



Bernard Williams

Edited by ALAN THOMAS

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Bernard Williams

This volume provides a systematic overview and comprehensive assessment of Bernard Williams' contribution to moral philosophy, a field in which Williams was one of the most influential of contemporary philosophers. The seven essays, which were specially commissioned for this volume, examine his work on moral objectivity, the nature of practical reason, moral emotion, the critique of the "morality system," Williams' assessment of the ethical thought of the ancient world, and his later adoption of Nietzsche's method of "genealogy." Collectively, the essays not only engage with Williams' work, but also develop independent philosophical arguments in connection with those topics that have, over the last thirty years, particularly reflected Williams' influence.

Alan Thomas is Senior Lecturer in the department of philosophy at the University of Kent.

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This volume is dedicated to Bernard Williams, 1929–2003

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List of Contributors

EDWARD CRAIG is professor of philosophy emeritus at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *The Mind of God and the Works of Man, Knowledge and the State of Nature*, and numerous papers in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and epistemology.

A. A. LONG is Irving Stone Professor of Literature, Professor of Classics, and affiliated Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley. He is editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, and his other books include *Language and Thought in Sophocles, Hellenistic Philosophy, Stoic Studies*, and *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*.

ROBERT B. LOUDEN is professor of philosophy at the University of Southern Maine. He is the author of *Morality and Moral Theory* and *Kant's Impure Ethics* and is currently preparing *The World We Want: How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us*.

A. W. MOORE is professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *The Infinite, Points of View*, and *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty*. He is also one of Bernard Williams' literary executors and is the editor of Williams' posthumously published collection *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. He is currently writing a book on the evolution of modern metaphysics.

JOHN SKORUPSKI is professor of moral philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. He has published widely in many areas of philosophy. Among his books are *Ethical Explorations* (1999) and *Why Read Mill Today?* (2006).

MICHAEL STOCKER is professor of philosophy at Syracuse University. He is the author of *Plural and Conflicting Values* and, with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions*.

ALAN THOMAS is a senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Kent. He is the author of *Value and Context* and of numerous papers on moral and political philosophy and the philosophy of mind.

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This volume has, for various reasons, been beset by delay. I have, throughout this time, been encouraged to persevere by the support of my partner, Kathryn Brown, my friend Adrian Moore, and a very strong personal sense of how much I owed to Bernard Williams, both professionally and personally. I am more than usually indebted to my contributors for their professionalism and for their forbearance in tolerating long periods of delay in seeing their excellent work appear in print. Bernard's widow, Patricia Williams, has been very supportive and supplied the photograph for the front cover of this volume. I am also grateful to Helen Frowe for her work as a research assistant that helped the volume over the finishing line. I would like to dedicate this volume to Bernard's memory on behalf of all the contributors.

London, 2006

Bernard Williams

Introduction

ALAN THOMAS

At the time of his death in 2003, Bernard Williams was one of the most influential philosophers in Anglo-American philosophy. His contribution to philosophy was very wide-ranging, from metaphysics and epistemology to moral, social, and political philosophy. In the history of philosophy, he made contributions to ancient philosophy, to scholarship on Descartes and to a wide range of other historical subjects.¹ For the purposes of this volume, selection from this wide range of subjects was necessary and I opted to focus on the centre of gravity of Williams' work, moral philosophy. Furthermore, without any editorial intervention, the papers in the volume naturally clustered around the key themes of Williams' later writings from *Shame and Necessity* to *Truth and Truthfulness*, thus complementing a volume of papers on Williams' moral philosophy that focused on his earlier work.²

Williams' early training both in classics and in the philosophical methods of Ryle and Austin inclined him to the piecemeal treatment of philosophical problems; he was not a systematic philosopher. However, over the course of his career, Williams did come to detect a broad consistency and mutual support between many of his distinctive theses in ethics. He remarked that "it is a reasonable demand that what one believes in one area of philosophy should make sense in terms of what one believes elsewhere. One's philosophical beliefs, or approaches, or arguments should hang together (like conspirators perhaps), but this demand falls a long way short of the unity promised by a philosophical system."³ One of the many virtues of the papers assembled here is that this aspect of Williams' work

¹ For a posthumous collection that represents the breadth of Williams' historical interests, see Williams (2006). There are two very helpful surveys of Williams' work as a whole: Cullity (2005), Chappell (2006), and a valuable introduction to his work in Jenkins (2006). See the Guide to Further Reading.

² Altham and Harrison (1995). An exception to this generalization is Williams' thesis that all practical reasons are internal, discussed both in this earlier volume and in this volume by John Skorupski, reflecting its standing as one of the most hotly debated of Williams' claims, much discussed in recent meta-ethics.

³ Williams (1995c), p. 186.

is brought out very clearly. With the benefit of hindsight, his entire philosophical output clearly does not form a system, but there is an underlying consistency and unity of purpose that deflects the charge, sometimes leveled against Williams, that he was a brilliant critic of other philosophers but had no systematic outlook of his own. A systematic outlook, no; a consistent set of theses all arranged around what Williams called “the need to be sceptical,” yes.⁴

Adrian Moore’s paper ranges the furthest outside moral philosophy and into metaphysics in order to assess Williams’ views as to the extent to which moral thought can be reflectively understood to be *objective*. That is because Williams’ approach to this problem, as Moore clearly demonstrates, cannot be understood independently of how he conceived of realism in general and of the differences between how we understand what it is to be realist across different domains. There are both bad and good reasons why Moore’s paper is so important in setting the stage for a clear understanding of Williams’ work in ethics. The bad reason is that some of Williams’ critics have systematically misunderstood his distinctive claim that in certain areas of thought and language we can aspire to a conception of the world maximally independent of our perspective and its peculiarities. In their eagerness to classify that which Williams called the aspiration to an *absolute* conception of the world as a misguided form of “external realism,” to be contrasted with the correct view, “internal realism,” in which this aspiration to objectivity is significantly curbed, several philosophers have misrepresented Williams’ claims in ways that Moore has already demonstrated in earlier work and further clarifies here.⁵

Those critics read the phrase “maximally independent of our conception of the world and its peculiarities” in an uncharitable way as “*totally* independent of our conception of the world and its particularities” and proceed to rehearse familiar arguments against the idea of such an “external realism.” These arguments include the claim that Williams must believe in a “ready-made” world that conceptualizes itself, or imprints itself on our minds unmediated by concepts or by our best standards of rational appraisal. This not only misunderstands Williams’ position but also implies that given that he has made such an obvious error we need not go on to consider further his actual arguments about the ethical in particular. Moore also shows how serious a mistake that view is, precisely because Williams does not import into his account of the ethical a preconceived view of realism, particularly

⁴ The title of a review essay, Williams (1990).

⁵ Moore (1997); see also the discussion in Thomas (2006, ch. 6).

realism about the physical sciences, with the aim of thereby discrediting the claim to objectivity inherent in ethical thought. That standard sceptical strategy, so prominent in the catalogue of errors attributed to him by his internal realist critics, seems to Moore entirely absent from Williams' arguments.

The good reason for the importance of Moore's paper is that no other interpretation of Williams brings out so clearly his overall strategy: that his realism about the scientific is at the service of a proper understanding of the ethical and not vice versa.⁶ Moore downplays Williams' arguments about explanation as a means of motivating his "basic realism," arguing instead that there is a clear sense in which Williams' basic realism "cannot be *argued* for."⁷ But Moore indirectly brings out the importance to Williams not of scientific understanding in general but of social scientific understanding in particular.

Williams brought to prominence in contemporary meta-ethics an idea suggested by Gilbert Ryle and developed by Clifford Geertz, namely, that some ethical concepts can be classified as "thick" ethical concepts as opposed to others that are by contrast "thin."⁸ The basic idea is that some ethical concepts, when used in judgments, seem to give one more detail about their circumstances of application and also, when used, to supply defeasible reasons for action. To illustrate the contrast, the idea is that when used in a judgment by a competent user, the thick ethical concept of **blasphemy** gives you a more detailed grasp of its circumstances of application than a contrasting thin ethical concept like **wrong**; furthermore, its users seem to supply both themselves and others with reasons for action in the course of classifying an action as blasphemous (if they do so correctly).

Given his particular interests in the philosophy of social explanation, Williams also was concerned to understand how the explanation of the use of thick concepts placed special demands on such explanations. His central idea, namely, that repertoires of thick ethical concepts represent "different ways of finding one's way about a social world" was directly connected both to the obvious facts of the plurality of such sets of concepts in contemporary social reality and to the question of the standpoint from which one can explain thick ethical concepts.⁹ Deeply informed about social science and a noted contributor to the philosophy of social explanation, Williams' "basic realism" afforded him a means of articulating how the mere possibility

⁶ Moore, this volume.

⁷ Moore, this volume.

⁸ Williams (1985), pp. 140–142, pp. 217–218, n. 7.

⁹ Williams (1986).

of a social scientific explanation of the ethical raises a specific challenge to *one* means of characterizing its objectivity.¹⁰ That is the argument, put forward by philosophers influenced by the later Wittgenstein, that the mere *existence* of “thick” ethical concepts places certain demands on how a practice using those concepts needs to be explained. They argue that such concepts demand an “internal” explanation from the perspective of a concept user who can share with those in that practice a sense of the evaluative point and purpose of those concepts.¹¹

Williams believed that this claim was simply ambiguous: “sharing” covers both participation and, crucially, enough sympathetic identification to make a social scientific perspective on such practices possible without requiring that the explainer share the practice in the sense of being completely identified with it. That seemed to him to cause problems for one neo-Wittgensteinian strategy in recent meta-ethics, namely, the objectivism of David Wiggins and John McDowell. They have argued that the use of thick concepts frustrates any attempt to isolate an empirical-cum-classificatory component within our ethical judgments from an evaluative component, where the latter represents a psychological projection of values on to a nonevaluative reality. That approach seemed to Williams merely to beg the question in assuming that there was a stable core of shared thick ethical concepts or, in what comes to the same thing, a stable core of shared agreements in judgment.¹² Only that presupposition would sustain the corollary that to understand the shared use of a thick concept was to become *identified* with those engaged in the practice.

Moore describes the framework for this debate while freeing Williams’ views from distortion. He also shifts attention to an alternative means of securing the objective claims of morality that is different from that of the objectivists whom Williams criticized. Moore points out that Williams’ position in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* suggests a different strategy, that of “indirect vindication,” for characterizing the limited objectivity that Williams considered ethical thought could achieve in the inhospitable circumstances of a modern society.¹³ In his own recent work, Moore has developed this line of thought in greater detail.¹⁴

¹⁰ Williams (1985), chapter 8, especially pp. 145–155.

¹¹ Arguments put forward in Wiggins (2000) and McDowell (2001) and further developed in Thomas (2006).

¹² A suspicion first expressed in Williams, (1981b).

¹³ Williams (1985), pp. 167–173.

¹⁴ Moore (2003), (2005).

Moore is not inclined, either in his exegesis of Williams' position or in his working out of a position compatible with the form of indirect vindication that Williams left open as a possibility for ethical thought, to challenge Williams' central argument against the objectivist views of Wiggins and McDowell. In my own contribution to this volume, I suggest that those more sympathetic to the existence of moral knowledge cannot allow Williams' central arguments against what he called "objectivism" to go unchallenged. If all that is left to us is the form of indirect vindication that Moore explores, I think that this argument arrives too late, as it were. Furthermore, it is an argument that is not going to deliver anything like that which the cognitivist set out to defend.¹⁵ I examine in some detail Williams' various and intertwined arguments against an objectivist interpretation of cognitivism in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. In an argument developed at greater length elsewhere, I suggest that Williams' critique of objectivism makes assumptions about the structure of ethical thinking that unfairly prejudice the case for a cognitive and objectivist understanding of a central core of moral claims.¹⁶ Williams makes the assumption that if we are talking of belief in the case of ethical thinking, then the relevant structure of justification is, in his presentation, tacitly presumed to be foundationalist.¹⁷ The cognitivist/objectivist is represented as seeing a group of thick concept users, who make claims using those concepts that are world-involving and yet also involve defeasible reasons for action, as standing entirely outside a repertoire of thick ethical concepts, comparing alternative sets and asking how to go on from this "hyper-reflective" standpoint.

A denial that this is a realistic situation for a group of such users to find themselves in is, in my view, best supported by a realistic description of an epistemology for moral cognitivism that views our ethical knowledge as devolved into particular problem solving contexts. These contexts are structured by which claims to knowledge are held fixed in that context and

¹⁵ An argument put forward in Thomas (2005a).

¹⁶ Thomas (2006), chapter 6. There is an issue here that appears terminological but quickly becomes substantive. The term "cognitivist" is usually used to refer to any meta-ethical view in which ethical judgments are truth-apt, expressions of belief, and capable of being knowledge. (As a general label it does not distinguish, for example, moral realists from constructivists.) In the present case, there is a new complication: there is a clear sense in which Williams is a cognitivist. However, he argues that cognitivism itself can receive both an "objectivist" and a "nonobjectivist" explanation and argues in favour of the latter. I ignore this complication here in this Introduction but do discuss it in my contribution to this volume and in Thomas (2006). The distinction between objectivist and non-objectivist cognitivism is drawn in Williams (1985), p. 147 ff.

¹⁷ Thomas (2006), chapter 7.

which are open to doubt, prompted by some specific question that has to be addressed. This kind of description, derived from the inferential contextualism sketchily presented by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, seems to me the best route to avoiding Williams' pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of moral knowledge.¹⁸ I briefly set out that argument before evaluating the indirect vindication escape route explored by Moore and suggesting that it will not give the cognitivist what he or she wants. Williams' "need to be sceptical" focused in particular on the need to avoid false consciousness and other familiar kinds of distortion to which ethical outlooks are subject. I conclude with the observation that a moral contextualism placed at the service of cognitivism can accommodate that need.¹⁹ (No sensible form of cognitivism is going to emerge from Williams' critique entirely unscathed.)

If Williams' critique of objectivism has had a continuing influence, his most controversial thesis in meta-ethics, the internal reasons thesis, also has been of continuing interest but only in so far as it *remains* highly controversial. Freeing Williams' actual views from widely held misunderstanding and connecting apparently disparate themes in his work is John Skorupski's concern in his discussion of the internal reasons thesis as much as it was Moore's in his discussion of the absolute conception. The thesis is that all practical reasons are, in a proprietary sense that Williams coined, "internal reasons."²⁰ (Strictly speaking, it is statements *about* reasons that are "internal" or "external.") The basic idea is that practical reasons, to be such, have to be reasons that are either part of an agent's current motivations or a motivation that the agent could acquire by engaging in one of the sound types of practical reasoning that Williams specifies, an account supplemented by noting the important role that Williams believed the imagination plays in practical reasoning. An external reasons theorist denies that this captures all that there is to the idea of a reason for action for an agent. Once again, however, the problem lies not with the internal reasons thesis but with other views to which it has been assimilated. In the course of his exposition, Williams elected to structure his dialectic by beginning with what he called a "sub-Humean" model of reasons.²¹ Whatever the dialectical merits of this, it has proved disastrous to the reception of Williams' ideas as he is widely understood to have advanced a Humean belief/desire theory of

¹⁸ An argument developed for epistemology generally in M. Williams (1991).

¹⁹ See Thomas (2006) chapter 10 for an attempt to respond to Williams' concerns about the possibility of a plausible ethical error theory.

²⁰ Williams (1981a).

²¹ Williams (1981a), p. 102.

motivation and a purely instrumentalist characterization of the practical use of reason, and no more.²²

Skorupski attempts to defend Williams' thesis from misunderstanding and to connect it to the deepest theme of Williams' late work, namely, his neo-Nietzschean critique of what he called the "morality system," a critique that I will describe in more detail later.²³ In his meticulous reconstruction of Williams' arguments, Skorupski points out that a commitment to a Humean desire/belief theory of motivation forms no essential part of it. There is a lively debate as to the nature of the rational motivation of action and whether or not desires play an essential role in motivation. The central point of dispute is whether or not a Humean desire/belief theory can be defended against a purely cognitivist view, in which beliefs motivate alone, or against motivated desire theory, in which the invocation of desire is a merely formal requirement of a particular explanatory schema in which it is belief that does all the justificatory and most of the motivational work, motivating as it does both the action *and* the desire.²⁴ Skorupski points out that this issue is simply orthogonal to the question of whether all practical reasons are internal or external in Williams' sense: they are simply two different issues, obscured by taking Williams to be a representative "Humean" in the theory of moral motivation.

Skorupski begins by demonstrating that a narrowly conceived Humean thesis plays no essential role in Williams' argument by showing that the belief that one has a reason, independently of the presence of a desire, supplies a reason for action in a way that Williams acknowledges (although he also takes this kind of reason to be an internal reason in his sense). However, in so far as Williams is committed to the idea that a person's reasons depend on his or her preexisting motives, Skorupski finds reason to resist that claim. Instead, he suggests that the best response is to change the way Williams' argument is usually interpreted. The focus should be, Skorupski argues, on the dual claim that reasons statements must be particularized to agents and should be "effective" in the sense that reasons for an agent must be reasons that an agent *could* act on.

Understood in this way, what is doing the work in Williams' argument is the claim that "agents cannot be said to have reasons for acting which

²² For a representative statement of this criticism, see Millgram (1996).

²³ Williams (1985), chapter 10. This has proved to be another of Williams' most controversial sets of claims, assessed in this volume by Robert B. Loudon. For a discussion more sympathetic to Williams, see Charles Taylor (1995).

²⁴ A view first developed in Nagel (1970).

they are unable to recognize *as* reasons.”²⁵ That, Skorupski argues, cannot be a threat to one central modern moral idea, that of the spontaneous autonomy of the moral agent who acts on reasons that he or she endorses, on the grounds that it is an expression of that very same idea. (This explains why Williams took Kant to be the “limiting case of an internal reasons theorist.”)²⁶ However, if that is Williams’ thesis how can it be a challenge to certain of our distinctively moral ideas? Skorupski explains how: by bringing in a psychologically realistic view of people and their motivations, the internal reasons thesis challenges our ambition to bring all human beings into the scope of moral reasons. As Thomas Nagel once put it, when it comes to moral reasons we do not want to allow people to “beg off.”²⁷

Williams connected a characteristic use of external reasons statements to our practices of praise and blame: our practice of blaming people depends not simply on acknowledging that they are at fault, but also that they are to blame for *being* at fault. That depends on there always being a reason that they could have acted on, in other words, the “fiction” as Williams put it, that all reasons are external:

Under this fiction, a continuous attempt is made to recruit people into a deliberative community that shares ethical reasons. . . . But the device can do this only because it is understood not as a device, but as connected with justification and with reasons that the agent might have had; and it can be understood in this way only because, much of the time, it is indeed connected with those things.²⁸

So, because part of our ordinary moral practices is not transparent, its workings depend on a device that cannot reflectively be acknowledged to be such. We want to blame people even when the reason that they failed to acknowledge was not a reason *for* them in a sense that the internal reasons thesis itself articulates. Skorupski insightfully comments that the truth of this thesis depends on a correct account of the moral emotions involved in blame. Combined with our ambition to place everyone within the scope of blame and the form of internalism that Skorupski has endorsed in Williams’ work, Skorupski also argues that when it comes to reconciling the correct view of practical reasons with the universal scope of blame “we must resort either to fiction or accept that we cannot have what we want.”²⁹

²⁵ Skorupski, *this volume*.

²⁶ Williams (1995c), p. 220, n. 3.

²⁷ Nagel (1970), p. 4.

²⁸ Williams (1995a).

²⁹ Skorupski, *this volume*.

Dissatisfied with Williams' own "proleptic theory of blame," Skorupski concludes that given that the very capacity to recognize a reason as such is fundamental to moral agency there is a tension within this notion of modern moral agency. It is generated by its internal drive toward crediting everyone with "comprehensive" moral agency that, Skorupski argues, may be false. (That drive is connected to the idea of equal respect, construed itself as respect for those who are able to recognize moral reasons as such.) The result, Skorupski concludes, will be a humanization of our ideals of moral agency – which is not to abandon them. To follow the reconstruction of Williams' arguments that Skorupski recommends is to accept an accurate diagnosis of a genuine tension within modern moral thought; to retreat into one, Humean strand of Williams' arguments however is, he argues, "just another dogma of empiricism." However, Skorupski convincingly demonstrates not only that the internal reasons thesis and the critique of the "morality system" are intimately connected but also that "Hume's conception of practical reasons is neither the only starting point, nor the best starting point, for Williams' questions about morality."³⁰

Williams' critique of the morality system is the explicit focus of the paper by Kant scholar and moral philosopher Robert B. Louden.³¹ The context of Williams' presentation of the argument in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* made its explicit target appear to be Kant. However, Skorupski's discussion has already suggested that this cannot be wholly accurate and in his scholarly examination of how much of Kant's ethical theory could reasonably be construed as a target of Williams' critique Louden gives further reason to dissent from this interpretation. Louden first identifies the four basic charges that Williams leveled against the morality system in this passage:

[M]orality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has special significance in modern Western culture. It particularly emphasizes certain ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation, and it has some peculiar presuppositions. In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special scepticism.³²

More specifically, Williams argues that the morality system mistakenly takes obligations to be central and primary in our conception of ethical

³⁰ Skorupski, this volume.

