted with the problem of reasonable disagreement. Even if externalism posits that reasons are fixed by facts about the world, it struggles to explain why conscientious, informed, and rational agents may nevertheless arrive at divergent conclusions about what they have most reason to do.

Maria's case above illustrates this problem vividly. Having advised numerous colleagues about early retirement and often concluding that their options were equally good, she now faces the same decision herself. When it comes to her own life, she finds both alternatives (i.e., retiring early or continuing to work) supported by weighty considerations. Neither option is normatively deficient; both appear to stand on a par. For the externalist, however, this is troubling. If all reasons are fixed by objective facts, there should be a uniquely correct answer. Yet our lived experience of such decisions suggests otherwise. Choices about which career to pursue, whether to marry a particular person, or how to interpret the law in *hard cases*, they all present situations where reasonable disagreement is not reducible to ignorance, error, or bias. Instead, they exemplify *genuine* practical conflict.

From my perspective, hybridism, as articulated most prominently by Ruth Chang (2009, 2013, 2017, 2020) and further developed by Sarah K. Paul and Jennifer M. Morton (2014), and Jeff Behrends (2015, 2016), offers a promising solution. At its core, hybridism is best understood as a pluralist view about the source of practical normativity, combining elements of externalism and voluntarism. It maintains that reasons can be either discovered (i.e., given by objective normative facts) or created (i.e., generated through the agent's acts of commitment and self-definition). Importantly, this does not mean that any particular reason has two sources of normativity simultaneously, which would lead to decision paralysis. Rather, each reason has a single normative source in a way analogous to how one and the same object in physics may exert different kinds of forces distinguished by their source, be it gravitational or electromagnetic (Chang, 2013, p. 178).

A central contribution of Chang's (2013) account is to clarify how these two sources interact by imposing two constraints:

- (i) *The metaphysical constraint*: Created reasons only come into play once discovered reasons have been exhausted, that is, when the given reasons are unable to determine what we have most reason to do. This occurs in two types of cases: (a) when competing reasons are incommensurable, such that no common measure

exists to establish which is stronger; or (b) when they are on a par, such that although neither can be ranked above the other, both are better than a significantly inferior option. In these circumstances, the metaphysical priority of discovered reasons no longer applies, opening the space for agents to create reasons through acts of commitment.

(ii) *The normative constraint*: Even when agents create reasons, these cannot alter the valence or weight of the reasons that are given. If the fact that João is my friend gives me a strong reason to visit him in the hospital, no new reason that I create, say, a personal commitment to visit strangers in hospitals, can overturn the fact that visiting João remains the stronger reason. Created reasons are not a license to reshape the balance of given reasons; they function instead as normative supplements in situations where the given reasons leave the balance undecided.

With these constraints in place, hybridism can explain how a single consideration may count as a reason for action in distinct ways, depending on whether it is grounded in discovered or created sources of normativity. For instance, the fact that João is hospitalized may give me a reason to visit him, either because he is my friend (i.e., a discovered reason) or because I have voluntarily undertaken a commitment to visit hospitalized people (i.e., a created reason). In both cases, however, there is only one normative source for my reason to act.

In practice, this means that when Maria faces two equally good alternatives, she can rationally create a decisive reason by committing to one path in light of her identity and aspirations. Such acts of self-authorship are not arbitrary. They are structured by the values already in play and by the agent's broader conception of a meaningful life. By choosing, Maria effectively commits herself to an image of who she is or wants to be, thereby creating a new reason that tips the balance in favor of one option. Crucially, this does not make the rejected option irrational or unreasonable. Both possibilities remain normatively valid. What resolves the impasse is the agent's self-constituting act of will.

This insight reshapes how we understand reasonable disagreement. Hybridism explains why two rational agents, equally informed and equally responsive to the facts, might justifiably arrive at opposing conclusions. One may commit to prioritizing family life, grounding her choice in values of intimacy and care, while another may commit to public service, grounding his choice in ideals of justice and contribution. Both are rationally justified,

not because truth is relative, but because the structure of normativity allows for a plurality of reasonable commitments once given reasons are exhausted.

### **Possible Objections and Some Replies**

The hybridist position, however, is not without difficulties, and it is important to address them directly. Three objections deserve particular attention<sup>5</sup>.

