Two kinds of skepticism about practical reason:

Content skepticism: What can reason tell us about our choices and actions?

Motivation skepticism: Can reason motivate us to make certain choices and actions?

Korsgaard’s first claim: Motivation skepticism depends on content skepticism.

Illustration: Hume’s argument that reason alone can never provide a motive.

(1) Reasoning establishes only mathematical/logical truths, or causal truths.

(2) Mathematical/logical truths are relevant to action only insofar as they establish causal truths.

(3) Causal truths only tell us what means will bring about what ends. They provide a motive only if we desire an end.

(4) Therefore, reasoning alone can never provide a motive.

The conclusion, (4), expresses a kind of motivation skepticism. But the premises, (1)–(3), express a kind of content skepticism: that the only thing that reason can tell us about our choices and actions is how to achieve them—not, say, whether they are worthwhile.

Internalism: if one makes a sincere moral judgment, then one is motivated to comply.

Externalism, one can make a sincere moral judgment without being motivated to comply.

Korsgaard then suggests that Williams’s paper applies this distinction more broadly, not simply to moral judgments, but to claims about reasons in general, whether or not the reasons in question are moral. This is slightly misleading. It suggests that:

According to Williams’s internalism, if one sincerely judges that one has reason to phi, then one is motivated to phi.

But, in fact:

According to Williams’s internalism, if one has reason to phi, then one is motivated to phi.

Korsgaard’s second claim: True irrationality is possible.

Hume says that, loosely speaking, a passion can be irrational when it is based on a false belief about the existence of some object or about some causal relation. But, Korsgaard observes, such a passion is not really irrational. It is based on a false belief, but relative to that belief it is perfectly rational. In cases of true irrationality, one fails to respond appropriately to reasons that are “available” to one: that one is, or is in a position to be, aware of.

Korsgaard’s third claim: The correct internalist requirement is that reasons for action must be capable of motivating rational persons, not that they must motivate persons in general.

(Believing that one has reasons for action must motivate one insofar as one is rational? That one has reasons for action entails that one would be motivated insofar as one is rational?)
Motivation skepticism results from misunderstanding what the internalist requirement says: from assuming that reasons for action must motivate us period, when in fact they must only motivate us insofar as we are rational. “My speculation is that skepticism about practical reason is sometimes based on a false impression of what the internalism requirement requires. It does not require that rational considerations always succeed in motivating us. All it requires is that rational considerations succeed in motivating us insofar as we are rational” (321).

How the second claim supports the third:
Denying cases of true irrationality and misunderstanding the internalist requirement go together. For if there are no cases of true irrationality, then whenever a reason will motivate you if are rational, it will motivate you in fact.

How the third claim supports the first:
We first need to know what reasons we have before we can tell whether the (correct) internalist requirement is met. If we can show that we have reason, say, to pursue our greater good, then we can show that the (correct) internalist requirement on our having this reason will be satisfied. So everything turns on whether we can show that we have such reasons for action. Once we do, we get the satisfaction of the internalism requirement for free. So, to repeat Korsgaard’s first claim: motivational skepticism depends on content skepticism.

Korsgaard’s criticism of Williams
What is present in a rational person’s S depends on what principles of reason there are. Again, motivation skepticism depends on content skepticism.

We saw that Williams may be, in fact, a kind of content skeptic. This is because he may believe that “having a reason to phi” cannot mean anything other than that “has an intrinsic desire that phi-ing would serve.” How does Korsgaard’s objection fare when Williams is interpreted in this way? Would her internalism requirement work as a definition of having a reason?

How might we avoid content skepticism?
Criticism of intuitionism: “[I]ntuitionists do not believe in practical reason, properly speaking. They believe there is a branch of theoretical reason that is specifically concerned with morals, by which human beings can be motivated because of a special psychological mechanism: a desire to do one’s duty” (316). What we have a duty, or simply reason, to do cannot be simply another subject matter, like mathematics or physics. Why would it be irrational to fail to be motivated by “the news that something is your duty”? Why would it be any more irrational to fail to be motivated by facts of that kind as it would to fail to be motivated by some fact of astronomy?

A Kantian approach: “If someone were not convinced by the logical operation of conjunction, and so could not reason with conviction from “A” and “B” to “A and B,” we would not be eager to conclude that conjunction was just a theory that some people believe and some people do not. Conjunction is not a theory to believe or disbelieve, but a principle of reasoning” (323). Just as the principle of conjunction is a structural, constitutive feature of thinking, certain rational requirements—including some moral requirements—might be structural, constitutive features of willing.