³¹ Louden, this volume; Louden's engagement with Williams' critique goes back to Louden (1992).

³² Williams (1985), p. 6.

considerations; to be committed to the thesis that obligations cannot ultimately conflict; to neglect the proper role of moral emotion in the assessment of moral agency; to treat obligations as automatically inescapable and overriding; to treat all practical necessities as moral obligations; to ignore the category of necessitated practical verdicts that are not based on obligations; to deny the grounding of ethical considerations in an agent's projects; to contrast voluntariness with mere force; finally, to be committed to a philosophically ambitious notion of radical voluntariness, connected to an ethical ideal of purity, "the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just."³³ Loudon assesses each of these charges in turn, specifically as leveled against Kant, described by Williams as "the philosopher who has given the purest, deepest, and most thorough representation" of "morality, the peculiar institution."³⁴

It is noteworthy that, in spite of the capacity for historical scholarship shown in his work on ancient philosophy and in some aspects of modern philosophy, notably Descartes, Williams' critique of Kant very rarely engages with Kant's actual texts and seems to aim at a broader target: Kant's influence on contemporary work on ethics, as opposed to Kant's views themselves.³⁵ That leaves him open to the charge that in various respects Kant may not turn out to be a Kantian in *that* sense and that Williams either targeted a straw man, or misdescribed his real target. The materials for an assessment of that charge are provided by Loudon's thorough examination of the respects in which the views that Williams criticized may reasonably be attributed to Kant.

Unsurprisingly, the verdict is mixed. On some points, such as the claim that obligations can never ultimately conflict, Loudon simply concedes that Williams was right to criticize this aspect of Kant's views, but also to note that this is an instance of incommensurability between historical outlooks. Williams' arguments and those of Kant do not engage with each other, Loudon implies, as Kant's worldview simply did not acknowledge the kind of radical pluralism that Williams takes to be central to the ethical.

³³ Williams (1985), p. 195.

³⁴ The title of Williams (1985), chapter 10; I am grateful to Tim Chappell for informing me that the phrase "the peculiar institution" was the standard euphemism for slavery in the antebellum South. (Also pointed out by Jenkins [2006], p. 69).

³⁵ I once pointed this out in a conversation with Williams, particularly with regard to chapter 4 of Williams (1985), which deals in very general terms with "the Kantian project," but is actually more concerned with the refutation of certain arguments of Gewirth (1977). Williams replied that chapter 4 of the book was not supposed to be about Kant, but chapter 10 was! For a similar line of concern, see Jenkins, (2006), who notes that "Williams's critique of Kantian moral theory appears to be almost totally disengaged from Kant's texts," p. 55.

On several other points, Louden follows a single strategy to defend Kant against Williams' criticisms: he emphasizes the transcendental status of Kant's view, that is, the sense in which it explains how being bound by a moral reason is so much as *possible* for moral agents with the particular and contingent psychological make up that humans in fact have.³⁶ Given that focus, Louden can represent the idea of placing oneself under a duty as fundamental to Kant's arguments, hence giving a sense to the thought that his ethics is "personal." It is personal in two ways: in being focused on one's duties to oneself and also on the development of one's moral character in such a way as to make oneself a reliable instrument of the moral law. This both limits the scope of blaming others and grounds Kant's ethics on what has been called an "autodicy," an ethically grounded proper self-concern, in a way that makes Kant's ethics nonalienating for the individual.³⁷ Those more sympathetic to Williams might question whether this captures the correct sense of the "personal" in ethics.³⁸ In particular, it might be questioned whether a derivative emphasis on moral virtue as work on oneself to make oneself an effective instrument of morality captures the phenomenological plausibility of virtue ethics more generally and the role of moral emotion in the assessment of a virtuous agent and his or her actions.³⁹ Kant is certainly concerned with the very possibility of altruistic action and with uncovering structure within apparent contingencies of moral motivation, but "the personal" seems to figure here as the limiting case of the binding of people in general, in view of certain very abstract features of their rational nature.⁴⁰ That, as I will discuss further later, became central to Williams' later discussions of his own version of a "critique of morality": he objected in particular to its conception of the moral self as "characterless."

Louden is very well aware that this issue of abstraction versus particularity returns, directly, to the question of whether or not all reasons are internal reasons that Skorupski discussed. He is less charitable than Skorupski in claiming that Williams' final position on this matter is that "there is no court of appeal outside of one's basic desires and projects. One reasons

³⁶ For a complementary emphasis on Kant's work as focused not on criteria of right action but on the constitution of the space of deontic modality itself, see Stratton-Lake (2000).

³⁷ I take the helpful term "autodicy" from Cottingham (1981), p. 802.

³⁸ The opposite of "personal" is not "impartial" but "impersonal," so the question is whether impartial ethical theories can recognize the reasons or values that we would ordinarily describe as personal in a nonalienating way; for some arguments and further references, see Thomas (2005b).

³⁹ Thomas (2005b).

⁴⁰ To put the point another way, one's self-concern is the limiting case in which one substitutes oneself as an instance of impartial moral concern for anyone.

instrumentally about how best to achieve them, and that is it.”⁴¹ That is the basis for Louden’s further insistence that what Williams means by practical necessity is, from a Kantian perspective, inevitably “heteronomous” as an agent’s reasons can be grounded only on prior “projects.” As Louden also notes, there is at the most abstract level a conflict between Williams’ commitment to a nonreductively naturalist style of explanation of the ethical, and Kant’s nonnaturalism, that comes out most clearly in their contrasting treatments of freedom and voluntariness. This conflict is closely connected to another: the conflict between the ethical ideal of purity and Williams’ view that “the idea of a value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion.”⁴² Louden concludes that Williams’ scepticism about the morality system, if restricted to those aspects of that view that definitely are part of the outlook of the historical Kant, ought to be resisted.

However, it is worth noting that others more sympathetic to Williams’ position, such as Charles Taylor, might respond that Louden’s achievement is to bracket Williams and Kant together as holding differing views of the status of a key background evaluative commitment, namely the ideal of purity – one in favour, one against – whereas the ethics of obligatory action in contemporary ethics that was Williams’ primary concern in his critique of the morality system simply ignores *any* such question.⁴³ Feigning a localized amnesia, those moral theories that Taylor labels “procedural” try and make do without any appeal to those qualitative distinctions between hypergoods that Williams tried to capture with his portmanteau term, “importance,” where what is important to an agent is shaped by those particular evaluative concerns that a given personal project makes salient to that person.⁴⁴ In identifying the conflict between the historical Kant and Williams as concerning the status of this “hypergood” of radical purity, Louden at least identifies them both as addressing an important question, whereas for much contemporary meta-ethics, Taylor argues, that question never even makes it onto the agenda.

In the closing stages of his essay, Louden argues that there is a different sense in which Williams fails to acknowledge an important impurity in Kant’s ethics; given the obvious danger of equivocation, let me flag up that Louden is here raising a distinct issue from that concerning the extent to

⁴¹ For an equally trenchant criticism of Williams that comes to essentially the same conclusion, see Millgram (1996); for some countervailing considerations see Thomas (2006), chapter 4, in addition to John Skorupski’s paper in this volume.

⁴² Williams (1985), p. 196.

⁴³ Taylor (1995).

⁴⁴ Thomas (2005b).

which an ethical view can represent our ethical experience as maximally free from luck, which is the point at stake in the argument over the ethical *ideal* of purity. In this different sense of “purity” versus “impurity,” the contrast is much more analogous to that between, say, pure versus applied mathematics. Louden’s claim is that Kant’s ethics can be significantly humanized if one acknowledges the extent to which Kant added a second, “impure” part to his ethics in order to accommodate the ways in which moral demands have to be tailored to the “crooked timber” of humanity out of which, he famously remarked, “no straight thing was ever made.”⁴⁵ Louden is surely correct to balance the stereotypical representation of Kant’s ethics with an account of his anthropological and pedagogical writings.⁴⁶ However, having identified the issue, let me note that it marks another point of contrast between the historical Kant, even as sympathetically expounded by Louden, and Williams specifically on this contrast between identifying a “pure” and “applied” component in ethics. As a perceptive critic of Williams, Raymond Geuss has noted one of the key themes of Williams’ later work is that:

There are some ‘universal materials’ out of which particular human ethical conceptions are constructed (*Shame and Necessity*, p. 56) and Williams believes that there is no special problem in claiming that we can know this or what these materials are. However, he also holds that, contrary to what Plato and Kant thought, investigation of these universal materials alone will not throw adequate light on any particular concrete form of ethical thought because there is no unique path from these materials to any particular human conception.⁴⁷

Williams was equally sceptical, then, of the ambitious plan to identify the pure and the applied in human ethical conceptions and to take the latter to be the empirical “filling in” of a necessary and universal template identified more abstractly; as Geuss also puts it, “the history, sociology and politics of the case do not simply fill in the details of the picture: they are the picture.”⁴⁸

Both Skorupski and Louden note the importance to Williams’ critique of the morality system of its neglect of moral emotion and the obstacles that it places in the way of a proper understanding of guilt and shame. Those key ethically relevant emotions are examined by Michael Stocker in his contribution to this volume, in which Williams’ analyses of these

⁴⁵ “Out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight can be made” was Isaiah Berlin’s translation of a sentence in Kant (1784), sixth thesis.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Louden (2000).

⁴⁷ Geuss (2005), p. 232.

⁴⁸ Geuss (2005), *ibid.*

emotions in *Shame and Necessity* are the basis for his own exploration of this complex topic. Stocker basically agrees with Williams that, as Stocker puts it, “shame is like moral luck in showing that the range of the ethical and the evaluative goes well beyond guilt”; however, there are various respects in which Stocker both builds on Williams’ account while also offering several correctives to it. In particular, guilt experienced without shame can only be a mistaken or pathological form of moral emotion, involving various forms of dissociation or failure of integration; Stocker claims this is *usually* true of shame without guilt. There are, however, forms of shame experienced without guilt that are nonpathological, particularly those associated with the conjunction of the beautiful with the good in the Greek ideal of *kalokagathia*, that Stocker discusses in detail.⁴⁹ He adds an important discussion of identificatory shame, based on those values with which a person is identified, and shame without responsibility. Stocker further argues that the criteria that Williams and other theorists have offered in order to demarcate shame and guilt cannot be understood as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; he suggests ways of conceptualizing the differences between shame and guilt, alongside an acknowledgment that in most actual contexts the two moral emotions are strongly interrelated. Stocker also argues against what he takes to be the inflated claim that shame involves a diminution of one’s whole being, as Williams at one point claims. Overall, however, in a penetrating discussion influenced by psychoanalytic and psychological as well as philosophical discussion of moral emotions, Stocker endorses Williams’ claim that “shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself.”⁵⁰

The issues dealt with by Stocker in ahistorical terms receive their most extended treatment in Williams’ work in an historical approach to the moral psychology represented in parts of the culture of ancient Greece. *Shame and Necessity*, a book that originated in the Sather lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, is comprehensively assessed in Tony Long’s paper in this volume. Long contextualizes this monograph, contrasting it with work that Williams produced both before and after its publication on ancient moral psychology and ethics. He brings out very clearly that *Shame and Necessity*, for all its meticulous philological and literary scholarship, was clearly intended to further a philosophical agenda and that this explains some of the readings of ancient philosophy, literature, and history that Long and others have found to be lacking in Williams’ usual nuance and finesse.

⁴⁹ “Kalokagathia” is a term resistant to translation, meaning something akin to a combination of moral nobility and beauty.

⁵⁰ Williams (1993), p. 4.

As Long points out, the most general programmatic statement of that which Williams hoped to “recover” from ancient ethical thought occurs in his earliest comprehensive treatment of it published in 1981:

It has, and needs, no God. . . . It takes as central and primary questions of character, and of how moral considerations are grounded in human nature: it asks what life it is rational for the individual to live. It makes no use of a blank categorical imperative. In fact – though we have used the word ‘moral’ quite often for the sake of convenience – this system of ideas basically lacks the concept of morality altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand. . . . The questions of how one’s relations to others are to be regulated, both in the context of society and more privately, are not detached from questions about the kind of life it is worth living, and of what is worth caring for.⁵¹

In these most general terms ancient ethical thought receives, as it were, a blanket endorsement. However, by the time of *Shame and Necessity* the influence of Nietzsche on Williams’ views had made itself felt. In a paper, to which I have already referred, that usefully supplements Long’s contribution to this volume, Raymond Geuss analyzes at length the precise form of this influence.⁵² He focuses in particular on Nietzsche’s claim that the “philosophical” elevation of Plato’s account of human psychology over that of Thucydides was tacitly moralistic. Nietzsche argued that Thucydides is a more reliable guide to the understanding of other people because of an uncompromising realism about other people’s motivations that is not tainted by a prior commitment to understanding psychology in moralized terms. This is taken up, and endorsed, by Williams, who writes in *Shame and Necessity* that:

Thucydides’ conception of an intelligible and typically human motivation is broader and less committed to a distinctive ethical outlook than Plato’s; or rather – the distinction is important – it is broader than the conception acknowledged in Plato’s psychological theories.⁵³

This endorsement of Thucydides as opposed to Plato formed part of Williams’ commitment to a general philosophical naturalism applied to the specific case of explanations of the ethical.⁵⁴ Philosophical naturalism is the claim that one need only ever cite natural properties and facts in one’s explanations, a plausible but very weak thesis that does little other than rule

⁵¹ Williams (1981c), p. 251

⁵² Geuss (2005).

⁵³ Williams (1993), pp. 161–162.

⁵⁴ Williams (1995b).

out any appeal to the supernatural. To put the idea to work one needs more than this; however, it is unclear what more is available. An inventory of natural properties can only look to the sciences, but if this account is to be plausible the social sciences will have to be included alongside the natural sciences and they will, as Williams himself emphasizes, have to reflect the fact that living in a convention-governed culture is itself natural for the kind of animal that we are.⁵⁵ The problem does not stop there: do we take the inventory of the natural properties from natural and social science as they are now? Even a modest fallibilism makes that look hubristic. Adverting to an ideally completed scientific world picture, however, seems to lose the constraint that naturalism was supposed to place on actual explanations in the here and now.

Williams suggested that at least in the case of the ethical one could come up with a plausible account of ethical naturalism that avoided this general dilemma. In a “minimalist moral psychology” inspired by Nietzsche, one seeks to explain distinctively moral ideas, those that seem to have placed themselves beyond any explanation (not simply beyond *reductive* explanation) by appealing to other ethical motivations that one is committed to anyway, that are continuous with (but not restricted to) concepts used in the explanation of the rest of human psychology.⁵⁶ However, to avoid circularity, one cannot have begun one’s investigation by tacitly moralizing basic psychological categories: hence the preference for Thucydides over Plato.

Thus Nietzsche’s influence on the arguments of *Shame and Necessity* leads, as Long points out, to a “strongly critical posture . . . in relation to the moral psychology of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato.” However, it is equally true that in his search for a Thucydidean ethical naturalism that does not moralize basic psychological categories, Williams supplemented this account with a “sympathetic engagement with the implicit ethics and psychology of Homer and the Greek tragedians.”⁵⁷ In the context of a discussion of Thucydides’ views alongside those of Sophocles, Williams identified that which he found attractive in their ‘joint’ outlook:

Each of them represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency, and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Williams (1995b), p. 67.

⁵⁶ Williams (1995b), pp. 68–74.

⁵⁷ Long, this volume.

⁵⁸ Williams (1993), p. 164.

As Long points out, Williams does not take ancient tragedy as in some way expounding philosophical theses, but as treating universal human experiences in a way that is free from philosophical distortion. Homer and the Greek tragedians avoid the “moralisation of basic psychological categories,” particularly those categories and concepts drawn on in the explanation of action. More specifically, the target is any dichotomy between reason as aligned with the good and mere “desire” and hence the elevation of a virtue of rational self-control to central importance in moral psychology, with a corresponding downgrading of individual moral character and its contingencies. In his particular treatment of ancient tragedy, Williams also draws attention to the representation of the experience of practical necessities understood as distinct from the idea of moral obligation, and a complementary emphasis on shame, where the latter is freed from the progressivist assumption that it represents a less developed moral emotion than guilt. Throughout *Shame and Necessity*, Williams fought a running battle with those progressivist interpretations of ancient philosophy and literature, primarily exemplified by the work of Arthur Adkins and Bruno Snell, that fails to find the characteristic concepts and concerns of the modern morality system in these writings and for that very reason regards them as faulty, lacking in a developed and mature form of ethical consciousness.⁵⁹

Long challenges the argument strategy of *Shame and Necessity* in two main respects: although not defending the “progressivist” theses of Snell and Adkins in their entirety, he does show that understanding the motivations for their respective projects casts them in a more charitable light than Williams’ highly critical account of their work. Second, he questions the details of Williams’ Nietzschean project of isolating an ethical psychology free of moralizing prejudice in Thucydides, Homer, and the tragedians, from the moralized psychology of Plato and Aristotle. He does so by pointing out that Plato’s psychology, in particular, is not that far removed from that of Homer. Where Williams sought a radical difference of kind, Long detects an explicable difference of degree. Overall, Williams’ “anti-Kantian agenda” can, it seems to Long, “be more distracting than illuminating.” This is brought out most clearly in the treatment of Plato. In his major publication before *Shame and Necessity*, Williams’ treatment of Plato’s ethics and moral psychology is largely approving; however, by the time of Williams’ later treatment of the subject, the critique of the morality system had been presented in the intervening *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. That

⁵⁹ Williams objects to the accounts of ancient ethics and psychology presented in Snell (1953) and Adkins (1960).

significantly colours Williams' treatment of Plato in *Shame and Necessity*. This seems, to Long, a retrograde step: Plato's moral psychology is assimilated to Kant's in a misleading way, structured around the claim that both take one's rational nature to be that which aligns one with the good, independent of the particularities of one's character, making the moral self "characterless."⁶⁰ Long questions whether this is a fair representation of Plato's account of moral agency; however, he also notes that one of Williams' very last publications on ancient philosophy reverses this negative evaluation of Plato's overall achievement and acknowledges that in Plato, just as much as in his own work, there is an emphasis on the "social and psychological insecurity of the ethical."⁶¹

Is it possible to draw any general moral from the disparate treatment of Williams' critique of the morality system in Skorupski's, Loudon's, Long's, and Stocker's contributions to this volume? Perhaps that a sceptical view gains in plausibility in so far as it becomes more local and focused: clearly identifying Williams' target makes his critique more plausible. The first point to be noted is that Williams did not deny that there are clearly many aspects of our modern moral ideas that *do* survive reflective scrutiny; one of the aims of his last monograph, *Truth and Truthfulness*, was to demonstrate that genealogy can supply vindicatory explanations at least of some key epistemic values and correlative virtues. The critique of the morality system, then, has to identify a restricted target and to be interpreted as using some of our ethical (and philosophical) ideas to criticize others. Our commitment to truthfulness undermines a set of ideas grounded partly on an ethical ideal of purity, partly on mistaken philosophical views about agency, voluntariness, and emotion and partly on our continuing use of some practically useful fictions that have, as is characteristic of key concepts of the morality system, done a very good job of concealing their tracks (as Craig puts it later in this volume).

Second, Williams seems to have believed that the morality system was largely represented in the reflective and theoretical accounts of the ethical produced by moral philosophers and other intellectuals that they influence, such as Snell and Adkins, and that this reflective account genuinely represented part of the common sense moral outlook of nonphilosophers, too. However, if Kant has theorized part of the outlook of all of us, it is life itself and the full range of ethical experience available within it that falsifies that outlook, combined with drawing attention to a less dominant tradition

⁶⁰ Williams (1993), p. 159.

⁶¹ Long, this volume.

of thinking about ethical psychology that is exemplified by the figures of Williams' counternarrative, and that is also, implicitly, part of the outlook of all of us. Third, it is undoubtedly true that Williams' target is simply too large and diffuse for his critique consistently to hit the mark, but if one identifies it more narrowly as that which Taylor calls an "ethics of obligatory action," particularly in the local context of the Oxford moral philosophy of Ross, Prichard, and Hare to which Williams critically responded, then we have both a clear target and a powerfully focused critique of the "peculiar institution" of the morality system. This may make Williams' critique seem too much a matter of theory; too much a matter of a philosopher correcting the mistakes of other philosophers. However, we would not be tempted to identify in the views of Ross, Prichard, and Hare an accurate representation of our ordinary ethical outlook if there was not something in that outlook *itself* that made such a theoretical misrepresentation attractive to us.