The first objection concerns the alleged arbitrariness of the act of commitment itself. If the act of commitment cannot be guided by discovered reasons (which are by hypothesis in parity) and cannot be guided by created reasons, which do not yet exist, then it seems to be no more reason-guided than the mere act of picking one option at random. On this view, hybridism does not go beyond the externalist position it seeks to improve upon, since both simply ask the agent to select without normative guidance.

As much as I can see, this sort of objection rests on a misunderstanding of what it means for an act to be arbitrary in the normatively relevant sense. Chang's (2013) account distinguishes between causal arbitrariness and normative arbitrariness. An act is normatively arbitrary when it lacks any rational orientation, when it is, in effect, equivalent to flipping a coin. But the act of commitment, as Chang understands it, is not of this kind. It is an exercise of *self-authorship*, a response to the question "what kind of person do I want to be?" rather than "which discovered reason outweighs the other?" This question has its own normative structure. It draws upon second-order considerations about the agent's practical identity (e.g., values, projects, and conceptions of a meaningful life), rather than upon the first-order balance of given reasons. Paul and Morton (2014) seem to suggest this point further by arguing that acts of commitment function as plans in the Bratmanian sense. They are not arbitrary because they are embedded within temporally extended structures of agency that already possess normative orientation. The agent who commits to retiring early is not choosing at random. She is expressing and constituting who she takes herself to be, and that expression is answerable to standards of coherence and authenticity even when it is not answerable to the balance of discovered reasons.

The second objection targets the internal mechanics of reason-creation. According to one possible reading of Chang (2009), when discovered reasons are exhausted, agents may create new reasons either by elevating a previously irrelevant consideration into a

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out aspects of the hybridist position that still required further explanation, which I attempt to address in this section.



reason or by taking a consideration already present in the first stage of deliberation and transforming it into a voluntarist reason, so that the same consideration yields two distinct reasons for the same action. Both moves seem problematic. The first is implausible because it suggests that agents can act on considerations that they themselves regard as irrelevant. The second leads to deeply counterintuitive results, because it would require us to take seriously claims such as “I had two reasons to accept the job: the salary increase, and the salary increase”.

It strikes me that this objection has genuine force, and it points to a real tension in Chang’s formulation. However, the most defensible reading of hybridism does not require either of the problematic moves the objection targets. What the act of commitment does is not add a new quantitative weight to an existing consideration, nor import an acknowledged irrelevancy. Rather, it transforms the agent’s normative *relationship* to a consideration that is already present: a consideration that was previously just one weight on the balance becomes constitutive of the agent’s practical identity. Behrens (2015) makes this point clearly by arguing that created reasons do not supplement given reasons additively but alter the deliberative landscape qualitatively. I think that a useful analogy is the case of promising. When I promise to visit a friend, I do not duplicate the reason that friendship provides, nor do I invoke an irrelevant consideration. I enter into a new normative relationship (i.e., the promissory relationship) which has a distinct source and a distinct character, even though its object is the same action. Similarly, the agent who commits to retiring early is not counting the same consideration twice. She is creating a new normative tie between herself and one of the options, a tie grounded in self-authorship rather than in the objective features of the alternatives.

*The third objection* concerns the normative consequences of commitment after a decision has been made. If committing to option A creates a decisive reason in favor of A, then choosing B immediately after the decision would seem irrational. Yet this seems wrong. From the agent’s own perspective, the alternative may still appear to be a perfectly reasonable option, even after she has committed. If hybridism implies that commitment instantly renders the unchosen alternative irrational, it imposes an implausibly rigid structure on practical deliberation. Here, the normative constraint built into hybridism provides the most effective reply. Recall that created reasons cannot alter the valence or weight of given reasons. This means that after Maria commits to retiring early, the given reasons in favor of continuing to work retain exactly the weight they had before her commitment. What has changed is that an additional reason (i.e., the commitment itself) now tilts the balance in



favor of retirement. The unchosen alternative does not thereby become irrational. It remains supported by the same given reasons as before. What the commitment produces is a reason-based asymmetry, not a normative nullification of the alternative. The sense in which it would be irrational to immediately reverse the decision derives not from the commitment alone but from the broader practical context: the expectations generated, the resources invested, and the integrity of the agent's deliberative project<sup>6</sup>. As the agent's life becomes increasingly organized around the chosen path, the facts about that organization themselves provide independent reasons to maintain it. But this is a gradual and context-sensitive process, not an instant normative foreclosure of the unchosen option. Hybridism thus preserves the intuition that, even after a commitment is made, the alternative remains normatively intelligible, while still explaining how commitment can rationally resolve practical impasses.