Throughout his later work Williams cited the influence of Nietzsche; as I have noted, this is both a matter of methodological self-consciousness about that which philosophy ought to become and in Williams' last book also an attempt to apply this method to a central question for Nietzsche, that of the value of truth. *Truth and Truthfulness* addressed itself to the question of the value of truth, or, more accurately, the value of those virtues that attach to truthful representations, their production and dissemination. Williams also explicitly adopted Nietzsche's method of genealogy, partly influenced by what he took to be the highly successful example of a synthetic account of the concept of knowledge in Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature*.⁶²

In his later work, Williams became highly self-conscious both about the practice of philosophy and its methods.⁶³ Concerned to defend the integrity of philosophy as a humanistic discipline and to resist the scientism of a range of contemporary approaches to philosophy, Williams also came to see philosophy as intimately connected with another humanistic discipline, history. If philosophy is concerned to retain its purity, or its special standing as a wholly a priori form of enquiry, it will yield results too indeterminate to help with the central task of 'making sense of what we are trying to do in our intellectual activities'.⁶⁴ Certainly in the case of modern ethical ideas, extending that term broadly to cover the norms surrounding truth telling, there is an essential role for history in explaining why our actual practices

⁶² Craig (1990), discussed in Williams (2006b).

⁶³ For example, in Williams (2006a) and (2006b).

⁶⁴ Williams (2006a), p. 186.

take the shape that they do. In the final paper of this volume, Craig examines Williams' use of his later "synthetic" method and of the various things that can be understood as "genealogical" projects. Craig concedes that his use of the term "genealogy" is very broad, ranging from the 'vindicatory explanation' of a particular belief to developmental narratives that, either essentially or accidentally, subvert or vindicate a concept, belief, or practice.

Craig considers, in particular, how a highly abstract and indeterminate set of apparently historical claims can be put to philosophical purposes, assessing the question by examining a broad range of genealogical projects in philosophy from Hume, through Nietzsche, to Foucault, Nozick, and Williams. In the course of a perceptive discussion, Craig notes that genealogies typically work by uncovering a *function* where it did not seem to exist. He also argues that appeals to "states of nature," a species of the wider genus of genealogical arguments, can be defended when understood not as speculative prehistory but essentially as a rhetorical device functioning as part of an argument about one's current beliefs, concepts, and practices. What grounds them and gives them their justificatory power are that which Craig calls "factual claims about human nature." The degree to which these claims can withstand scrutiny depends, Craig argues, on how far we understand this form of genealogy, one that utilizes the state of nature vocabulary, as explanatory. His genealogy of the concept of knowledge, like Williams' genealogy of the virtues of truthfulness, accuracy, and sincerity, aims to be both explanatory and vindicatory. There is no appeal, in any of this, to imaginary histories: the distinction is rather that state of nature theorists seem to begin from very general and hence less determinate claims about human beings and genealogists draw on a more specific set of claims about people situated in more particularized and determinate historical circumstances.

In the [final section](#) of his chapter, Craig turns to the question of how genealogies do not simply identify function where there seemed to be none, but also to account for that fact itself – the capacity of some functionally justified concept, belief, or practice to conceal its own origins. Conceding that the question has no general answer, Craig notes that Williams attaches importance to a particular kind of case in which a functional phenomenon actually ceases being functional – paradoxically – in order to perform its function. The virtue of truthfulness is, for Williams, an example of this general pattern. It is generally beneficial, in functional terms, if the distribution of reliably accurate information is widespread (and Craig's own work identified knowledge as a means of flagging reliability in informants) but this signally fails to translate into a motivation for everyone to tell the truth. So the virtue of truthfulness develops into an intrinsic value, so that

people tell the truth without referring to the general story about the general benefits of truthfulness. An account like this can neither be wholly functionalist, ignoring the role played by the development of an intrinsic value, nor wholly concerned with intrinsic status alone. It is characteristic of genealogies of the kind that both Craig and Williams have developed that these two aspects of a practice receive a single, distinctive style of genealogical explanation.

I have been struck, in rereading the essays commissioned for this volume, how they have without any editorial intervention naturally come to circle around certain key themes in Williams' late work on moral philosophy. The work of the various contributors takes Williams very seriously in a way that goes beyond ready dismissals of his alleged Humeanism, instrumentalism, external realism, scepticism, or "merely negative" criticisms of the work of others. The result is to take the engagement with Williams' work to a new level of sophistication. Only time will tell if Williams' work will prove to be of enduring value, particularly given the extent to which people were impressed by his work because they were impressed by him, not simply his obvious cleverness and quick wit but also by his underlying moral seriousness and commitment to scholarship.⁶⁵ The early signs, represented by the quality of work produced by the contributors to this volume, are certainly promising. I am very grateful to them all for collectively producing such an appropriate tribute to a remarkable philosopher.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ In what proved to be his last interview, Williams strikingly stated that, "Another person who had one kind of influence on me . . . was Elizabeth Anscombe. One thing that she did, which she got from Wittgenstein, was that she impressed upon me that being clever wasn't enough. . . . Elizabeth conveyed a strong sense of the seriousness of the subject, and how the subject was difficult in ways that simply being clever wasn't going to get around," Voorhoeve (2004), p. 82; see also Williams (1995c), p. 220, n. 1.

⁶⁶ I am grateful for helpful comments on drafts of this introduction to Kathryn Brown and to Edward Harcourt.

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1

Realism and the Absolute Conception

A. W. MOORE

1. REALISM, SCIENCE, AND ETHICS

It is often said that Bernard Williams opposes ethical realism. And so he does.¹ But what does this mean? The term “realism” has a notorious and bewildering variety of uses. What does Williams oppose? The first and most basic thing that needs to be emphasized is that what he opposes is just what its name implies: realism *about ethics*. This highlights something that is becoming increasingly standard in philosophical uses of the term “realism,” namely, its relativization to a subject matter. Granted such relativization, a realist about history may or may not be a realist about mathematics, say. Indeed, we shall see in due course that Williams’ opposition to realism about ethics is to be understood precisely in contrast with his acceptance of realism about science.

But here already there is a complication. For the term “realism” is also sometimes used without relativization. We sometimes hear it said of a given philosopher that he or she is a realist *tout court*. More to the point, we sometimes hear it said of Williams. Moreover, I think this is an appropriate thing to say of him, properly understood. I also think it is an appropriate point of leverage in the attempt to understand his position.

Williams’ realism – *tout court* – receives famous and memorable expression in his book on Descartes, where he writes, “Knowledge is of what is there *anyway*.”² This is his summary way of putting what he describes in the previous sentence as “a very basic thought,” namely

that if knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except in the special case where the reality known happens itself to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience.³

¹ For an early indication of this opposition, see Williams (1973). For later dissatisfaction with the early way of putting it, see Williams (1996), p. 19.

² Williams (1978), p. 64, his emphasis.

³ *Ibid.*

This is a basic realism which is not itself tied to any particular subject matter.⁴

Grafted on to this unqualified realism is the distinction that most concerns Williams, a distinction between different ways of explaining how we come by the knowledge we have. It is this that underlies the contrast he wants to draw between science and ethics. The idea is not that we do not have ethical knowledge.⁵ Nor is the idea that the ethical knowledge we do have is not “what it claims to be” and so lies outside the ambit of his unqualified realism.⁶ The idea is rather that the best reflective explanation of our having the ethical knowledge we have, unlike the best reflective explanation of our having the scientific knowledge we have, cannot directly vindicate that knowledge: it cannot directly reveal us as having got anything right.⁷

The position that motivates this idea is roughly as follows. We (human beings) not only inhabit a reality that is there anyway. We also inhabit different social worlds that we have created for ourselves. Part of what it is to inhabit a particular social world is to operate with a particular set of what Williams calls “thick” ethical concepts. By a “thick” ethical concept Williams means a concept whose applicability is both “action-guiding” and “world-guided.” Examples are the concepts of **infidelity**, **blasphemy**, and **racism**. To apply a thick ethical concept in a given situation, for example to accuse someone of infidelity, is, in part, to evaluate the situation, which characteristically means providing reasons for doing certain things; but it is also to make a judgment that is subject to correction if the situation turns out not to be a certain way, for example, if it turns out that the person who has been

⁴ Of course, it immediately suggests at least one thing that could reasonably be meant by realism about any given subject matter, namely, the view that that subject matter admits of knowledge. But in itself, Williams’ realism is neutral with respect to any such view. This may make it seem rather anodyne. However, it is by no means so anodyne that no philosopher has seen fit to reject it. Many notable philosophers have marshalled many notable arguments against any such realism, in some cases with a view simply to denying it, in other cases with a view, more radically, to repudiating the very concepts in whose terms it is couched. I shall present an example of the latter in §4. (For further examples, and for further discussion, see Moore [1997a], ch. 5, §8 and ch. 6.) For my own part, I think Williams’ realism is no more than the intuitive deliverance of reflective common sense. I shall have more to say about this too.

⁵ See n. 4: the denial that we have ethical knowledge is certainly one thing that could be intended by the rejection of ethical realism, particularly when it takes the form of a denial that talk of ethical knowledge so much as makes sense. But that is not what Williams intends.

⁶ Or at least – as I have tried to argue in Moore (2003), pp. 347–348 – the idea had better not be that. That had better not be part of what he is getting at in his repeated insistence that ‘ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems’ (e.g. Williams [1985], pp. 135 and 199). If that *were* part of what he is getting at, then other doctrines of his, including doctrines that we shall be examining later, would be severely compromised.

⁷ See esp. Williams (1985), ch. 8. See also Williams (1995a), and Williams (1995b), pp. 205–210.

accused of infidelity did not in fact go back on any relevant agreement. In favourable circumstances, a judgment involving a thick ethical concept can be immune to any such correction and can count as an item of ethical knowledge.⁸ Now the social worlds that we inhabit admit of incompatible rivals in which quite different thick ethical concepts are exercised. Although we need to inhabit *some* social world, there is no one social world that we need to inhabit. A good reflective explanation for someone's having a given item of ethical knowledge must therefore include an account of their inhabiting a social world that allows them to have it. This explanation may draw elements from history, psychology, and/or anthropology. But it cannot itself make use of any of the thick ethical concepts exercised in the knowledge, because it must be from a vantage point of reflection outside their social world. This means that it cannot directly vindicate the knowledge. This contrasts with the case of scientific knowledge. A good reflective explanation for someone's having a given item of scientific knowledge can make use of the very concepts exercised in the knowledge, and so can straightforwardly and directly vindicate the knowledge, by revealing that the person has come by the knowledge as a result of being suitably sensitive to *how things are*. Thus Williams' realism about science, but not about ethics.

Here is another way to characterize the position. Inhabiting a social world means having a certain *point of view*. Ethical knowledge is knowledge from such a point of view. What prevents a good reflective explanation of someone's having such knowledge from directly vindicating it is the fact that the explanation must include an account of how they have the relevant point of view (where this does not itself consist in their knowing anything). By contrast, there can be scientific knowledge that is not from any point of view. A good reflective explanation of someone's having such scientific knowledge need not involve the same kind of indirection.

This position invites countless questions, of course. For instance, what are the criteria for a "good" reflective explanation? Or for a "direct" vindication of an item of knowledge? But one question that has troubled critics as much as any concerns the science side of Williams' ethics/science contrast. What reason is there for thinking that there can be scientific knowledge that is not from any point of view?

Williams' own reason for thinking this, familiarly, is grounded in the unqualified realism that forms the basis of his position.⁹ Taking that realism as a premise, he argues for the possibility of what he calls "the absolute

⁸ Williams (1985), pp. 140–148.

⁹ We shall see later (§3) that "basis" is a somewhat inappropriate metaphor here. For now, we can let it pass.

conception,” or “the absolute conception of reality,” where what this is is, precisely, a conception of reality that both constitutes scientific knowledge and is not from any point of view.¹⁰

I have tried to defend Williams’ argument elsewhere.¹¹ In this essay, I am more interested in understanding Williams’ position than in motivating it. In particular, I want to see what the conclusion of his argument can teach us about its premise, the underlying realism.

2. THE ABSOLUTE CONCEPTION

If the conclusion of Williams’ argument is to teach us anything, we need to be clear about what that conclusion is. When I defended Williams’ argument, I prefaced my defence with, in effect, a list of twenty-two things that it is *not*.¹² My list was meant as a safeguard against various possible misconstructions of Williams’ position, many of which I take to be actual. I shall not rehearse that list in full now. But I do want to draw attention to one item on the list that is especially pertinent to this discussion.

Williams’ conclusion is not that there are some uniquely privileged God-given concepts waiting to be discovered – as it were, the “one true eternal” stock of concepts that equip us to represent things from no point of view.¹³

Talk of “the” absolute conception encourages this idea. But there is nothing in Williams to preclude the thought that, if we are to represent things from no point of view, then we shall be involved in continual decisions between various incompatible but equally legitimate conceptualizations; that these decisions may be highly parochial, in that they may be tailored to certain context-specific needs and interests of ours; that they may be hard-earned, in that they may involve us in intensive conceptual and empirical

¹⁰ See esp. Williams (1978), pp. 64–65. For further discussion see *ibid.*, pp. 65–68, 211–212, 239, 245–249, and 300–303; Williams (1985), pp. 138–140; Blackburn (1994); Dancy (1993), ch. 9, §2; Heal (1989), §7.2; Hookway (1995); Jardine (1980); Jardine (1995); Putnam (1992), ch. 5; and Strawson (1989), Appendix B.

¹¹ Moore (1997a), Ch. 4, §3. I may, however, attach less substance than Williams does to the relation between a conception of reality that is not from any point of view and science. I take it to be more or less a defining characteristic of science that, if a conception of reality that is not from any point of view can be couched at all, then it can be couched in scientific terms: see *ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 4, §1. I say “in effect” because I was arguing for a conclusion that is a slight variation on Williams’ conclusion; but I think the differences are inessential. (I was not concerned with completeness. Contrast Williams’ definition of the absolute conception in Williams [1978], p. 65 with what I say in my *ibid.*, p. 64.)

¹³ See Moore (1997a), p. 64. Cf. also *ibid.*, pp. 95–96. (There is a hint that this *is* Williams’ conclusion in Korsgaard [1996], p. 68. But it is only a hint. What Korsgaard goes on to say seems to me to show great exegetical sensitivity.)

endeavour; and that it may take long-term active participation and commitment on our part both to sustain these decisions *vis-à-vis* their rivals and to implement them in the joint process of representing how things are and justifying our representations. McDowell, writing about the absolute conception, caricatures it as involving a picture of “science as a mode of inquiry in which the facts can directly imprint themselves on our minds, without need of mediation by anything as historically conditioned and open to dispute as canons of good and bad scientific argument.”¹⁴ That is simply unfair. (It is unfair even apart from the point I am making about rival conceptualizations. Williams nowhere denies the need for mediation of the sort McDowell describes in discovering what the facts are, that is in *applying* whatever conceptual apparatus is in play. It is not clear, in fact, that even if Williams had been committed to there being uniquely privileged God-given concepts, he would have had to deny the need for mediation of the sort McDowell describes in discovering what *they* are.)

Even more unfair, it seems to me, is the related but further idea, all but embraced by McDowell, that the possibility of the absolute conception entails what Davidson calls “a dualism of scheme and content”¹⁵ – a dualism that Davidson, McDowell, and others have done so much to discredit.¹⁶ Scheme, according to this dualism, is constituted by concepts; content is that extraconceptual element in reality which we seek to capture, by an imposition of our concepts on it, whenever we represent things to be a certain way. Content is something that we passively receive. Concepts, by contrast, are things that we actively exercise.¹⁷ The reason why the possibility of the absolute conception is thought to entail this dualism is, precisely, that it is thought to require uniquely privileged God-given concepts, where part of what uniquely privileges these concepts is in turn thought to be that they constitute a scheme which is, in McDowell’s words, “peculiarly transparent, so that content comes through undistorted.”¹⁸ But we need not accept that the possibility of the absolute conception requires uniquely privileged God-given concepts. And even if we did accept this, we need not accept that what uniquely privileges the concepts has to be characterized in terms of scheme and content – still less, in terms of “transparent” scheme and “undistorted” content.¹⁹

¹⁴ McDowell (1986), p. 380.

¹⁵ Davidson (1984). See esp. pp. 187 and 189.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *ibid.*, *passim*; McDowell (1994), *passim*; and Rorty (1980), esp. ch. VI, §5. See also Rorty (1991b), pp. 138–139.

¹⁷ See again McDowell (1994), *passim*. See also Child (1994).

¹⁸ McDowell (1986), p. 381.

¹⁹ Cf. Williams (1995b), p. 209.

I see no reason, then, to think that Williams' conclusion entails any scheme/content dualism. A different worry, which is worth pausing to address, is that his *premise* entails such a dualism. Does not the idea that knowledge is of a reality that exists independently of that knowledge entail that it is of something extraconceptual, something on which we impose our concepts whenever we know anything to be the case?

No. Williams' premise is that knowledge is of a reality that exists independently of being known, not independently of being knowable.²⁰ It does nothing to foreclose the possibility that what is known is essentially conceptual. In fact, it is really nothing but a kind of schematic summary of such commonplaces as this: even if no-one had known that $e = mc^2$, it would still have been the case that $e = mc^2$.²¹ This commonplace certainly allows for the fact that $e = mc^2$ to be, in McDowell's words again, "essentially capable of being embraced in thought in exercises of spontaneity [that is, in exercises of conceptual capacities]."²² (Indeed – although this is not really to the point as far as Williams' premise is concerned – it allows for this without in any way prejudicing the thought that our knowledge that $e = mc^2$ may be part of the absolute conception.²³)

I have suggested that representing things from no point of view can still leave room for decisions between rival conceptualizations. What sort of thing do I have in mind? I have in mind the sort of thing that Quine has in mind when he suggests that a pair of scientific theories might be "empirically equivalent," in the sense that "whatever observation would be counted for or against the one theory counts equally for or against the other," yet such that each involves "theoretical terms not reducible to" the other's.²⁴ He later has a splendid analogy to illustrate this. He writes:

[Irresolubly rival systems of the world] describe one and the same world. Limited to our human terms and devices, we grasp the world variously. I think of the disparate ways of getting at the diameter of an impenetrable sphere: we may pinion the sphere in calipers or we may girdle it with a tape measure and divide by pi, but there is no getting inside.²⁵

²⁰ For the importance of this distinction, cf. McDowell (1994), p. 28.

²¹ "Commonplace," as I suggested in note 4, does not preclude opposition. For an especially stark example of opposition to just this sort of idea (that even if no one had known that p , it would still have been the case that p), see Heidegger (1962), §44(c).

²² McDowell (1994), p. 28.

²³ Cf. Child (1994), pp. 61–62.

²⁴ Quine (1990), §§41–42. The quoted material occurs on pp. 96–97.

²⁵ Quine (1990), p. 101. (This analogy, incidentally, is curiously equivocal as far as the dualism of scheme and content is concerned. It *can* be construed in such a way as to provide further ammunition against the dualism. But it can also be construed in such a way as to provide support for it. Quine himself, as it happens, is not hostile to the dualism: see Quine [1981c]. For criticisms of Quine on this matter see McDowell [1994], Afterword, Pt. I.)

Suppose now that we have our own system of the world but are also aware of such a rival. (This may be because our choices between conceptualizations have been quite conscious.) Quine raises the question of what we are to say about the rival. He distinguishes two attitudes that we can take. The *sectarian* attitude, as he calls it, is to repudiate the alien concepts and to regard the rival system as empirically warranted nonsense. (For Quine, this is not the oxymoron it sounds. “Empirically warranted nonsense” is, very roughly, nonsense which, if it did count as sense, would also have the right sort of connection with experience to count as true.) The *ecumenical* attitude is to acknowledge the alien concepts and to regard the rival system as simply true.²⁶

Two very powerful forces in Quine’s philosophy have made him vacillate over the years between these alternatives. His *naturalism* has inclined him toward sectarianism. His *empiricism* has inclined him toward ecumenism. By his naturalism, I mean his conviction that there is no higher authority, when it comes to deciding what is true, than whatever has in fact led us to adopt our own system of the world. By his empiricism, I mean his conviction that there is no other evidence for the truth of a system than its empirical warrant: systems answer to nothing but experience.²⁷

He has eventually settled for sectarianism.²⁸ This is surely the right alternative *for Quine*. After all, in the case in which we are aware of an empirically equivalent rival system to our own, whose concepts are *not* incommensurable with ours, he is committed to regarding the rival as, however warranted, false.²⁹ His sectarianism nevertheless leaves him uncomfortable.

²⁶ Quine (1990), §42; and Quine (1986), pp. 156–157. (Note: on p. 156 of the latter he characterizes sectarianism as the view that the rival system is false rather than nonsense. But this is an aberration. It is subverted on the very next page.) Taking the ecumenical attitude would not commit us ever to exercising the alien concepts. If we chose not to, this would be a little like regarding empirically warranted French sentences as true but choosing only to speak in English. Taking the sectarian attitude would be a little like regarding English as the only real language.

²⁷ For an example of a swing to sectarianism, see Quine (1981a), pp. 21–22. For an example of a swing to ecumenism, see the first edition of Quine (1981b), p. 29. (This is corrected in later editions. The earlier version is quoted in Gibson [1986], p. 153, n. 2.)

²⁸ Quine (1990), p. 100; and Quine (1986), p. 157. (This explains the correction referred to in n. 27.) Cf. Rorty (1991a), §2.

²⁹ The possibility of empirically warranted false systems is an immediate corollary of his thesis that truth is underdetermined by evidence. See Quine (1969), pp. 302–303, in which he also distinguishes between mere underdetermined truth and indeterminacy. For further discussion, see Moore (1997b). (Note: Davidson is surely wrong to claim, as he does in Davidson [2001], p. 76, n. 4, that “Quine has changed his mind on the issue [whether there can be empirically equivalent, but incompatible, theories] more than once.” The issue on which he has changed his mind is not that, but what the best construal of such theories is.)

He recognizes the invidiousness of regarding one system as true and another as nonsense, even though there is no cosmically telling between them and even though it is nothing but a kind of historical accident that one of these systems has our allegiance rather than the other. So he is keen to remind us that we can change our allegiance. The sectarian, he tells us,

is as free as the ecumenist to oscillate between the two [systems]. . . . In his sectarian way he does deem the one [system] true and the alien terms of the other meaningless, but only so long as he is entertaining the one [system] rather than the other. He can readily shift the shoe to the other foot.³⁰

This is not to concede, along with the ecumenist, that both systems should be regarded as true. It is not even to concede that both systems *can* be regarded as true. But it *is* to concede that *each* system can be regarded as true. And, as Quine himself admits, to concede this is but one terminological step away from conceding ecumenism. After all, ecumenists and sectarians alike are agreed that, whichever system has our allegiance, we must pay the rival system every compliment we can, short of giving it too our allegiance. Does anything of substance hang on whether this includes calling the rival system “true”?

But then, come to that, does anything of substance hang on which system has our allegiance? It now looks melodramatic to suggest, as I did earlier, that, when we have decided between two rival conceptualizations, long-term active participation and commitment on our part may be required to sustain our decision *vis-à-vis* its alternative. It even looks melodramatic to describe the two conceptualizations as “incompatible.” In what sense are they incompatible?

Well, they are incompatible in the sense that the concepts involved must lead their own separate and independent lives. Or, a little more prosaically, they are incompatible in the sense that it is impossible to exercise concepts in accord with one conceptualization except at the expense of doing so in accord with the other.³¹ What may require long-term active participation and commitment is, not upholding the selected conceptualization in a way that downplays the other, which is something we have no reason to do, but upholding the selected conceptualization in a way that prevents *interference*

³⁰ Quine (1990), p. 100.

³¹ This does not rule out the possibility of combining the concepts by brute aggregation – that is, by first producing a representation in accord with one conceptualization, then conjoining a representation in accord with the other – although *sectarians*, of course, will deny even that possibility.

from the other.³² To select, maintain, and implement a conceptualization requires keeping any rivals clearly in focus *as rivals*. This can take hard work. And it is this that constitutes giving allegiance to the conceptualization, or to any system that uses it. So yes; much of substance hangs on which system has our allegiance; and we had better be clear about which does.

The problem now is that operating with one conceptualization rather than another, in the scientific case that we have been considering, is beginning to look very much like operating with one set of thick ethical concepts rather than another. Does not the indulgence that Quine says we should show to an empirically warranted rival system of the world, and that I have agreed we should show, smack very much of the indulgence that Williams says we can show to judgments involving thick ethical concepts that we do not ourselves share?³³ How then can we say that neither of the two rival scientific systems is from a point of view?

Admittedly, there is one obvious and important difference between the scientific case and the ethical case, reflected in Quine's lax sectarianism. On Quine's view, as we have seen, we are free to shift our allegiance back and forth between the two scientific systems. Indeed he cites a possible benefit in our doing so (although, disconcertingly for my purposes, he describes the benefit as "an enriched perspective on nature"³⁴). The ethical analogue is much harder to envisage. Oscillations between social worlds may be possible, either for individuals or, very differently, for groups. They may occur as a result of a kind of restlessness, or a kind of unconfidence, or even a kind of "ethical experimentation."³⁵ But this sort of thing is necessarily more awkward, more disorderly, and altogether more demanding than its scientific counterpart, as well as having much less clearly defined criteria of success. I agree with Williams when he calls it a "wild exaggeration" to assimilate adopting a scientific system with living in a social world. What makes two social worlds incompatible is far more radical than what makes two scientific conceptualizations incompatible, even when each world is, in Williams' terms, a "real option" for some group of people.³⁶

³² It is as if we were French purists who had nothing against English but wanted to banish Franglais.

³³ Williams (1985), pp. 140 ff. (Note that Williams' indulgence, unlike Quine's, is ecumenical. In suitably favourable circumstances, Williams thinks, we can regard a judgment involving an alien thick ethical concept as true.)

³⁴ Quine (1986), p. 157. (I see no reason, incidentally, to think that the possibility of shifting our allegiance in this way detracts from the importance of keeping each system at bay while trying to maintain our allegiance to the other.)

³⁵ Williams (1985), p. 157.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 160 ff. See also, in greater detail, Williams (1981).

But the problem remains. “More radical,” “harder to envisage,” “more demanding”: these all indicate differences of degree. But what is required is a difference of kind. We need some independent handle on the idea that social worlds do, and scientific conceptualizations do not, furnish different points of view.

3. WHAT THE ARGUMENT FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF THE ABSOLUTE CONCEPTION REQUIRES

It seems to me that the best handle on this is given by the very argument for the possibility of the absolute conception. That is, I think we best understand the content of Williams’ conclusion, and of the intended contrast between science and ethics that goes with it, if we look at them in the context of the argument that he gives for that conclusion.³⁷ Understanding the argument in turn, of course, requires understanding its premise, the underlying realism. And I have already indicated that one of my aims in this essay is to see what we can learn about the premise from the conclusion. Am I therefore involved in a vicious circle? In a circle, yes; in a vicious circle, I think not. What Williams is presenting us with, it seems to me, is a *package* of ideas that need to be understood together.

This package is roughly as follows. All knowledge answers ultimately to a unified, substantial, autonomous reality which can, in principle, be conceived as such. To conceive it as such is to form a single conception of it such that, for any item of knowledge, the conception indicates what makes that item of knowledge true;³⁸ more to the point, for any two items of knowledge, the conception indicates what makes both those items of knowledge true, in such a way that it can be used in an account of how they cohere. This means that the conception cannot be from the same point of view as any given item of knowledge. For if it were, it would not be able to indicate, with the detachment necessary to be used in this way, what makes both that item of knowledge and an item of knowledge from an

³⁷ Cf. Moore (1997a), pp. 82–83.

³⁸ By “indicates” here, I do not mean “makes reference to”; I mean something more like “expresses.” Thus consider someone who knows that the earth orbits the sun. In order to indicate the fact that makes this item of knowledge true, the conception must actually incorporate the claim that the earth orbits the sun – or else a set of claims that entail that the earth orbits the sun. It cannot just incorporate some claim *about* the fact that makes this item of knowledge true, for instance the claim that the item of knowledge is made true by the fact which Copernicus famously established. For (part of) the significance of this distinction, see further later, esp. n. 56.

incompatible point of view true. So the conception cannot itself be from *any* point of view. Science is able to provide this conception.³⁹

We can now see why social worlds are thought to furnish different points of view in a way in which scientific conceptualizations do not. The idea is this. Given two scientific systems of the world, of the sort considered in the [previous section](#), there is no impediment to using the conceptual resources of one to indicate (non-reductively) what makes the other true; nor to using this indication of what makes the other true in giving an account of how the two systems cohere. By contrast, given two incompatible social worlds, even if (improbably) it is possible to use the thick ethical concepts associated with one to indicate what makes an item of knowledge involving the thick ethical concepts associated with the other true, it is out of the question to use this indication of what makes the second item of knowledge true in giving an account of how the two items of knowledge cohere. To give an account of how the two items of knowledge cohere, and in particular to frame that part of the account that indicates what makes both the items of knowledge true, requires at the very least the sort of detachment from either social world that would be needed to indulge in some suitably reflective history, psychology, and/or anthropology. (I am not now trying to defend the position, just to clarify it.)

This, of course, is highly reminiscent of the idea that initiated this discussion: the idea that the best reflective explanation of our having whatever ethical knowledge we have, unlike the best reflective explanation of our having whatever scientific knowledge we have, cannot directly vindicate it. But the two ideas are not the same. There was no reference in what I just said to explanation. Indicating what makes an item of knowledge true is different from explaining how a given individual or a given group has come by the knowledge. The former typically falls short of the latter.⁴⁰ Williams' focus on explanation introduces something not present in the original argument for the possibility of the absolute conception, something that, at least

³⁹ For amplification, see my *ibid.*, esp. ch. 4, §3. (Why think that science can provide the conception? See n. 11: for me, this is more or less a matter of definition; for Williams, it may be a more substantial matter.)

⁴⁰ But as regards that part of the explanation that concerns how the individual or the group in question has actually acquired the belief – no matter that it constitutes knowledge – the latter typically falls short of the former. It would be setting absurdly high standards to expect a good reflective explanation of how I have come by my belief that water contains hydrogen, for instance, to extend any further back than the various reference books and other authorities that have led me to believe this. (But the best reflective explanation of how I have come by my *knowledge* that water contains hydrogen – and of how, in particular, it counts as knowledge – would have to extend all the way back to the fact that water contains hydrogen. Some critics of Williams perhaps miss this crucial distinction. See, e.g., Quinn [1993], §II, esp. p. 140; and Rorty [1991a], §4, esp. pp. 57–58.)

as far as this current discussion is concerned, is actually both a complication and an irrelevance.

But is it perhaps more than that? Does it perhaps stand in some *tension* with the original argument? The original argument requires that, for any item of knowledge, it should be possible to indicate, from no point of view, what makes that item of knowledge true. The appeal to explanation suggests that there are some items of knowledge, involving thick ethical concepts, such that it is impossible to say anything, from no point of view, that directly vindicates them. Do these not tell against each other?⁴¹

I do not think so. The word “directly” is vital. What is precluded, in the case of an item of knowledge involving thick ethical concepts, is exercise, from no point of view, of those very concepts. This is enough to prevent any *direct* indication, from no point of view, of what is known. But it leaves open the possibility of telling a story, from no point of view, whose consequences, in some nontrivial but suitably relaxed sense of “consequences,” include the fact that things are as they are thereby known to be.⁴² The original argument requires nothing, it seems to me, that is threatened by the appeal to explanation.

Note, incidentally, that in order to give a full account of how two items of knowledge from incompatible points of view cohere, it is necessary to go beyond the resources of the absolute conception. The absolute conception can supply part of this account, certainly. In particular, it can indicate what makes the items of knowledge both true; that is of its very essence. But it cannot indicate, on its own, *how* either of them is made true (how, for instance, the point of view of either contributes to its having whatever content it has). To give a full account of *that* requires exercise of such concepts as the concept of knowledge and the concept of content, neither of which can be exercised except from some sort of psychosocial point of view.

A fortiori the absolute conception cannot, on its own, explain how a given individual or a given group has come by either of the items of knowledge. It cannot, on its own, explain how a given individual or a given group has come by *any* item of knowledge. In particular, it cannot, on its own, explain how *we* have come by *it*. Another common misconstrual of Williams’ position is to think that he does demand this of the absolute conception; that he takes the absolute conception “to explain itself.”⁴³ Williams himself is partly to blame

⁴¹ This is in effect the criticism that I levelled against Williams in Moore (1991). I have tried to correct what I say there in Moore (2003): see esp. n. 20.

⁴² This is an allusion to the notion of “weak entailment,” and to the attendant contrast between endorsement and indirect endorsement, that I use in Moore (1997a): see pp. 15–16, and cf. also pp. 35–36.

⁴³ Cf. Moore (1997a), p. 65. Culprits are Putnam, in Putnam (1992), p. 98; and Quinn, in Quinn (1993), p. 136.

for this misconstrual, because of some occasional incautious formulations of a demand that he does make. At one point, for instance, he says that “the substance of the absolute conception . . . lies in the idea that it could nonvacuously explain how it itself . . . [is] possible.”⁴⁴ For the most part, however, he is careful to insist that all the absolute conception need do is to include *part* of a good reflective explanation of how we have come by it: it must “*help* to explain . . . our capacity to grasp [it].”⁴⁵ The reason for this more circumspect demand is precisely the fact that a good reflective explanation of how we have come by any given knowledge must be from some sort of psychosocial point of view. Williams is well aware of this, despite the impression that his critics sometimes give.⁴⁶ There is of course the further question, which part of the explanation the absolute conception must include. The answer, I take it, is that insofar as our grasp of the absolute conception involves our being sensitive to the fact that things are a certain way, it must include that part of the explanation which says that things are indeed that way – which it will trivially do. As far as the rest of the explanation is concerned, the most that we can demand of the absolute conception – although we can indeed demand this – is that it should stand in some intelligible relation, presumably some relation of consequence of the sort mentioned earlier, to the psychological and sociological elements in it that explain our actual sensitivity to how things are.⁴⁷

However that may be, I repeat that the best handle on Williams’ notion of the absolute conception is given by the very argument for its possibility. What the absolute conception *is* is that which the argument for the possibility of the absolute conception is an argument for the possibility of. It is a conception, in other words, that can indicate what makes any given items of knowledge true, in such a way as to form part of an account of *how* they are made true, even when they are from incompatible points of view; a conception fit to sustain our sense of what is known as what is there *anyway*. And our sense of what is known as what is there anyway is that which the absolute conception is a conception fit to sustain.

I do not pretend that such interdependencies are to be regarded with complete nonchalance. Close scrutiny of Williams’ argument, and of everything he says in connection with it, is required to ensure that these particular interdependencies constitute a useful and robust structure. But I am certain they do. My point here is simply that the structure has no right way up.

⁴⁴ Williams (1985), p. 139.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140, my emphasis.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Williams (1978), pp. 301–303, and Williams (1985), p. 140. One critic who suggests that he is not aware of this is Putnam: see Putnam (1992), p. 100.

⁴⁷ See further Williams (1978), pp. 245–246.

4. REALISM AND ITS VARIANTS

The structure is a conceptual structure. To make use of it is to operate with certain concepts, most notably a certain concept of knowledge and a certain concept of reality. Someone might elect not to operate with these concepts. This would involve, among other things, rejecting the fundamental propositions that hold the structure together. In particular, it would mean rejecting the realism. That is certainly something that someone might do. However, although the realism can be rejected in this way, there is an important sense in which it cannot be *denied*. To deny it would be, not to repudiate the concepts in whose terms it is couched, but rather (on the contrary) to appropriate those concepts and to repudiate the realism itself – to count the realism as false. And that is not something that anyone who fully understands the realism can do. To appropriate those concepts is, among other things, to acknowledge the truth of the realism. If someone appears to deny that knowledge is of a reality that exists independently of being known, then this only goes to show that he or she is not really – not properly – operating with the concepts of knowledge and reality with which Williams is operating. We can compare this with the case of someone who appears to deny a principle of Euclidean geometry, say the principle that between any two points there is at most one straight line. This only goes to show that he or she is not really – not properly – operating with Euclidean concepts. To be sure, there may be good reason for *not* doing so. There may be good reason for operating with variant concepts instead. Thus, as is well known, there are non-Euclidean geometries that entitle us to say, “There can be two points between which there is more than one straight line.” Moreover, it is to these variants of Euclidean geometry that we should turn, rather than to Euclidean geometry itself, in order to find the best tools for describing physical space. I am not ruling out the possibility that there is some similar variant of Williams’ conceptual structure that provides the best tools for undertaking some metaphysical task. But if this variant entitles us to say, “Knowledge is of a reality that depends on being known,” then it cannot involve exactly the same concepts of knowledge and reality as those which Williams is using.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ This is related to what I mean in Moore (1997a) by my repeated insistence that Williams’ realism, encapsulated in what I there call the Basic Assumption, cannot be justified (e.g., pp. 107, 109, and 188–189). It cannot be justified because there is no *issue* about whether it is true. See further Moore (1999). (Note: when I suggested in n. 4 that Williams’ realism is no more than the intuitive deliverance of reflective common sense, I did not mean that such variants are impossible. My point was rather that the concepts that Williams is using are concepts that we habitually and naturally use; and that, granted these concepts, Williams’ realism emerges as a basic conceptual truth.)

What alternatives are there? (There are alternatives that involve repudiating any concepts that so much as resemble these of course. Some particularly radical philosophers do advocate such alternatives. But I mean: what alternatives are there that are sufficiently close to Williams' structure to count as variants of it, in the way in which non-Euclidean geometries count as variants of Euclidean geometry?)

The most familiar, perhaps, are various species of idealism, in which the term "reality" stands for something that does depend for its existence, or for some of its essential characteristics, on being known. But there are also non-idealistic variants in which what is overturned is not the knowledge-independence of that which is termed "reality" but its unity. To see the sort of thing that these latter variants involve, we need to look more closely at the role that unity plays in Williams' realism. And it is here especially that the conclusion of his argument – that the absolute conception is possible – can help us.

What the conclusion reveals is the following fundamental principle at the heart of Williams' realism. Given any two items of knowledge, or more generally, given any two true representations of reality, it is possible to indicate what makes them both true.⁴⁹ This is implicit in the following extract from the original argument:

[If *A* and *B* each has knowledge, and their representations differ,] then it seems to follow that there must be some coherent way of understanding why these representations differ, and how they are related to one another. . . . [A] story can be told which explains how *A*'s and *B*'s can each be perspectives on the same reality.⁵⁰

Williams does elsewhere insist on the "non-additive" nature of knowledge. He writes, "Not all pieces of knowledge can be combined into a larger body of knowledge."⁵¹ But this relates to what I said in the [previous section](#) about directness. Again I see no conflict. What his argument and its conclusion require is the possibility of telling some story that gives an indirect indication of what *A* and *B* between them know. What the "non-additive" nature of knowledge prevents, or may prevent, is directly conjoining what *A* knows with what *B* knows, without dilation or manipulation of any kind.⁵² The

⁴⁹ This is basically what I call the Fundamental Principle in Moore (1997a): see pp. 21–22.

⁵⁰ Williams (1978), p. 64.

⁵¹ Williams (1985), pp. 148–149.

⁵² See again n. 42. The kind of dilation or manipulation that I have in mind is illustrated in the case in which *A* knows that it is humid and *B*, in the very same place six months later, knows that it is snowing: in order to indicate what *A* and *B* between them know (which is

basic idea, then, is that all knowledge ultimately answers to *reality* – the same reality in every case – and this is an idea that means nothing unless it means that, for any given items of knowledge, there is some single way of indicating, however indirectly, how reality is thereby known to be.

What are the alternatives to *this*? Here is one.

Where we have . . . , [two true representations] that conflict . . . their realms are . . . less aptly regarded as within one world than as two different worlds, and even – since the two refuse to unite peaceably – as worlds in conflict.

This is Goodman, summarizing the chief motif of his iconoclastic work *Ways of Worldmaking*.⁵³ As we can see, he is using conceptual apparatus that differs from that of Williams in precisely the radical way envisaged. Not that Goodman would mind admitting that the resultant apparent disagreement between him and Williams is essentially terminological. On the contrary, to admit this would itself be to signal a striking example of the very pluralism he is advocating. Earlier in the same book he writes:

While I stress the multiplicity of world-versions, I by no means insist that there are many worlds – or indeed any; for . . . the question whether two versions are of the same world has as many good answers as there are good interpretations of the words “versions of the same world.” The monist can always contend that two versions need only be right to be accounted versions of the same world. The pluralist can always reply by asking what the world is like apart from all versions.⁵⁴

But if we do adopt the pluralism that Goodman advocates, then we shall not say, with Williams, that for any two items of knowledge, there is some single way of indicating what is thereby known. We shall say instead, with Goodman, that some items of knowledge answer to different worlds, worlds that cannot be combined into one, and that, in such a case, there is no single way of indicating what is thereby known.⁵⁵

To understand better what is at issue here, let us look at two applications of these ideas. The first is to the question whether tense is real. On one way of construing that question, it is, precisely, the question which of these alternatives is the right one for tensed knowledge (knowledge from a

not, of course, that it is both humid and snowing) we make explicit reference to the dates and times concerned.

⁵³ Goodman (1978), p. 116.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96. (Actually, the pluralist had better do better than that. The monist can just as easily acknowledge the force of that rhetorical question.)