These replies do not dissolve all difficulties that face hybridism. A fully satisfying account of the conditions under which commitments bind agents, the standards by which their authenticity can be assessed, and the extent to which they can be revised would require further investigation. What the replies show, however, is that the most pressing objections do not undermine the core hybridist thesis. I take it that hybridism remains a more adequate framework than externalism for explaining the structure of reasonable disagreement, and the objections considered here point toward productive refinements rather than fatal flaws.

Moreover, hybridism illuminates a central phenomenological aspect of our moral and practical lives: the sense that, in some contexts, our choices are not fully determined by the world but also by who we are. Externalism tends to flatten this phenomenology, insisting that all practical conflicts must have a uniquely correct resolution. Hybridism instead respects the ordinary intuition that our most important decisions (e.g., those involving careers, commitments, and personal relationships) cannot always be resolved by appealing solely to objective facts. By granting agents the normative power to create reasons, hybridism situates responsibility within the agent herself, making her authorship a constitutive element of rational action.

This also avoids the danger of practical paralysis. A purely externalist view might suggest that, when faced with balanced reasons, the rational agent has no sufficient grounds to act, leading to an impasse. Hybridism resists this conclusion by showing that rational agency is not exhausted by passive responsiveness to given reasons. It also includes an

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<sup>6</sup> Considerations of the kind Williams (1981) captures under the notion of integrity.

active dimension, whereby agents shape the normative landscape through commitments, promises, and self-defining acts. In this sense, hybridism aligns with Williams' (1981) insight that integrity (i.e., remaining faithful to one's projects and attitudes that give meaning to life) is a crucial component of rational deliberation. Thus, hybridism provides a richer explanatory framework for cases of reasonable disagreement. It accounts for the phenomenon that in hard cases (whether about careers, relationships, or legal interpretation) agents may have equally justified reasons to act differently. At the same time, it preserves the objectivity of normativity by affirming that most reasons remain given by facts, while allowing commitments to play a normative role precisely where those facts underdetermine action.

In my view, the strength of hybridism lies in its ability to reconcile two central features of our normative lives: the objectivity of normative reasons and the plurality of reasonable courses of action. By integrating discovered and created reasons within a single framework, hybridism shows how disagreement among rational agents is not a flaw to be eliminated but a structural feature of practical normativity. It illuminates why plurality and disagreement persist without collapsing into relativism or arbitrariness, thereby providing a more faithful account of how we deliberate, commit, and act in the face of complex moral and practical choices.

### **Implications for Legal and Moral Philosophy**

Legal practice provides an especially vivid arena for hybridism, as it constantly oscillates between the discovery of binding reasons and the creation of new reasons through institutional commitments. Law claims authority over subjects independently of their desires, a claim that fits naturally with externalism. Statutes, constitutional norms, and precedents purport to bind agents regardless of whether they endorse them. At the same time, adjudication and legislation are saturated with value conflicts that cannot be fully resolved by the discovery of reasons alone. Courts must often go beyond what is strictly *given* by texts or traditions, creating normative stability through decisions that generate new reasons for compliance, such as predictability, coherence, and institutional legitimacy. Hybridism makes sense of this dual structure, since legal reasons are partly discovered (grounded in constitutional principles, statutory purposes, and moral facts) and partly created (grounded in precedents, procedural commitments, and role-based responsibilities).

This hybrid account clarifies familiar tensions in jurisprudence. Consider the debate between Ronald Dworkin's (2011) *right answer thesis* and H. L. A. Hart's (2012) emphasis on judicial discretion. From a hybridist standpoint, there are domains in which a unique right

answer is fixed by discovered reasons (i.e., cases where the law and background moral principles converge to yield a determinate outcome). Yet there are also domains where discovered reasons plateau, offering no conclusive guidance. In such cases, adjudication requires an exercise of reason-guided commitment. Judges commit to particular interpretations, doctrinal frameworks, or policy priorities that then generate new normative reasons within the legal order. The creative role of the judge, in this sense, is not an arbitrary leap into subjectivity but a normatively intelligible act situated within an institutional background that confers legitimacy.