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 115.

temporal point of view). Those who claim that tense *is* real, on this construal of the question, adopt a Goodmanian pluralism. Their position is this. Given some tensed item of knowledge, there is no indicating what makes it true except from the same temporal point of view. This is because what makes it true contains something directly corresponding to its tense that does not obtain from any other temporal point of view. Thus, suppose I know that it is humid today. Then what makes my knowledge true is the fact that it is humid today. But this is a fact that I can indicate only today. If I say tomorrow, “It was humid yesterday,” that will not indicate the same fact. At best it will indicate some intrinsically related fact, a fact about (as it were) hesternal humidity which can itself be indicated only tomorrow.⁵⁶ Reality fractures into different temporal worlds, then. Each temporal point of view carries its own world with it. The facts that peculiarly constitute one of these worlds can be indicated only from the corresponding temporal point of view. It immediately follows that there are some items of knowledge, namely, items of knowledge from different temporal points of view, for which there is no single way of indicating how reality is thereby known to be – a consequence that is, of course, in direct violation of Williams’ realism.⁵⁷

The second application of these ideas – an application more relevant to Williams’ concerns – is to the analogous question about social reality. The analogue of the view that tense is real is the view that reality fractures into different *social* worlds, and that the facts that peculiarly constitute one of these social worlds can be indicated only from the corresponding social point of view. Williams himself uses the expression “social worlds,” as I did in echo of him when outlining his view in §1.⁵⁸ And sometimes he makes claims that suggest that he adopts precisely this Goodmanian view about them. He writes:

[An observer] cannot stand quite outside the evaluative interests of [a] community he is observing, and pick up [one of their thick ethical concepts] simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world. . . . [Their ethical knowledge is] part of their way of living, a cultural artifact that they have come to inhabit.⁵⁹

But of course, Williams does *not* adopt Goodmanian pluralism about social worlds. This quotation is another illustration of the distinction that arises

⁵⁶ Is this not self-stultifying? Is not my very reference to this fact that I say can be indicated only tomorrow an indication of it today? No. Cf. earlier, n. 38: when I talk about “indicating” a fact, I mean something like “expressing” it, not making reference to it.

⁵⁷ See Moore (2001) for a fuller account of the material in this paragraph.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Williams, (1985), p. 150.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142 and 147.

within his realism between, on the one hand, directly expressing what members of the community know – that is, what they know through exercise of their thick ethical concepts – and, on the other hand, telling a story that indicates indirectly what they know. The observer cannot do the former because, as someone who lives outside their social world and who does not share the values that sustain exercise of their thick ethical concepts, he cannot himself make use of those concepts. Nor, crucially, does he have the wherewithal to construct neutral equivalents of those concepts: that is the point that Williams is making in the quotation.⁶⁰ By contrast, he may be able to do the latter. He may be able to understand enough about the community, about their social world, and about its history to be able to see how their use of these concepts enables them to live in that world, and he may be able to say, in the light of that, how their circumstances warrant the exercise of the knowledgeable judgments they make using these concepts. Admittedly, if he does succeed in doing this, he might still not have carved out the same chunk of logical space as they do in making any of the relevant judgments. But carving out the same chunk of logical space must not be confused with carving out a chunk of the same logical space. He *will* have done the second of these, which is all that Williams requires. In particular, he will have said enough to entail what they know, in the relaxed sense of entailment that I alluded to in the [previous section](#).

If the choice between Williams' realism and Goodman's pluralism is essentially terminological, then can it matter which we adopt? It can. The word "terminological" has pejorative overtones. But an issue can be both terminological and of considerable moment. It can be, in effect, an issue about which of two conceptual structures is better equipped to meet certain theoretical and/or practical needs. (Think again about the choice between Euclidean geometry and its non-Euclidean variants.)

Very well, then; what is there to be said in favour of either of these alternatives? There are different things to be said in different contexts, but one thing that I think must be said quite generally in favour of Williams' realism is that it is our natural starting point. Goodman's pluralism is an unintuitive departure from the way we normally think and speak.⁶¹

Still, the way we normally think and speak is not sacrosanct. This advantage can be outweighed.⁶² Let us turn back to the question whether tense is real. Here the Goodmanian alternative might be thought to have an

⁶⁰ See further *ibid.*, pp. 141–142, and the references therein. See also McDowell (1981), pp. 144–145.

⁶¹ Cf. the parenthetical remark in n. 48.

⁶² Cf. in this connection Wittgenstein (1974), Pt I, §402.

advantage in relation to the idea that the future is open. It is far beyond the scope of this essay to say fully what I have in mind. But here is a sketch. Suppose, what many people intuitively think, that the future is open. That is, roughly, suppose that nothing is the case at any given time about what is contingently the case at later times. And suppose I said yesterday, "It will be humid tomorrow." Then not only did this fail to indicate the fact that verifies my knowledge that it is humid today. It was not even true. For it was not (then) the case that it would be humid today. By far the most natural way to capture this idea, and arguably the only way to do so, is by appeal to different temporal worlds; more specifically, by appeal to a sequence of temporal worlds such that those later in the sequence contain details corresponding to gaps in those earlier in the sequence.⁶³

But even if Goodman's pluralism has the whip hand in this context (which actually I doubt), there are other contexts in which Williams' realism retains all sorts of advantages over it, and indeed over any of its rivals. In particular, it retains significant advantages in the context of moral philosophy. Paramount among these is something that will serve to bring my essay full circle: namely, the way in which Williams' realism, by sustaining the argument for the possibility of the absolute conception, creates an ideal framework for expressing his opposition to realism about ethics. It is important here to be clear just what the relation between his realism *tout court* and his opposition to realism about ethics is. The latter does not of course follow from the former (in the way that the belief that the absolute conception is possible does). Rather, the former is part of a conceptual structure that facilitates expression of the latter. If we repudiated Williams' realism in favour of Goodman's pluralism, or even in favour of some species of idealism, this would not undermine any of his arguments against ethical realism; but it would make those arguments harder, if not perhaps impossible, to state.

Williams' realism gives us, I think, a richer understanding than its variants do of the nature of our ethical experience. By enabling us to see that our ethical knowledge is from a point of view that admits of equally legitimate and incompatible alternatives, in a way in which our scientific knowledge is not – and by enabling us to see how history, psychology, and/or anthropology are needed to explain why we have the ethical point of view we

⁶³ For a thorough discussion of the issues and complications that arise here, a discussion which attempts in a quite different way to capture the belief that the future is open, see Tooley (1997), *passim*. (Note: whether we are to regard the future as open or not may itself be a terminological issue of the very kind I have tried to identify. See further Cockburn [1997], esp. Ch. 9.)

have, where this is not itself a matter of our knowing anything – Williams’ realism gives us a much firmer grip on what people are getting at when they make clumsy appeal to the fact/value distinction. Up to a point, their clumsy appeal is apposite. As Williams observed long ago,

in the factual case, there is a possible thought. . . . “I am convinced that p , but it is possible for all that that not- p ,” . . . [which] registers the impersonal consideration that how things are is independent of my belief; however they are, they are, whatever I believe. . . . But . . . [there is] no parallel thought possible on the moral side: . . . there just is no content to “I am convinced that racial discrimination is intrinsically wrong, but it is possible for all that, that it is not,” except things like “How convinced am I?” or “I suppose somebody might make me change my mind.”⁶⁴

However, as Williams’ critique of thick ethical concepts clearly shows, there is more to it than that. The concept of being intrinsically wrong is not itself a thick ethical concept. Its applicability is not “world-guided” in the way that, say, the concept of being a racist is. My conviction that racial discrimination is intrinsically wrong is not an item of knowledge. But – and this is the point – it does enable me to know such things as that Wagner was a racist. The clumsy appeal to the fact/value distinction obscures this. Williams’ more layered view makes it very clear. It also makes clear what kind of thing I need, or more generally what kind of thing *we* need, if we are to maintain our point of view and continue to have such knowledge, from that point of view. We need confidence.⁶⁵ Not that Williams’ realism itself gives us confidence. On the contrary, it contributes significantly to undermining our confidence – not least, by making us aware of our need of it. But that is the predicament that we must learn to face if we are to live in light of the truth, something we have every reason to do. It would be a serious mistake to think that we would be better off if we had never reflected in this way on our ethical experience; if we had never thereby known what it is to be, in a phrase borrowed from Wallace Stevens and quoted by Williams at the beginning of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*,⁶⁶ “shaken realists’.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Williams (1972), p. 49.

⁶⁵ Williams (1985), pp. 170–171; and Williams (1995b), pp. 205–210. For further discussion, see Fricker (2001).

⁶⁶ This phrase is taken from Stevens’ poem “Esthétique du Mal,” in Stevens (1954); Williams quotes it as part of the frontispiece of Williams (1985), p. x. See further Williams (1985), pp. 167 ff.

⁶⁷ I am very grateful to Anita Avramides for many helpful discussions on these matters.

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2

The Nonobjectivist Critique of Moral Knowledge

ALAN THOMAS

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams developed a subtle and intertwined set of arguments against a contemporary view that he called “objectivism.”¹ Williams is on record as having confessed that some of that work is difficult to follow, partly because of his stylistic trait of presenting arguments in compressed and allusive forms.² Certainly, the argument against objectivism is presented in a highly abstract way and while it is clear that a serious obstacle has been placed in the path of an objectivist view of the ethical, it is not entirely clear what that obstacle is. The aim of this paper is to contextualize Williams’ arguments in order to bring out their main lines, to explain their inter-relations and to assess their overall cogency. I will argue that the only satisfactory way to respond to his profound challenge to an objectivist form of moral cognitivism is to adopt a certain approach to the underlying epistemology of morality, namely, inferential contextualism.³ For those who do believe that a core of ethical claims is indeed made up of claims to knowledge, contextualism offers the best way of deflecting Williams’ criticisms while incorporating insights from his critique that no form of moral cognitivism ought to neglect.

1. BETWEEN SUBJECTIVISM AND OBJECTIVISM

It is possible to be more precise as to where, and how, Williams’ arguments seem puzzling and in places to verge on the paradoxical. In a footnote to

¹ Williams (1985), ch. 8.

² A confession Williams made during his exchange with Simon Blackburn in *Philosophical Books*; see Williams (1986).

³ An argument presented at greater length in Thomas (2006). I use the phrase “objectivist version of cognitivism” as, strictly speaking, it will become clear that Williams is himself an ethical cognitivist: he believes that ethical judgments are truth-apt, often true, expressive of a mental state of the general category of belief and can constitute perspectival knowledge. However, all of those claims, Williams argued, were compatible with giving such knowledge a nonobjectivist understanding, which he endorsed, and an objectivist understanding that he rejected. See Williams (1985), pp. 147–155.

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy Williams describes how he first encountered the idea of a “thick” ethical concept in a seminar given by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in Oxford in the 1950s.⁴ Williams took up this idea and is responsible for the widespread discussion of such thick ethical concepts in meta-ethics. The appeal to such concepts is based on the fact that a previous generation of meta-ethicists, including emotivists such as A. J. Ayer and prescriptivists such as R. M. Hare, had represented some ethical concepts as decomposable, under analysis, into two parts.⁵ One part was an empirically grounded representation of the world. The other part expressed the distinctively evaluative part of the judgment, which, under philosophical analysis, proved to be an expression of emotion or an endorsement of a universalisable prescription. The aim of appealing to “thick” ethical concepts was to demonstrate that for a central range of cases, an analysis of this kind simply was not feasible. Without grasp of the evaluative interest underlying the use of a concept, one could not characterize its extension such that one could substantiate the claim that a theoretically insightful analysis could be given of its two independently characterisable components.⁶

Williams was one of the moral philosophers responsible for placing thick concepts and the special demands that they place on explanation at the centre of meta-ethical discussion. A beneficiary of this emphasis was the view, developed by David Wiggins and John McDowell, known as sensibility theory or secondary property realism (more accurately, “objectivist cognitivism”).⁷ This view was cognitivist because it took the mental state asserted by a judgment using a thick concept as capable of being the mental state of knowledge; virtue is a way of coming to know things, if an appropriate agent exercises her capacities well, and judges correctly. For a limited range of judgments about that which Wiggins called “specific evaluations,” by using thick ethical concepts a virtuous person came to know facts about the ethically salient features of a situation. Furthermore, she does so in such a way as to come to accept certain defeasible reasons that necessitate his or her will to act in response to the demands of that situation.⁸ The linchpin of this argument is the characterisation of the nature of a virtuous

⁴ Williams (1985), p. 218 n. 7.

⁵ Hare (1952), p. 121. For a later development of a view of this kind, see Blackburn (1984), p. 148–149.

⁶ Williams (1985), pp. 141–143.

⁷ I will refer mainly to the papers in Wiggins (2000); McDowell (2001a); my own version of this theory, that builds on their work, is Thomas (2006).

⁸ Thomas (2006) esp. ch. 3, discusses this aspect of the view and draws some further distinctions between McDowell’s and Wiggins’ approaches to moral motivation that are not needed for the present discussion.

person. Such a person has two related features. She has the capacity to respond to the evaluative features of situations using an appropriate range of thick ethical concepts and has an appropriate understanding of those concepts.⁹ She also treats the defeasible reasons arising from such judgments as especially authoritative in her practical thinking.¹⁰ Given the irreducible connection between this characterisation of the nature of a virtuous person and the proper characterisation, using thick concepts, of the ethical properties involved in such judgments, Wiggins and McDowell characterized the latter as both anthropocentric and real. They are anthropocentric in that they cannot be characterized independently of the interests and concerns of the ethical perspective of human beings, a perspective that is *presupposed* in any particular ethical judgment.¹¹ They are real in the sense in which any property counts as real, namely, by being irreducible and indispensable in certain canonical explanations. There is nothing else to think, for example, but that “slavery is unjust and insupportable.”¹²

This judgment is backed up by appropriate standards of rational appraisal. It can feature in a wide range of explanations, personal, social, or historical. An examination of its grounds reveals that it is based on more specific evaluations about cruelty, humiliation, and exploitation. These properties are made available to us by our presupposed, human, ethical perspective with, to borrow a Williams expression, its “distinctive peculiarities.” The role of such properties in explanations cannot be dislodged for reasons that Williams took from Foot and Murdoch and developed with great sophistication. The starting point of this argument is phenomenological: it is simply the case that there *are* concepts of this kind. Used by an appropriate judge, such concepts figure in judgments that both express knowledge and sustain defeasible practical reasons. Their explanation places special demands on social explanation that explaining the use of the concept of a **hawk** or **handsaw** does not because of this unique combination of features.¹³ Any attempt to decompose the use of such concepts in judgments into a sensitivity to “empirical,” “descriptive,” or nonevaluative features of a situation characterisable independently of the evaluative interest underlying the use

⁹ This is clearest in McDowell (2001b).

¹⁰ McDowell takes the minority view that in an appropriate agent moral considerations “silence” other practical considerations; for criticism of this claim in general terms, see Williams (1985), pp. 183–184, in which the conflation of importance and deliberative priority is taken to be one feature of “the morality system.”

¹¹ Wiggins (2000), p. 107, in which Wiggins establishes that red is “not a relational property.” Judgments of colour, like judgments of value, presuppose the human point of view but this does not make either class of judgment implicitly relational.

¹² For this category of “vindicatory explanations,” see Wiggins (1991), p. 70.

¹³ Thomas (2006), ch. 2, pp. 36–38.

of the concept will not succeed. This raises special issues about what it is to grasp the point of a concept used in an evaluative judgment independently of any wider theory of concept use in general.¹⁴ However, Williams is quite clear that an appeal to thick concepts and their use in ethical judgments suffices to refute any “two factor” analysis of ethical concepts, such as that proposed by the emotivist, prescriptivist, or expressivist.

Yet Williams did *not* go on to draw Wiggins’ and McDowell’s conclusion that one ought, therefore, to become a secondary property realist: that is why he drew his important further distinction between an objectivist and nonobjectivist form of cognitivism. When *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* states that there are two ways of conceiving of a set of practices using ethical concepts, an objectivist way and a nonobjectivist way, the former model is clearly intended to represent Wiggins’ and McDowell’s position and this view is rejected.¹⁵ Objectivism is undermined by a perplexing fable of a hypertraditional society, in which a group of thick concept users who conscientiously make ethical judgments in the light of reasonable standards find their whole practice destabilized when reflection gives them one thought that undermines their “ways of going on.” This destabilising thought is that this form of ethical life is *just one way of going on* amidst a range of equally viable alternatives. Williams seems to claim that this is a case where reflection, far from making justified true beliefs secure as knowledge, undermines the knowledge that our imagined group of concept users was presumed to possess. That seems straightforwardly paradoxical: if reflection can undermine their knowledge then these concept users could not have expressed knowledge in the first place.¹⁶

To add to the puzzlement in understanding Williams’ position, both he and the secondary property realist clearly share a common opponent. As I have noted, those who believe that ethical concepts can receive a two-factor analysis in the way suggested by Ayer and Hare have developed this line of thought. More recent developments of this kind of view are much

¹⁴ Simon Kirchin, quite reasonably, presses the cognitivist to explain the features attaching to ethical concepts in particular, as opposed to concepts in general, in Kirchin (2004).

¹⁵ Williams (1985), pp. 147–148.

¹⁶ For further discussion, see Moore (2003b). A question that seems terminological but which is actually substantive is whether, on thinking the destabilizing thought, we are still talking about a society of “hypertraditionalists.” We could simply fix ideas by stipulating that a hypertraditional society *is* a society, such that *this* thought is unavailable. That would make the thought experiment, to borrow the very useful formulation of Williams, (1981), a description of an alternative “for us,” not “to us.” We cannot be hypertraditionalists, but we can imagine ourselves in a position very similar to theirs, but one that does permit that reflection could emerge in our position in a way that destabilizes some of our ethical practices. I am grateful to Adrian Moore for pressing me to clarify this point.

more sophisticated than their predecessors. Expressivists or projectivists in recent meta-ethics such as Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn have developed ingenious analyses of the underlying structure that they believe underpins the superficially assertoric form of ethical utterances.¹⁷ They do so in order to continue to develop the argument that ethical judgments are, in their primary dimension of assessment, noncognitive. But what room in dialectical space is there to deny this view, as Williams and the secondary property realists do, and then go on to deny the truth of secondary property realism, as Williams does and Wiggins and McDowell do not? However that question is to be answered, it is clearly both posed and answered at a level of sophistication beyond that of contrasting the “subjectivity” of the ethical with the “objectivity” of the scientific. However, Williams’ internal realist critics, such as Jane Heal, McDowell, Hilary Putnam, and Warren Quinn believe that they can trace the vestigial influence of this crude dichotomy within Williams’ overall strategy.¹⁸

This group of critics, mostly representative in different ways of a contrasting “internally realist” approach to the problem of whether any area of our thought and language can be construed as objective, viewed Williams as a stereotypical example of an “external realist.” Briefly, an internal realist thinks that our aspiration objectively to represent the world is significantly limited by our contingent and finite powers and any objectivity to which humans can aspire can go no further than our currently accepted theories of what there is. She also represents external realism as mistakenly aspiring to something more: a conception of the world that directly imprints itself on us, shaping our concepts and judgments and furthermore requiring an algorithmic view of scientific rationality, in which we can see the development of modern science as powered by the discovery of a set of rational methods that approach, ideally, the status of a mechanical, algorithmic process. Williams has commented on how unfair he took this stereotypical representation of his view to be and deflecting this line of criticism goes beyond the scope of the present discussion.¹⁹ I mention it in order to introduce Moore’s suspicion, well expressed in his contribution to this volume, that this misunderstanding is a serious obstacle to understanding the way in which Williams conceives of ethical objectivity in particular.

¹⁷ Blackburn (1984) and Blackburn (1993) express similar positions, but Blackburn (1999) offers a strikingly different strategy as discussed in Thomas (2006), ch. 5. See also Gibbard (1990).

¹⁸ For representative discussions, see McDowell (1986); Heal (1989); Putnam (1992); Quinn (1994).

¹⁹ Williams, (1991), (1995b). I discuss the issue at length in Thomas (2006), ch. six.

2. THE UNITY OF THE SCIENTIFIC AND THE PLURALITY OF THE ETHICAL

The essential piece of stage-setting for understanding Williams' nonobjectivist view of the ethical is Moore's argument that Williams' internal realist critics have his position precisely back to front.²⁰ Williams does not fit the stereotype of an external realist who, in the light of a scientific prejudice in favour of scientific objectivity, proceeds to downgrade the credentials of moral knowledge. It is, rather, that given Williams' understanding of the *point* of scientific enquiry, which is to develop representations of the world maximally independent of our perspective and its peculiarities, science has a different aim from that of ethical enquiry that must be concerned with the local and the peculiar and mention some of those capacities distinctive of our human point of view.²¹ However, in explaining what an absolute conception of the world amounts to, Williams' basic argument assigns an important role to absolute representations being representations of a *unitary* reality. However, social science is a part of science too, and its aim is to explain the plurality within unity that must inevitably emerge when we accept that the *point* of ethical thinking is such that it will inevitably use perspectival representations. Its proprietary concepts will typically receive a scientific explanation in the form of a social scientific explanation.²² A social scientific perspective on the ethical itself seems to bring in a different notion of unity from that applicable to, for example, physics. A social scientific understanding of the ethical views it primarily as a functional means of structuring a given social world and such unity as there is in ethical thinking would be a derived, not basic, means of understanding this function.

In summary, Moore contrasts in his contribution to this volume *direct* and *indirect* vindications of representations.²³ Ideally, a scientific explanation of the world uses representations that are capable of indirect vindication by their integration into a unitary and substantial conception of the world. However, in the case of social scientific explanations the representations involved reflect the distinctive interests and concerns represented by their being representations from a particular point of view. The point of view concerned is the idea of an individuable social world. Moore interprets Williams' position in the light of these assumptions: Williams' cognitivism is certainly correct as there can be responsibly deployed judgments using

²⁰ Moore, *this volume*, developing further some of the arguments of Moore (1997).

²¹ Most clearly explained in Williams (1991).

²² Williams' discussion of the "ethnographic stance" in Williams (1986) brought this point out very clearly.

²³ Developing the arguments of Williams (1985), pp. 167–173.

thick ethical concepts that are indeed knowledge. However, there is an inherent limitation of these claims to a presupposed set of such concepts, which are in turn used in some social worlds as opposed to others. In the case of scientific representations of the world, this presupposed element can always be discounted as the representations are all absolute. But in ethics our situation is different:

A good reflective explanation for someone's having a given item of ethical knowledge must therefore include an explanation for their inhabiting a social world that allows them to have it. . . . But it cannot itself make use of any of the thick ethical concepts exercised in the knowledge, because it must be from a vantage-point of reflection outside their social world. This means that it cannot directly vindicate the knowledge. This contrasts with the case of scientific knowledge.²⁴

Given that there are, and have been throughout history, a plurality of sets of social worlds in any reasonable sense in which social scientific explanation would find a use for that explanatory concept, then direct vindication forms no appropriate ideal for ethical representations. Such a directly vindicatory explanation would reuse the very concepts deployed in the original judgment, but a social scientific explanation is going to have to stand at one remove from the concepts that it explains as the question automatically arises as to why the explanandum involves *those* concepts *as opposed to others*.

I think this focus on explanation and its relation to different ideals of objectivity helps to answer the question of why Williams took himself to be in a position to deny the truth of expressivism by appealing to thick ethical concepts, while not being in his terms an "objectivist." He succinctly explained why in the following passage, using the term "centralism" to refer to the idea that very thin ethical concepts such as **right** and **good** are explanatorily prior to thick concepts (whereas "non-centralism," the view of Wiggins and McDowell, asserts the opposite):

Centralism is a doctrine about language or linguistic practice, and there is no reason at all to think that people could substitute for a linguistic practice the terms in which that practice was psychologically or sociologically explained.²⁵

Williams' position allows that an interpreter of a group using a divergent set of thick ethical concepts could, to use Moore's helpful phrase,

²⁴ Moore, *this volume*.

²⁵ Williams (1995a), p. 187. The terminology of "centralism" versus "noncentralism" is that of Hurley (1992).

“carve out a chunk of the same logical space” as the group interpreted, which, as Moore notes, is not the same as “carving out the same chunk of logical space.”²⁶ Thus a social scientific explanation of the use of highly perspectival concepts is possible, where such concepts are interpreted both as classifying *and* as giving rise to defeasible reasons for action. (In the latter case, to explain the interpreted group’s defeasible reasons is not to endorse them from the interpreter’s perspective.) That which Williams did not envisage is the simple conjunction of these two sets of results into a projectivist “analysis” of a thick ethical concept in any meaningful sense of “analysis.” This would be, putatively, an analysis of the original grasp of the concept on the part of the thick concept user. Projectivism would not, in Williams’ view, be redeemed by two independent facts: First, that from a social scientific perspective such concept use has an explanation and that the user of a thick concept can be construed as classifying from the same broad range of classifications as the interpreter (even if not using exactly the same classifications). Second, that the concept users can be interpreted as having certain defeasible reasons arising from such a classification. These two facts could *not* be conjoined in a plausible explanation of what it was for the interpreted group to grasp the original concept, such that the explanation was one that concept users *themselves* could grasp. Hence Williams’ verdict: neither projectivism nor expressivism meet their own demanding standards for a satisfactory analysis. In that sense, the argument from thick concepts continues to have a point, in spite of the failure of objectivism to defend its ambitious way of modeling social practices that use such concepts. There thus emerges a distinctive way, a nonobjectivist way, of resisting the views of both the projectivist/expressivist and the secondary property realist.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE HYPERTRADITIONALISTS

Moore has certainly afforded us a sympathetic reconstruction of the overall strategy of Williams’ nonobjectivist position. In this section I will put a little more detail into the picture of precisely why Williams rejected secondary property realism, or “objectivism.” Given his sympathy in his later work towards minimalism about truth, the focus of the dispute between Williams and objectivism is not whether or not ethical judgments can be true; given his concession that perspectival concepts can figure in knowledge claims the issue is not whether or not there can be moral knowledge.²⁷

²⁶ Moore, *this volume*.

²⁷ Williams (1985), p. 139.

The issue for Williams is that the secondary property realists' position is, in a precise sense, *superficial*.²⁸ In terms of presentation, the primary argument against objectivism in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* contrasts two ways of explaining knowledge: objectivism is convicted of believing that ethical knowledge is anchored, at the reflective level, by considerations that stabilize the knowledge involved in *just the same way* that scientific truth anchors belief. It is this claim of strict parity that Williams believes is false. (However, I believe that Moore has helpfully shown how this argument about explanation can be motivated at a more fundamental level by consideration of that which absolute and nonabsolute representations aim to achieve.)

In the background to the arguments of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is Williams' long-standing suspicion of some of the claims in the later Wittgenstein on which Wiggins and McDowell based their arguments. In particular, as I have noted, Williams always believed that thick ethical concepts placed special demands on social explanation and that is because of a crucial ambiguity in how one understands the idea of grasping a concept from "the inside" so that one comes to "share" it with its users.

The argument from thick concepts is that any attempt to grasp the extension of an evaluative concept independently of grasp of its evaluative point fails. Put so baldly, this does seem like an argument that applies to all concepts in a way that raises no special issue in the case of ethical concepts. However, I do think to understand both the argument and Williams' concern about it, the focus needs to fall on what it is, in the case of an evaluative concept, for a person explaining the judgment using the concept and the practices in which both are embedded to "share" its evaluative interest. This account presupposes two perspectives: that of the original users of the concept and that of a person giving an explanation, presumably a social scientific explanation, of that concept and its place in a network of judgments and practices. Williams believes that, just as in other cases in Wittgenstein's later work, there is a systematic ambiguity in this idea of sharing a concept. To share a concept can either involve total identification with its users or it can mean taking up a stance toward use of the concept that is "sympathetic but nonidentified." (Williams called the latter the "*ethnographic stance*."²⁹) It is the stance typical of a social scientist explaining the use of an evaluative concept from within a social world with which the social scientist is sympathetic, to allow her to "pick up" the point of the concept within a practice, but with which she is not totally identified – it is not her concept and not

²⁸ Williams (1985), pp. 146–148.

²⁹ Williams (1986).

her practice, not, at least, in her role as a social scientist. Furthermore, use of the concepts in judgments gives rise to defeasible reasons, and the social scientist may certainly refuse to draw the relevant practical consequences from an understanding of local practices using a thick ethical concept.

Williams agrees with the secondary property realist, then, that there is something special about evaluative concepts and the interests underpinning them; without sympathetic identification with the concept users one lacks insight into the two dimensions of supplying world guided judgments and defeasible reasons for action in a single judgment. Without such insight, however, the aims of a social explanation of a practice in which those concepts were used in judgments would be frustrated. (I take it this explains the distinctive feature of evaluative concepts. It is not true that those sympathetic to Wittgenstein have to see him as recommending a form of operationalism about all concepts, such that their use would *always* supply defeasible practical reasons, a claim extended even to theoretical concepts far removed from the periphery of experience.)³⁰ However, sympathetic identification with an ethical practice is not total identification: in order to explain a group of concept users the social scientist does not have to become an “inside member” of the group that would, once again, frustrate the aims of social scientific explanation. An “in-group” explanation of the practice is not an explanation in the relevant sense.

In the case of some Wittgensteinian reflections on our conceptual practices Williams is happy to resolve the oscillation he identified between what one might call an “empirical” and a “transcendental” reading of such reflections in favour of the latter.³¹ As he points out, if Wittgenstein is right there is no contrast between internal and external realism as there is no “inside.” To use a formulation from his early paper “Wittgenstein and Idealism,” some of Wittgenstein’s thought experiments about strange groups with equally strange conceptual practices have to be viewed not as alternatives “to us,” alternative spaces within the empirical world, but alternatives “for us.”³² They point out the limits of intelligibility by enacting failures of sense as one approaches a limit that can only be mapped from *here*.

³⁰ Moore (2005), explains as follows: “Practical reasoning, on this reconstruction, includes a pure element: keeping faith with concepts. Theoretical reasoning also includes keeping faith with concepts. What makes it possible for keeping faith with concepts to have a practical dimension as well as its more familiar theoretical dimension is, ultimately, the fact that some concepts – thick ethical concepts – equip those who possess them with certain reasons for doing things.”

³¹ Williams (1981). One of his targets here, if not by name, is Winch (1958), for example, on page 158.

³² Williams (1981), p. 160.

(Not “from inside” as there is no contrasting “outside.”)³³ This transcendental interpretation of some of Wittgenstein’s remarks has been worked up into a compelling interpretation of his later work by, among others, Jonathan Lear and Adrian Moore.³⁴ However, this approach was not, in Williams’ view, going to come to the rescue of secondary property realism as it suggests a model of a single necessary and universal structure to thought that is an appropriate model for ethical thought.³⁵

If phenomenology shows that we have thick concepts, it equally shows that history gives evidence of different and divergent schemes of concepts, in which a group of concepts function holistically to structure alternative ways, as Williams metaphorically puts it, of “finding one’s way around” a given social world. This inherent pluralism, answerable to the different point or function of our having thick ethical concepts, also poses problems for two other strategies to which a secondary property realist might appeal. One argument uses the work of Donald Davidson to argue that there are limits to how much inexplicable disagreement there can be in interpreting other groups of concept users, such that we can be confident on a priori grounds that a core of their representations will be true.³⁶ The other argument appeals to the commonalities of human nature as a similar basis for a denial that there will be significant divergences between groups of ethical concepts.³⁷ Williams’ ground for objecting to the first of these strategies was that it was too blunt an instrument; whether or not ethical discussion is conducted in terms of thick or thin ethical concepts is itself an ethical matter and partially determined by historical circumstances that fall outside the scope of justification.³⁸ In the latter case, Williams objected to a particular development of this idea, taken from Aristotle; his objection was that our conception of the natural world has changed too drastically for us to be able to resurrect this kind of argument in good faith.³⁹

These considerations form the context for Williams’ actual argument against objectivism in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that proceeds very obliquely via the perplexing fable of a hypertraditional society. I think the way to interpret this thought experiment is by seeing it as giving the

³³ Williams (1991).

³⁴ For a positive development of this interpretation of Wittgenstein, see, as representative of their respective positions, Moore (1985) and Lear (1982).

³⁵ Williams (1985), p. 152.

³⁶ One of the many complex arguments of Hurley (1992).

³⁷ Nussbaum (1995).

³⁸ Williams discusses views of this kind in, inter alia, (1995a), pp. 184–186.

³⁹ See the Reply to Nussbaum in Williams (1995b).

objectivist all that he or she wants: the members of such a society meet the constraints that the objectivist places on those who claim moral knowledge. The hypertraditionalists conceptualize their moral experience using thick ethical concepts. They make judgments and withdraw them in the light of mutual discussion and criticism. However, they do not have one key thought: that their way of going on, ethically, is merely local. This prepares the way for Williams' apparently paradoxical thought that when they do have that thought, from what one may call a "hyperreflective standpoint," their practice is destabilized and they lose their knowledge.

I think it is important, in order to avoid flagrant paradox, to interpret Williams' claim as implying that the hypertraditionalists lose not their truths – the property of truth is stable and cannot be lost – but their thick concepts and hence their knowledge. (They lose their ethical knowledge, but nothing that was true before the destabilizing reflection takes place is *no longer* true.) Endorsing those concepts could now, from the hyperreflective standpoint, only be ironic. The case is analogous to one of presuppositional failure.⁴⁰ There is an illuminating comparison between this non-objectivist thought experiment and the explicitly Hegelian interpretation of secondary property realism in Sabina Lovibond's rich and insightful *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*.⁴¹ In the course of developing her own version of the secondary realist's position, she independently motivates a position very like that of the hypertraditionalists and invites them to embrace a "transcendental parochialism," described as:

A renunciation of the (ascetically motivated) impulse to escape from the conceptual scheme to which, as creatures with a certain kind of body and environment, we are transcendently related.⁴²

Set Williams' and Lovibond's arguments side by side and it is clear that it is precisely this kind of reimmersion into our local and particular perspective that the hypertraditionalists are unable to achieve if they want to think of their particular way of going on with thick ethical concepts as a way of acquiring objective knowledge. Having set out Williams' fundamental motivations for his criticism of objectivism I will assess one way in which a moral cognitivist might respond to his arguments before suggesting an alternative, I think far more promising, strategy based on the adoption of inferential contextualism.

⁴⁰ I say "analogous" as Williams argued against this literal interpretation in Williams (1996).

⁴¹ Lovibond (1983).

⁴² Lovibond (1983), p. 210.

4. THE FAILURE OF INDIRECT VINDICATION

One strategy that a cognitivist might adopt in response to Williams' critique of objectivism is one of damage limitation: accept Williams' critique, but try and work within the criteria that he develops. I have already noted that in his sympathetic treatment of Williams' work Moore has tried to explore a loophole in the arguments on *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, namely, that Williams allows the possibility of an indirect vindication of ethical judgments. Williams did not deny that his "grammatical" analyses of the different forms of thought and language permit us to say that we assert ethical truths and possess perspectival ethical knowledge. However, our understanding of this knowledge would have to be a nonobjective understanding.

In his contribution to this volume and in other work, Moore tries to build on this concession. He notes, correctly, that Williams was always careful to argue that reflection can destroy ethical knowledge, not that it always will; he also concedes that a question remains as to whether the possibility of indirect vindication allows a return to what one might call a state of "pre-reflective innocence."⁴³ My own view is that this damage limitation strategy is not going to work; you cannot accept the situation that Williams describes as the inevitable predicament of the objectivist and recover from that situation a nonobjectified form of moral knowledge. The objectivist is, in Williams' dialectic, represented by the hypertraditionalists who are driven into the ethical equivalent of a "view from nowhere" in which awareness of a set of alternative complete schemes of ethical concepts makes a return to any particular point of view an exercise of bad faith. If they are permanently estranged from any set of thick concepts, then it seems to me that not even indirect vindication of any outlook is going to be available to them. Conversely, in explaining what is wrong with the disaster scenario that befalls the hypertraditionalists I think we already have sufficient resources to provide a robust epistemology for moral knowledge, one that pre-empts the need to develop an indirect vindication of what it is to have ethical knowledge that is given a "nonobjectified" explanation.

This does not mean that Moore's work is not of the greatest independent interest as the development of a distinctive meta-ethical position in its own right:

Williams' realism gives us . . . a richer understanding . . . of the nature of our ethical experience. . . . [It enables] us to see that our ethical knowledge is

⁴³ Moore (2003a; 2005; [this volume](#)).

from a point of view that admits of equally legitimate and compatible alternatives, in a way in which our scientific knowledge is not – and [enables] us to see how history, psychology and/or anthropology are needed to explain why we have the ethical point of view we have, where this is not itself a matter of knowing anything.⁴⁴

This nonobjectivist picture may seem “disenchanted” in contrast to its objectivist competitor, but even in these conditions we can know particular things. Whether or not a given society relies more or less heavily on thick ethical concepts is a matter that philosophical analysis cannot determine. As I have noted, Moore builds on Williams’ concession that reflection can destroy ethical knowledge, but that this is not inevitable. However, it seems to Williams true that in a modern society such as ours we *do* rely more heavily on thin concepts, supplemented by those thick concepts that have survived the corrosive effects of both reflection and the nature of a modern society.⁴⁵ If we are still to be able to know particular ethical truths, we need to appeal to *confidence*, a phenomenon that is itself social and that, once again, lies beyond philosophy to bring about:

What is done by confidence? The answer I had in mind was that, granted the nature of modern societies, we would face a good number of ethical tasks with the help of unsupported thin concepts, and, since there was not going to be knowledge in that connection, it would be as well if we had confidence.⁴⁶

Philosophy cannot bring about a situation where we have this confidence. However, assume that, as a contingent matter of fact, we do. Then there are particular things that we can know, as Moore points out:

The concept of being intrinsically wrong is not itself a thick ethical concept. Its applicability is not “world-guided” in the way that, say, the concept of being a racist is. My conviction that racial discrimination is intrinsically wrong is not an item of knowledge. But – and this is the point – it does enable me to know such things as that Wagner was a racist. The clumsy appeal to the fact/value distinction obscures this. Williams’ more layered view makes it very clear.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Moore, *this volume*.

⁴⁵ Williams (1985), pp. 170–173.

⁴⁶ Williams (1995b), p. 207.

⁴⁷ Moore, *this volume*.

This represents the best case scenario for ethical knowledge in the conditions of a modern society. It is notable how much of this scenario it lies beyond philosophy to engender. Certainly much of it cannot even be recognized and described by the limited resources of much contemporary meta-ethics, which needs to supplement its limited resources with those of sociology and history. The general picture is of a set of non-world guided thin principles generating, given the presupposition of social confidence, knowledge of particular cases. If this looks like a particularly subtle form of Kantianism, in its contemporary contractualist variant, then that is precisely how Moore has developed the argument.⁴⁸

It follows that if we can foster confidence in our ethical point of view, then we can still be committed to ethical principles cast in thin, non-world guided vocabulary that represent an unshakeable conviction, such as that racism is wrong. However, that conviction allows us to know particular things. This scenario is what it is to live in the light of the truth of our nonobjectified circumstances: the relationship between our reflection and our practice is, in that sense, transparent. Our moral convictions are being supported by the phenomenon that, in a closely related context, Richard Rorty called “solidarity.”⁴⁹

Deeply interesting though this response is to Williams’ powerful critique of objectivism I am not ultimately convinced of its feasibility. Williams’ explanation of a non-objectified ethical life seems to me to make the hyper-traditionalists’ predicament both unavoidable and, as it were, the final word when it comes to the prospects for moral knowledge.⁵⁰ When reflection destroys our knowledge, there is no way back from this, not even the way back explored by those sympathetic to the indirect vindication of our ethical commitments. In explaining why I believe this, I think the point to start with is Williams’ belief that even in the nonobjectified conditions of a modern society, some isolated pockets of knowledge using thick ethical concepts will survive. However, as J. E. J. Altham first pointed out in an insightful discussion of Williams’ appeal to confidence, that now places this appeal in a peculiar light. Coexisting side by side are knowledge claims formulated using thick ethical concepts that do not have to be supplemented by confidence and other ethical commitments sustained not by knowledge *but* by confidence.⁵¹ Altham objects that if we have knowledge, we don’t need to appeal to confidence, and if we do not have knowledge we do need

⁴⁸ Moore (2003a; 2005).

⁴⁹ Rorty (1989).

⁵⁰ Thomas (2006), ch. 6.

⁵¹ Altham (1995).

confidence. However, it seems inconsistent both to have some knowledge reinforced by an appeal to confidence while at the same time replacing lost knowledge *with* confidence. These two roles are simply too divergent to be covered by the same concept.⁵²

In the indirect vindication model that Moore develops, we accept the existence of principles using thin ethical concepts that are “not items of knowledge, but allow one to know particular things.” It is not clear to me how this is possible. If we lose our thick concepts then “how we go on” with our ethical concepts cannot be guided solely by how the use of such judgments gave rise to defeasible practical reasons. The inherent practicality of such judgments was made possible only by the conceptualisations that made “world guidedness” and “action guidingness” two aspects of one and the same judgment.⁵³ If the strategy of indirect vindication rests on an appeal to confidence, then it is not going to succeed for the kinds of reason Altham has highlighted. If it fails, then we cannot be in a situation where we are committed to “thin” principles, in the light of which we know particular things, without those thick conceptualisations that secured moral cognitivism alongside the practicality of judgment. If thick concepts have been lost in the way that the hypertraditionalist scenario seems to make inevitable, then both the indirect vindication theorist and the more orthodox cognitivist are equally in trouble.