Hybridism also illuminates the structural role of precedent. Precedents are not merely descriptive records of past judicial decisions but normative commitments that create additional reasons for future courts to follow them. They embody institutional values (e.g., stability, equality before the law, and predictability) that are not simply *discovered* facts but outcomes of collective commitments. The hybridist model helps explain why both the discovery of underlying constitutional or moral truths and the creative establishment of precedential practices are central to the authority of law.

In the broader context of moral philosophy, hybridism supports a nuanced account of responsibility and moral criticism. Agents can be faulted for two distinct kinds of failures: (1) failing to recognize discovered reasons, such as ignoring clear evidence of harm, and (2) making commitments that are unintelligible, inconsistent, or poorly integrated with their identities and roles. However, where parity obtains and commitments are intelligible, plural permissibility is not a defect but a structural feature of normativity. Hybridism thereby explains why we sometimes admire agents who choose differently than we do, even when their decisions diverge from ours, and why legal systems can recognize the reasonableness of dissenting opinions even when they are not adopted as the law.

Furthermore, hybridism provides a framework for reconciling value pluralism with the aspiration to normative unity. Values often conflict (e.g., justice with mercy, equality with liberty, stability with innovation). Externalist theories struggle to account for how such conflicts can yield more than one rationally permissible outcome, while relativist or subjectivist approaches risk undermining objectivity altogether. Hybridism allows us to see that while discovered reasons anchor the objectivity of our normative practices, commitments provide the means to integrate diverse values without reducing them to a single master value. This dual structure is especially relevant in democratic societies, where law must both reflect common normative standards and accommodate deep pluralism in moral outlooks.



Taken together, these implications suggest that hybridism offers a richer account of how law and morality function in practice. It shows how authority can be both discovered and created, how responsibility can be grounded both in responsiveness to reasons and in intelligible commitments, and how reasonable disagreement can coexist with a shared normative order. Of course, these suggestions would need to be developed in much greater detail, since each of them opens up an entire field of inquiry in its own right. For instance, the claim that authority is simultaneously discovered and created invites a re-examination of jurisprudential debates on the nature of legal obligation and the legitimacy of judicial creativity. Likewise, the account of responsibility that hybridism provides (anchored partly in responsiveness to objective reasons and partly in the intelligibility of self-shaping commitments) calls for further investigation into the conditions under which such commitments genuinely bind agents. And the suggestion that reasonable disagreement can coexist with a shared normative order demands a fuller articulation of the institutional and moral mechanisms that make such coexistence sustainable. I will not attempt to pursue these avenues here. My objective is more modest: to sketch the outlines of how this debate could be fruitfully carried forward in addressing pressing questions within legal and moral philosophy, leaving a more systematic elaboration for future work.

## **Concluding Remarks**

To sum up, the problem of reasonable disagreement presses hard on externalist theories of reasons. By insisting on a single correct answer in all cases, externalism risks misrepresenting the complexity of practical life. By conceding plural permissibility without explanation, it risks undermining its own claim to objectivity. Hybridism, in turn, offers a principled middle path. It preserves objective, discovered reasons while acknowledging a constrained, reason-generating role for the will in parity cases, where commitments intelligibly complete practical justification. The objections considered in the paper (i.e., concerning the arbitrariness of commitment, the mechanics of reason-creation, and the normative consequences of decision) do not defeat this view. They point instead to features of hybridism that require careful articulation: the second-order normative structure of self-authorship, the qualitative rather than additive character of created reasons, and the gradual rather than instantaneous normative implications of commitment. Properly understood, hybridism accommodates these concerns without abandoning its core thesis.

The result is a model that explains how rational agents can justifiably disagree without error or relativism, and why legal and moral practices can command authority amidst plural

values. This is not merely a theoretical refinement but a practical achievement. It illuminates how individuals and institutions can act responsibly in a world marked by conflict, diversity, and deep moral disagreement. By integrating the insights of externalism with the creative role of commitment, hybridism secures a richer account of normativity. It acknowledges the objectivity of most reasons while explaining those contexts where reasonable disagreement persists. In doing so, it better captures the phenomenology of practical life and provides a more adequate framework for guiding both moral deliberation and legal adjudication.

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