The real difficulty of understanding knowledge in nonobjectified conditions is precisely that Williams envisages indirectly vindicated knowledge coexisting *in the same social space* with knowledge acquired through the responsible use of thick concepts. If we can make sense of the hypertraditionalists, then we can make sense of a society that has objective moral knowledge expressed by judgments using thick concepts. If we accept Williams’ thought experiment, we can see how they lose their knowledge. In those new, nonobjectified conditions we could understand the hypertraditionalists as falling back on thin, nonworld guided principles. What is totally unclear is how they could use, within the same social space, some

⁵² There is an exegetical-cum-interpretative dispute between, on the one hand, Altham’s view and my own and, on the other, that of Adrian Moore on this point. Moore argues (personal correspondence) that the role of the invocation of confidence is to support that thick ethical knowledge that, contingently, survives reflection. (Bearing in mind the point that reflection can destroy knowledge, but will not always do so.) It supports this knowledge by preventing its loss; however, confidence was never intended to replace lost knowledge. In response, I would reiterate Altham’s concern that confidence in that which has already survived reflection is unnecessary; therefore, if confidence is necessary, it is necessary to support those commitments *not* grounded on thick ethical concepts.

⁵³ Thomas (2005).

thick knowledge sustained by their thick concepts and another kind of knowledge sustained, however indirectly, by confidence.

5. AVOIDING THE HYPERTRADITIONALISTS' PREDICAMENT

I have suggested that if those sympathetic to the claim that we have moral knowledge do not contest Williams' description of the predicament of the hypertraditionalists, then there is no way back from that concession. If Williams is right, then there will not be enough available to those who want to take up his option of an indirect vindication of the ethical. Is there no way of avoiding this pessimistic conclusion?

I suggest that there are three points that the moral cognitivist may develop in order to formulate a response, although this is not the place to supply all the necessary details.⁵⁴ The first point is that if one wants to resist Williams' conclusion that a modern society will, typically, sustain only a nonobjectified ethical life then one ought to examine the role that absolute representations are called upon to play and to argue that some ethical representations, highly perspectival though they are, could *also* play that role. The second point involves developing a different description of what knowledge is, such that the perspective of the hypertraditionalists turns out to be an impossible one. The third point is that one can resist Williams' pessimism about the prospects for a theory of moral error. I will set out each of these three kinds of counterargument in turn.

First, then, an important part of the argument for the absolute conception of the world is envisaging a certain kind of role for absolute representations, namely, one that ties them very closely to their being representations of a single and unitary conception of the world that itself reflects the fact that reality itself is single and unitary. Such representations perform the cognitive role of tiebreaker when we are unable to reconcile a conflict between two perspectival representations.⁵⁵ The process of perspectival ascent, in which we subsume a more perspectival representation under a less perspectival one, is the central way in which we construct an absolute conception of the world.⁵⁶ However, it is worth pointing out that while this is an important way of working up to the idea of a conception of the world maximally independent of our perspective and its peculiarities, the process of perspectival

⁵⁴ I try to do so in Thomas (2006), chs. 6, 7, and 8.

⁵⁵ A central part of Moore's motivation for the possibility of absolute presentations, as presented in Moore (1987) and Moore (1997).

⁵⁶ Moore (1997).

ascent uses much less, simply a comparison in terms of “more perspectival” and “less perspectival.” Those terms of comparison, and the idea of an intellectual gain in moving from a less to a more perspectival conception seem equally available at the level of those interest relative and perspectival materials that are typical of ethics and to which Williams did not deny the title of “knowledge.”

This point can be combined with the second point to which a moral cognitivist might appeal in trying to undermine Williams’ description of the hypertraditionalists’ predicament. An inferential contextualist argues that Williams’ treatment of the idea of ethical pluralism is mistaken.⁵⁷ One response to Williams’ argument from his internal realist critics was to argue that he had misconstrued, in his description of a hypertraditional society, the relations between objectivity and detachment. That charge does not seem to me to be fair in quite that form, but there is something to it. Williams himself was a pluralist about the contents of ethical thinking; an emphasis on the plurality of values and the possibility of tragic conflict between them runs throughout his work, reflecting the influence on Williams’ work of Isaiah Berlin.⁵⁸ (It is clearly demonstrated by Williams’ admiration for the work of Sophocles in *Shame and Necessity*.)⁵⁹ However, that is a pluralism that one might describe as *within* the ethical; it seems radically different in kind from the situation in which the hypertraditionalists find themselves. They are confronted by a range of what appear to be complete alternative schemes of ethical concepts, from a perspective in which they have none, as they have lost their faith in their merely local ways of going on because they are *merely* local. I think it is illuminating to contrast this kind of radical pluralism with the objective value pluralism that is an interpretation within morality of the plurality of values and of ethical considerations more generally. The way forward, I think, is to challenge the underlying model of knowledge that makes this look like a predicament that a group of concept users could find themselves in.

This will involve adapting a general claim to the particular circumstances of ethical thought, but the basis of the general claim is that there is an irreducible plurality within knowledge: The structure of enquiry is a useful guide to the underlying structure of knowledge itself. The inferential contextualist argues that the particular questions that drive enquiry forward serve also to structure knowledge.⁶⁰ Those questions give point to structuring our knowledge into problem solving situations where, as

⁵⁷ Thomas (2006) chs. 6 and 7.

⁵⁸ Berlin (1969).

⁵⁹ Williams (1993).

⁶⁰ Thomas (2006), ch. 7.

the epistemological coherentist has pointed out, knowledge claims that are doubted and come up for question are challenged on the basis of knowledge claims that are not. Unlike the coherentist, however, the contextualist denies that these plural contexts of enquiry are merely contexts of discovery, underlying which is a single and unitary context of justification (a claim to which coherentism is committed). Like the pragmatist, the contextualist grounds his or her position in phenomenology in this sense: it begins from a realistic and unprejudiced description of the actual process of enquiry. That process seems to reveal a plurality of distinct problem solving situations and the contextualist argues that this surface appearance does not mislead. It is no part of this view to deny significant disanalogies between the scientific and the ethical; in particular, the scientific seems to give clearer evidence of self-correcting mechanisms internal to the practice of science as a whole that encourages, even if it does not vindicate, the idea that scientific enquiry converges on a substantial and unitary view of reality. But the absence of that external point to ethical enquiry and the absence of convergence on a single, identifiable, best life for all communities of enquirers is not an objection to ethical cognitivism, simply a misconstrual of the kind of objectivity available in the ethical case. There remains a viable distinction between the scientific and the ethical but this is not a demarcation of knowledge from nonknowledge or of the world-guided from the merely projected.

The fundamental motivation for adopting inferential contextualism has to lie outside ethics; my own view is that it offers a uniquely satisfying response to philosophical scepticism. A general reason like this is needed to avoid the charge that adopting the view solely to escape the predicament of Williams' hypertraditionalists – a comparatively local difficulty within meta-ethics – is opportunistic. However, given that there are such general reasons, one can appeal to inferential contextualism to question the implicit foundationalism about ethical justification that seems to underlie Williams' account of the hypertraditionalists. He sets up the objectivist for this kind of refutation in passages such as the following:

The very general kind of judgement that is in question here – a judgement using a very general concept – is essentially a product of reflection. . . . In relation to this society, the question now is: Does the practice of the society, in particular the judgements that members of the society make, imply answers to reflective questions about that practice, questions they have never raised?⁶¹

⁶¹ Williams 1985, p. 146.

Before he transferred the onus of proof in answering this question to the cognitivist:

There are two different ways in which we can see the activities of the hyper-traditional society. They depend on different models of ethical practice. One of them may be called an “objectivist” model . . . we shall see the members of the society as trying, in their local way, to find the truth about values. . . . *We shall then see their judgements as having these general implications.* [emphasis added]⁶²

Is this not, in the present case, too controversial an assumption? On a more realistic picture of moral cognitivism, people take themselves to be finding out the truth about ethical questions from within established traditions of enquiry. As in other forms of enquiry, propositions that come into question are not doubted until some concrete concern is raised that problematizes them against a set of relevant alternatives. This process of enquiry proceeds in the light of those taken for granted “hinge propositions” whose unique functional role was described by Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*.⁶³

In representing transitions between such contexts of enquiry as rational, the cognitivist appeals to the first point I mooted in response to Williams, namely, that the role of tiebreaker in conflicts between rationally warranted representations is one guaranteed to maximally nonperspectival representations, from which it does not follow that no perspectival representation can play such a role. If such representations can do so, then it is possible to represent ethical thought as *progressive*, in the incremental sense captured by Nozick in the following passage.

If it is said that Reason itself, rather than any particular statement of its content, must remain as the final arbiter, then we must wonder what precisely that is. If not as particular content, then the only sense in which reason must endure is as an evolving chain of descent. Reason will endure as whatever evolves or grows out of the current content of reason by a process of piecemeal change that is justified at each moment by principles which are accepted at that moment (although not necessarily later on), provided that each evolving stage seems close enough to the one immediately preceding it to warrant the continued use of the label “reason” then. (The new stage may not seem very similar, however, to an earlier, step-wise stage.) That degree of continuity hardly seems to mark something which is a fixed and eternal intellectual point.⁶⁴

⁶² Williams 1985, p. 147.

⁶³ Wittgenstein (1975).

⁶⁴ Nozick (2001), pp. 2–3.

This is not the place to give a comprehensive description of a view of this kind; I have attempted to do so elsewhere.⁶⁵ However, it is clear that a major concern that Williams had about views of this sort was the ambitiousness of their presupposed theory of error. A theory of this kind is taking on the burden of explaining some of the divergence between ethical thought in different times and places as involving an error and Williams thought that making out this case convincingly was going to be very difficult.

This is the third point that I think can be developed to help those sympathetic to an objectivist understanding of cognitivism to resist Williams' critique. I will conclude with some remarks intended to make this challenge for cognitivism look precisely like a challenge, not an unsurmountable obstacle. Any satisfactory response to the nonobjectivist challenge is going to have to avoid inflating the cognitive credentials of ethics; it is more prudent to concede to Williams that traditions of moral enquiry cannot be modeled as research programmes each independently seeking the moral truth, such that we can expect them, in the long run, to converge on a single answer. But that is not to concede that such moral traditions are not concerned with knowledge at all.⁶⁶ Once the radical and destabilising pluralism that destabilized the knowledge of the hypertraditionalists has been rejected as based on a false model of enquiry, one can appeal to a reasonable objective pluralism within morality itself that would go some way to explain why ethical enquiry lacks an "external" point. The ends of living virtuously are set within a life virtuously lived, and ethical enquiry as a whole can reasonably be expected to exhibit this feature, too. Another point to be made in defence of cognitivism is that perhaps, compared to truths available at the cutting edge of scientific research, moral knowledge is more easily accessible than scientific truths. If that implies that moral traditions are more concerned with articulating competing visions of the good, then that also supports a more realistic view of the contrast between the scientific and the ethical. However, once again, this does not imply that articulation is not concerned with knowledge. Throughout these analogies and disanalogies Williams might insist that one has yet to have made plausible the claim that there can be moral error; to which I would reply that this challenge is in fact deeply ambivalent. Mark Timmons has also recently argued that the existence of moral error is an argument that *supports* cognitivism.⁶⁷ That is because cognitivism alone acknowledges the possibility of deep moral error,

⁶⁵ Thomas (2006), parts II and III.

⁶⁶ The following discussion recapitulates some of the arguments of Thomas (2006), ch. 10.

⁶⁷ Timmons (1999), ch. 3. See also Brink (1989), pp. 29–36.

namely, error that cannot be given a noncognitivist explanation in terms of our current critical practices, or how we might extend such practices.

Before I develop that point, let me also make some remarks intended to make the task of a theory of moral error look more tractable: first, many moral disagreements are clearly traceable to disagreements over nonmoral beliefs. False scientific, metaphysical or religious beliefs may lead people to hold false moral views, or bias their enquiries. Another point is that people may hold false moral beliefs because they make errors in reasoning. We are also reflectively aware that even in contexts where moral knowledge is, as it were, reasonably easily accessible in the sense that we do not need to expend large sums of money on research teams and equipment, there is another sense in which it is hard to get things right. For example, sometimes, to get things ethically right, you must be emotionally engaged; at other times, detached. Sometimes you need to react spontaneously, at other times, after long and careful thought. Cognitivism only claims that a central core of ethical claims are claims to knowledge. That central core is Wiggins' category of "specific evaluations" and general features of cognitive claims can be expected to apply in this particular case, such as the difficulty of deciding when we do have two genuine competitor views, because of the problems of vagueness and indeterminacy.⁶⁸

Williams' challenge, then, poses a genuine problem for cognitivism, but not necessarily an insoluble one. Indeed, the cognitivist can respond that only his or her view can give an explanation of the possibility of deep error in our moral outlooks, a possibility that common sense seems to countenance. As Mark Timmons has pointed out, our ordinary critical practices presuppose that one can speak truly of moral agreement, disagreement, and genuine error. However, only cognitivism can redeem that commitment: all varieties of noncognitivism, Timmons argues, substitute an ersatz conception of moral error for the deep error recognized in our ordinary critical practices. The expressivist, to take a representative example, tries to represent the idea of improvements of moral sensibility in terms of improved sets of attitudes, viewed as self-correcting from within the perspective set by those attitudes themselves. However, this is too psychologistic an idea to capture the idea of a deep ethical error that transcends any such set of attitudes: any transition between sets of attitudes can be represented as simply that – a psychological change.⁶⁹ This is not the claim that

⁶⁸ Wiggins (1991). There is little discussion of the problem of vagueness specifically for ethical concepts, but see Shafer-Landau, (1995).

⁶⁹ Brink (1989), p. 30.

noncognitivism cannot explain ethical error. Rather, the claim is that it cannot do so in as simple and compelling a way as cognitivism; nor can its ersatz notion of error capture the notion of deep error available to cognitivism.

The contextualist version of cognitivism that I have suggested is the most plausible response to Williams' non-objectivism tries to reconcile two aspects of our critical practices: first, that specific challenges to parts of our on-going moral outlook have to presuppose a background context to that enquiry taken as a "going concern," as it were. Nevertheless, while enquiry is always relative to particular problem solving contexts, reason has a particular "context breaking" use that allows one to challenge any such context, without iterating *that* thought to generate the idea of a standpoint than which none other could transcend. (So nothing in the contextualist model forces the adoption of the idea of a notional end point to enquiry.) It does seem to me that this emphasis on localness and context relative holism does support a general view of scepticism as an engine of ethical change and as properly taking the form of a particular kind of critique of our ethical ideas. That particular form of critique would be local, would subject some of our ethical ideas to sceptical challenge on the basis of other ethical ideas to which we are reflectively committed, and would increase in plausibility as it was made more specific and detailed. In that respect, contextualism seems to offer a positive model of the kind of ethical critique of which Williams himself was an exponent, reflecting the "need to be sceptical" central to his account of ethical thought in particular, as opposed to the objective status of the ethical in general.⁷⁰ Williams' critique of "the morality system" in chapter 10 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* seems to be an example of such a local, detailed, and contextual critique of a limited range of our ethical ideas, criticized from the standpoint afforded by certain others.⁷¹ There are some respects, then, in which a form of "objectivism" that appeals to an inferentially contextual model of moral knowledge can accommodate some of Williams' central claims, provided, of course, that they are detached from his commitment to a "nonobjectified" view of the ethical.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have presented the complex and intertwined lines of argument with which Williams raised serious problems for one leading form

⁷⁰ Williams (1990).

⁷¹ As is made clear in Burt Louden's contribution to this volume.

of cognitivist view, which he labeled objectivism. I also have evaluated one response to his arguments that does not contest his sceptical undermining of the objectivist position, but tries to limit the damage done to our aspiration to treat parts of our ethical thought as objective. I have suggested that any defence of moral cognitivism will be forced to contest Williams' refutation of the view and ought to do so by developing a contextualist epistemology for those parts of ethical thought that can be interpreted as knowledge claims. Three key aspects of such a view have been highlighted. The first is that contextualism accommodates what has been called the context-breaking role of reason, reflected in the particular claim that a transition from one set of perspectival representations to another can be interpreted as a rationally well grounded transition. Second, the contextualist believes that there is an irreducible plurality of contexts, individuated by the "hinge propositions" that function to set up a problem solving context within which other propositions are the subject of rationally grounded doubt. Third, the challenge of developing a theory of error can be met in such a way as to address Williams' challenge, and, in fact, so as to accommodate his "need to be sceptical" about our received ethical ideas.⁷²

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⁷² I am very grateful to Kathryn Brown, Adrian Moore, and John Skorupski for their help with this chapter.

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3

Internal Reasons and the Scope of Blame

JOHN SKORUPSKI

One of Bernard Williams' most influential themes has been the claim that there are only "internal" reasons. It is an important element in his moral philosophy, constituting, in particular, the main thrust in a striking critique of "modern morality," a critique that has interesting affinities with that of Nietzsche.¹ Yet despite the very extensive discussion this theme has produced, it also has been surprisingly elusive. Critics have found it hard to pin down the difference between "internal" and "external" reasons, and even harder to get clear about what bearing the claim that there are only internal reasons has on modern morality. What is it about this thing that Williams wishes to reject?

Here we shall set ourselves a twofold aim: to examine (§§1–3) Williams' argument for "internalism" – the thesis that there are only internal reasons – and to assess (§§4–6) what bearing internalism has on modern moral ideas, or on modern ideas about the nature of the moral.

Williams often seems to weave his internalism into a Humean model of practical reasons – a model that has struck many philosophers as unconvincing, and indeed seriously misleading. However I shall suggest that Hume's conception of practical reasons is neither the only possible starting point, nor the best starting point, for Williams' questions about morality – notably, about the scope of blame. In Williams' own account of what it is for something to be an "internal" reason the Humean conception sometimes retreats into the background, although it never quite disappears from view. And in fact something like Williams' internalism, with similar implications for modern morality, can arise from a thought that is not connected with Hume's particular model of practical reasons. It is that agents cannot be said to have reasons for acting which they are unable to recognize *as* reasons (even when they know the relevant facts). Not that this form of

¹ Other aspects of this critique, which will not concern us here, relate to voluntariness and moral luck. I shall say more about what 'modern morality' is shorthand for, that is, what is being criticized, in §6.

internalism about reasons produces any direct challenge to morality itself. For a guiding thread in our idea of the moral is its spontaneity: moral agents are accountable in so far as responsible – able to respond for *themselves* to moral considerations, recognize and act on them without having to be told by others what they are. Morality, at any rate in this common modern conception of it, is a matter of self-governance, not external command. A corollary is that inability to recognize moral reasons as reasons removes an agent from the scope of responsibility and blame, to an extent proportionate to the degree of the inability. Not only is the internalism about reasons of the kind I have just mentioned consistent with this: the conception of morality as self-governance is a special case of it. Yet that is not the end of the story. When this internalism is combined with a realistic view of people it challenges certain cherished modern moral assumptions: egalitarianism and universalism about the scope of responsibility and blame, rigorism about the bases of respect. The resulting diagnosis of the tensions in our conception of morality at least overlaps with that of Williams' critique. More ambitiously, I will argue that it captures everything that is sound in it, while leaving out the unsound elements which derive from Hume. But let us begin by considering Williams' account of internal and external reasons.

1. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL REASONS?

In a paper published in 1980 Williams suggests that sentences of the form "A has a reason to φ ," or "There is a reason for A to φ " (where " φ " stands in for "some verb of action") might be interpreted in two ways:²

On the first, the truth of the sentence implies, very roughly, that A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his φ -ing. . . . On the second interpretation . . . the reason-sentence will not be falsified by the absence of an appropriate motive.³

The first interpretation takes these sentences about reasons to express what Williams calls *internal* reasons. The second allows that they may express what he calls *external* reasons. Explaining the contrast further, Williams notes that internal reasons always display a relativity to the agent A's "subjective motivational set," which Williams labels "S," and that comprises

² Williams (1981).

³ Williams (1981), p. 101.

A's existing motivational states: "An internal reason statement is falsified by the absence of some appropriate element from S."⁴ He also holds that such a statement is *verified* by the presence of an appropriate element in S, although, as he notes, that is not so important in his argument.⁵

What about external reason statements? Williams agrees that we sometimes talk as though there were external reasons – as though agents could have reasons which weren't relative to the motives in their S – but he denies that this talk has any clear meaning. The only clear notion of a reason is the internal notion: A has a reason to φ if and only if A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his φ -ing.

If this biconditional is to be plausible we must exclude motives based on false beliefs about the facts. Williams imagines someone who wants a gin and tonic and believes the stuff in this bottle to be gin, whereas in fact it is petrol.⁶ Does he have a reason to mix it with tonic and drink it? He probably thinks he has, but if he does then as Williams plausibly says, he is wrong. (Assuming there is no other reason to drink it.) This agent wants to drink gin and he also wants to drink the stuff in this bottle. The first motivational state, let's assume, is not based on a false belief about the facts, whereas the second is – and that strips it of reason-giving force. So we should restrict S to motives whose reason-giving force is not vitiated by dint of their resting on false beliefs about the facts.⁷ Then we can put Williams' view, that all reasons are internal reasons, in a nicely succinct way:

(I) There is reason for A to φ if and only if φ -ing would serve a motive in A's S.

This is the formulation we shall be considering. But complications arise. For Williams often puts his view in a rather different way, which appeals to whether there is a "sound deliberative route" by which A could reach the conclusion to φ :

The internalist view of reasons for action is that . . . A has a reason to φ only if he could reach the conclusion to φ by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has. The externalist view is that this is not a necessary condition . . .

⁴ Williams (1981), p. 102.

⁵ Williams (1995), p. 35. Cf Williams (2001). However, he does sometimes argue from the sufficiency as well as from the necessity of the condition.

⁶ Williams (1981), p. 102.

⁷ This is a slight modification of what Williams says: he includes such motives in S but says they give no reasons. Williams (1981), p. 103.

And

The central idea is that if B can truly say of A that A has reason to φ , then (leaving aside the qualifications needed because it may not be his strongest reason) there must be a sound deliberative route to φ -ing, which starts from A's existing motivations.⁸

A large part of the obscurity about internal and external reasons has arisen from this alternative way of putting the distinction. But I think Williams intends it to agree with (I); and the obscurities to which it gives rise can be clarified by referring back to (I).⁹ Here are some examples of that.

(1) What is a sound deliberative route? It is too broad to say that a deliberative route is sound so long as every step in it is a priori truth-preserving. For in that case, if the principles of morality or prudence are a priori truths they can enter into a sound deliberative route, whether or not they are in A's S – in other words, whether or not A accepts and is motivated by them. There will be a sound deliberative route to them *whatever* is in A's S, as they themselves will make up part of the route. In contrast, Williams emphasizes that prudential and moral considerations, as against matters of fact and sound epistemic principles of reasoning, do not enter into what he means by a sound deliberative route. They give A reason to act, he thinks, only if they are in A's S. Notably, moreover, his reasons for excluding prudential and moral considerations, unless they are already in the agent's S, do not turn at all on whether these considerations are or are not a priori. They turn on a different, and interesting, point:

The grounds for making this general point about fact and reasoning, as distinct from prudential and moral considerations, are quite simple: any rational deliberative agent has in his S a general interest in being factually and rationally correctly informed . . . on the internalist view there is already a reason for writing, in general, the requirements of correct information and reasoning into the notion of a sound deliberative route, but not a similar reason to write in the requirements of prudence and morality.¹⁰

At first, this looks unpersuasive. Surely there can be lazy-minded people whose S includes no general motivation to be factually and rationally

⁸ Williams (1995), p. 35 and Williams (1981), p. 186.

⁹ It should be noted, however, that Williams in his last comment on this argument preferred the "sound deliberative route" formulation. See Williams (2001), p. 91.

¹⁰ Williams (1995), p. 37.

informed, or even to be relevantly informed about what actions serve the motives in their S. They still have various reasons to do various things – it's just that a general reason to get informed is not one of them. However the point is clear if we derive it from (I). It will follow from (I) that any agent, anyone who has motives at all, has reason to get the information and do the reasoning that will serve the motives in their S, whatever these may be. But it does *not* follow from (I) that anyone at all, whatever their S, has reason to ascertain or to observe the principles of prudence and morality.

(2) Does it matter whether A – *that* person – could reach the conclusion by a sound deliberative route, or are we asking only whether there *is* a sound deliberative route? The question is important in ways which we will come to only in Section 4. For the moment, note that there may be a sound deliberative route which requires very complex reasoning that is well beyond A's powers. Suppose, for example, that A's goal is to sink an enemy battleship, and that a sound deliberative route starting from information he already has shows that this goal would be served by sending the fleet to a particular area of the ocean. However the route in question involves cracking an enemy code that would take A's best computers a long time to unravel and is certainly well beyond A. Or again, suppose the sound deliberative route calls on facts that A could not know. For example, Mount Etna is about to erupt and that fact generates a sound deliberative route from A's S to the conclusion that he has reason not to climb it today.

Is there reason for A to send the fleet to that spot, or not to climb Mount Etna? I'm not sure how Williams would reply – but (I) entails that there is.¹¹ And that seems to me to be the correct answer. If the stuff in the glass is poison, not gin, but A can't tell that, there is still reason for him not to drink it. Similarly, someone might call me out of the blue and inform me that there was reason for me to attend their office the next morning, while refusing to tell me what the reason was. What they said might be true (for example if I could become a billionaire by signing a document there before noon) even if I had and could have no reason to believe them.

True, there is a lot of flexibility in the way we talk about reasons, with context doing a lot of disambiguating work. Take the locutions "A has reason to φ ," and "There is reason for A to φ ." Depending on context,

¹¹ He says that A may not know a true reason statement about himself (and may believe a false one), but he also thinks that there are cases in which one "merely says that A would have reason to φ if he knew the fact," Williams (1981), p. 103.

either of these can refer to (i) what there is reason for A to do, given the facts (e.g. not to drink this, because it's poison) or (ii) what A is justified (in various senses of this word) in believing there is reason for A to do, given what he is justified in believing to be the facts (to drink this, because he justifiably thinks it's gin). We may even mean – at least in the case of “A has reason to φ ” – (iii) what A takes himself to have reason to do. Of these, it's only (iii) that can explain what A does. There is something to be said for stipulating that “There is reason for A to φ ” is to refer to (i), and that “A has reason to φ ” is to refer to (ii). We could then say that A *has* no reason to avoid drinking this stuff, even though there *is* reason for A not to drink it. Similarly, we could say that A had no reason not to climb Mount Etna, even though the fact that it would erupt was a reason not to climb it, and so on. In §5, we shall find this distinction between the two locutions useful, but it is not needed just for the moment.¹²

(3) What should we say about the following possibility: if A were to deliberate about how to realize some goal that is in his S, that very process of deliberation would remove the goal from his S?¹³ Williams emphasizes that deliberation can change the agent's S:

We should not . . . think of S as statically given. The processes of deliberation can have all sorts of effects on S, and this is a fact which a theory of internal reasons should be very happy to accommodate.¹⁴

However, how should it accommodate it? Should we say that the reasons A has at a time are relative to his S at that time, or to the S he would have if he deliberated? Since deliberating may have various effects on his S, depending on how good he is at deliberating and what particular deliberations he goes in for, should we somehow idealize A's abilities and the amount of deliberating he can do at a time, so that his reasons are relative to the conclusions he'd come to as an ideal deliberator? Many pitfalls attend this line of thought.

Again, however, the issue is clarified if we refer back to (I) and bear in mind Williams' frequent insistence that A's reasons depend on A's *existing* motivations, motivations A *already* has. The reasons A has are the reasons (I) says he has given his existing S, not the reasons he *would have*

¹² Williams sometimes distinguishes “A has reason to φ ” and “there is reason for A to φ ” – for example, Williams (1985), p. 192 – but seems not to do so systematically.

¹³ For example, A wants to find someone to complain to but if he were to deliberate about how to do that he would calm down and stop wanting to complain.

¹⁴ Williams (1981), p. 105.

if he deliberated in ways that *modified* his existing S. That still allows Williams to be quite liberal in what “motivations” he allows into A’s S, as we shall see.

So I shall take it that (I) states Williams’ internalist view of reasons. A question that can now be raised about (I) is whether Williams intends it as a conceptual or a substantive normative truth. T. M. Scanlon suggests the latter reading in an interesting and lucid discussion of Williams’ view, but I think Williams intends the former.¹⁵ For a person who puts forward (I) as a substantive normative thesis is not thereby proposing an analysis of the concept of a reason. They could hold, for example, that that concept is the primitive normative concept, and not itself further analysable. (This is in fact Scanlon’s view, and I think he is right about that.) In contrast, Williams rests his case for internalism on an analysis of what it is for something to be a reason, and as we have seen, he questions the *intelligibility* of external reason statements. In “Internal reasons and the scope of blame,” he asks “What are the truth-conditions for statements of the form ‘A has a reason to φ ?’” and advances internalism (in the “sound deliberative route” version) as the right answer.¹⁶ The point will become clearer when we examine Williams’ arguments for internalism. But before we come to these, it will be useful to consider how Williams differs from Hume. The question has often puzzled his readers, and it raises the further question of how inclusive one is supposed to be, on Williams view, about the “motivations” in a person’s S.

2. DOES WILLIAMS DIFFER FROM HUME?

In “Internal and External Reasons,” Williams starts from what he calls the “sub-Humean model” of reasons, intending, he says, “by addition and

¹⁵ Scanlon (1998), p. 365. Parfit (1997), p. 10 suggests that Williams rejects “Analytical Internalism” in Williams (1995b) – Parfit cites in support of this interpretation page 188. What Williams denies here is only that if someone concludes, by deliberating, that he has reason to φ , he has thereby concluded that if he deliberated correctly he would be motivated to φ . (Williams is discussing the “sound deliberative route” version of his view.) It may be that even a strictly “Analytical Internalist” could deny that (in virtue of the paradox of analysis); more importantly, Williams’ view need not be read as a strict definition of the meaning of statements about reasons. It is best understood as offering a “deeper-down” account of their conceptual content (and thus not a substantive, normative, thesis).

¹⁶ Williams (1995), p. 35. Cf p. 40, “I think the sense of a statement of the form ‘A has reason to φ ’ is given by the internalist model.” He also suggests that external reasons statements are “false, incoherent, or really something else misleadingly expressed,” Williams (1981), p. 111.

revision, to work it up into something more adequate.” The model is very like (I); it says that:

(II) There is reason for A to f if A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by φ -ing.¹⁷

Williams calls this “sub-Humean” because he thinks that Hume’s views were in fact more complex. They were indeed more complex; in fact it is hard to be certain what they were, and that makes a comparison between Hume and Williams difficult. Observe, for example, that Williams is interested in the concept of a reason understood normatively, in the context of justification, and that he accepts that such a normative concept is perfectly legitimate, whereas quite a lot of what Hume says seems to imply a wholly sceptical view about the existence of normative reasons, rather than an internalist theory of them. Then another large part of what Hume says is concerned with the psychological question of what gives rise to action; here he famously argues that beliefs alone cannot do so but must always combine appropriately with passions. This is Hume’s “desire/belief theory of motivation.”

However, it still seems fair to see (II) as *also* being a part of what Hume says. Plausibly, his view taken as a whole has two levels: considering the matter in strictly epistemological terms, Hume thinks, we’re never justified in saying anything is a reason (epistemic or practical) for anything; however, he also thinks that insofar as we *in fact*, in everyday discussion, talk about reasons for a person to act we should do so in a way that conforms to (II). On this reading, Hume is at one level an internal-reasons theorist even though at another level he is a sceptic about reasons as such. If we fix attention on the former level, then, the “sub-Humean model” *is* the Humean model. So although Williams is not at all a sceptic about reasons, we can still ask how similar his internalism is to Hume’s in *this* respect.

Williams tightens (II) by eliminating desires based on false beliefs – as Hume does. He also allows for a variety of forms of deliberation, not just means-end reasoning; this also, Hume, understood as an internal-reasons theorist, could surely have allowed. So if there is a difference between Williams and Hume it will lie either in the difference between desire and motive – the possible play that is allowed by the difference between (I)

¹⁷ This is close to Williams (1981), p. 101. He uses the phrase “A has reason to φ ,” and he adds, “Alternatively, we might say . . . some desire the satisfaction of which A believes will be served by his φ -ing” – but in fact he makes nothing more of this alternative.

and (II) – or alternatively, it will lie in the different meanings that can be attached to the term “desire.”

Now Williams says that he wants to be “more liberal than some theorists have been about the possible elements in S”: he is willing, he says, to use the term “desire” “formally,” for all these elements, noting however, that desire must then be understood to include “dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects embodying commitments of the agent.”¹⁸ How liberal is this? To put the question in another way: is the concept of desire meant so “formally,” or thinly, as to cover every possible motive?

Let us say that a motive is whatever can be adduced, in our everyday explanations of intentional action, as explaining (in combination with a person’s factual beliefs) why the person did an action. A can have various motives, to do various things; the operative motive is the one that explains why he did what he actually did. Now suppose A has the following beliefs. He believes that he’s just trodden on your toe and he believes that that’s a reason to apologize. Because he believes these things, he apologizes, for example, by saying “Sorry!” So it’s the belief that treading on a person’s toe gives one reason to apologize that was his operative motive for saying “sorry”: it is what explains his action, in combination with his factual beliefs. It’s irrelevant whether he actually *felt* sorry. What motivated him was the conviction that, irrespective of his feelings, it was appropriate to apologize. The motive was a belief about what reasons for action he had.

Can we describe this motive, even “formally,” as a desire to apologize? It hardly helps clarity to do so. In the ordinary, substantive, sense of the term “desire,” A has apologized because he thought he had reason to do so, whether or not he *desired* to do so. That allows for a difference between *motive* and *desire* – and the Humean view is then the substantive doctrine that every operative motive must involve a desire, even when it appears not to. For a Humean, the essential points are that desire is an affective and not a purely cognitive state, and that only a motive which includes an affective state is capable of triggering action. Hence, according to the Humean, if A apologized there must have been some desire, that is, affective state, or in Hume’s word, “passion,” which caused him to do so.

We should understand the word “desire,” as it occurs in (II), in this Humean way. So if one endorses (II), one thinks that A has reason to apologize only if there’s some affective state or passion which would be served by

¹⁸ Williams (1981), p. 105.

his doing so. And now let's ask whether Williams endorses (II) understood in this way. It seems not – he can allow that A's beliefs alone caused him to apologize, and in that case he would say that *they* were the motive for A's apology and hence in their own right an element in A's S. Thus he asks:

Does believing that a particular consideration is a reason to act in a particular way provide, or indeed constitute, a motivation to act? . . . Let us grant that it does – this claim indeed seems plausible, so long at least as the connexion between such beliefs and the disposition to act is not tightened to that unnecessary degree which excludes *akrasia*. The claim is in fact so plausible, that this agent, with this belief, appears to be one about whom, now, an *internal* reason statement could truly be made: he is one with an appropriate motivation in his S.¹⁹

Williams agrees here, as it seems to me quite rightly, that a belief on A's part about reasons – for example, his belief that treading on your toe is a reason for him to apologize – can “provide, or indeed constitute, a motivation to act.” In allowing that, and thus including the belief in A's S, he seems to depart from Humeanism about motivation.

The essential point for the Humean was that any motivating state must contain an *affective* element. That still leaves open a response to the case we're considering which would depend on what is often called “expressivism.” Expressivism says that what we treat as “beliefs” about reasons for action aren't really *beliefs*. They are affective attitudes, of approval or disapproval, toward action. On the expressivist view, A's motive includes an attitude – that treading on your toe is a reason for him to apologize – which is not to be thought of as a belief but as an affective state: a disposition to approve of apologizing to people whom one has inconvenienced. It is this affective attitude of approval that does the motivating.

But Williams does not take this line. Accepting that propositions and beliefs about reasons are genuine propositions and beliefs, he provides a truth-condition for them in the form of (I). He then challenges the external reasons theorist to explain the content of propositions about reasons in a way which shows how *external* reasons can exist:

What is it the agent comes to believe when he comes to believe he has a reason to φ ? If he becomes persuaded of this supposedly external truth, so that the reason does then enter his S, what is that he has come to believe? This question presents a challenge to the externalist theorist.²⁰

¹⁹ Williams (1981), p. 107.

²⁰ Williams (1995), p. 39. Cf Williams (1981), p. 109.

What is the challenge? It would be ineffective if it simply required the externalist to explain the content of propositions about reasons in a way that is consistent with the view that their truth condition is given by (I). That would be patently question begging.²¹ Is it, then, a demand to provide a truth condition for propositions about reasons other than that given by (I) – but that like (I) does not *itself* deploy the concept of a reason? Why should there be an onus on the external reasons theorist to do that? It is not a demand that could be sensibly placed on truth conditions in general, and it is not obvious that there is some obscurity about the concept of a reason that encourages reductive analysis in this case in particular. When I consider my belief that if I have inconvenienced someone I have reason to apologize, or my belief that if someone has done me a good turn I have reason to show gratitude, their content seems perfectly clear. It does not cry out for analysis in terms which eliminate the concept of a *reason*. We shall return to this point in the [next section](#). For the moment, however, let us focus on Williams' own account of the content of beliefs about reasons, in order to see why it might lead him, after all, to the Humean (II).

It is not, as we have just seen, because he endorses Hume's desire-belief psychology. Williams accepts that A's belief that he has reason to apologize can motivate A; he says that the belief is then itself a motive in A's S – as in the passage quoted above: “this agent, with this belief, appears to be one about whom, now, an *internal* reason statement could truly be made: he is one with an appropriate motivation in his S.”

This conclusion, however, has a peculiar consequence. For it now seems to follow in general – for *any* belief I have about what there is reason for me to do – that so long as the belief has motivating force it's true. If the belief that I have reason to φ is in my S then it is a motive which would be “served” by φ -ing.²² So by (I) the “*internal* reason statement” that I have reason to φ can truly be made about me.

Can this be right? I can certainly have false beliefs about what reasons I have to act; Williams does not dispute that.²³ And surely such beliefs can be false even if they *do* have motivating force! Williams could accept this in part, too: he could answer that beliefs about reasons can be excluded from the agent's S when they are based on false beliefs about the facts. That would simply be an application of the general point that motives based on false factual beliefs can be excluded from S. But what, now, of *fundamental*

²¹ As noted by Hooker (1987).

²² Take it that the belief that one has reason to φ is “served” by φ -ing.

²³ See, e.g., Williams (1981), p. 103 – point (iii)(a).

beliefs about reasons – that is, beliefs about reasons for action which are themselves ultimate, and not derived in part from factual beliefs? If these motivate a believer they will be in his or her S, and so, by (I) they will be true. Thus all of an agent’s fundamental, motivating beliefs about reasons will be true.

We could avoid this result by excluding A’s beliefs about what A has reason to do from A’s S. If that is done, the internalist analysis of reasons will say that A’s belief that he has reason to φ can be true only if there is some motive for φ -ing, *which is not itself the belief that there is reason to φ* , in A’s S: and this, presumably, will be a desire, in the sense of an affective rather than a cognitive attitude. So there is a drive here towards normative Humeanism – that is, to the truth of (II), with “desire” understood in the stricter, affective, sense.

It does not force the conclusion that Williams is a Humean. Perhaps he would accept instead that all *fundamental* and *motivating* beliefs about reasons are true. Moreover, he also says things that pull in a non-Humean direction. In the first place, since he accepts that beliefs about reasons can themselves motivate, the argument he gives for internalism, which we will consider in the [next section](#), supports only (I), and not the narrower (II). Then there is his intriguing suggestion that Kant, who to some people’s minds would be a paradigm *externalist*, is best treated as an internalist:

Kant thought that a person would recognize the demands of morality if he or she deliberated correctly from his or her existing S, whatever that S might be, but he thought this because he took those demands to be implicit in a conception of practical reason which he could show to apply to *any rational deliberator as such*. I think that it best preserves the point of the internalism/externalism distinction to see this as a limiting case of internalism.²⁴

At first glance, this looks inconsistent with something we saw Williams saying earlier, namely, that considerations of prudence and morality should not be included in the agent’s deliberative route. However, one can make a distinction here between the intuitionist and the Kantian. The intuitionist thinks that you can directly intuit the demands of morality. He wants, so to speak, to write these demands into every agent’s deliberative route by an intuitive *fiat*. The Kantian, in contrast, is more indirect: he argues that if you accept that you have any reasons for acting at all, then you can be shown to face the demands of morality. This claim is of the form: if you

²⁴ Williams (1995b), p. 220, n. 3. (Williams is responding to Martin Hollis’ view that Kant should be classified as an externalist about reasons, and agreeing with Christine Korsgaard’s [1986] internalist reading of Kant – cf Williams [1995], p. 44, n. 3.)

have reasons then you have moral reasons, and the antecedent is supposed to be non-redundant. Williams does not think the Kantian argument can be sustained, and it is not our business here to inquire whether it can be; the point for present purposes is only that he does on this basis accept that Kant is to be classified as an internalist. So in principle there can be motives that are not desires, for on the Kantian view under consideration, an agent can arrive at his moral obligations by a process of reflection on what is involved in his having reasons at all, and will then be motivated by his conclusions about those obligations; that is, motivated by a purely cognitive process. By (I), but not by (II) understood in the Humean way, this agent has reason to carry out the obligations he believes he has.

3. WHAT IS THE CASE FOR INTERNALISM?

As we noted, one way Williams argues for his view is by challenging externalists to explain the content of propositions about reasons. *What*, he asks, is it that the agent “comes to believe” when he accepts a new reason for acting? As we also noted, the question invites a short answer: when a person who previously saw no reason to show gratitude for the good turns people do for him comes to believe that there is after all reason to show gratitude, what he comes to believe is *just that*. Why, after all, should it be assumed that the concept of a reason is analysable in terms that don’t include that concept? Why shouldn’t we just accept it as a concept primitive to normative thought?

Perhaps, however, we should put the question differently. *How* does this person come to believe that? Suppose, for example, that Annabel used to think, in a tough-minded way, that expressions of gratitude are a waste of time. After all if a person does you a good turn he’s surely not doing it to get a thank you. Or if he is, then he doesn’t deserve one. But now she comes to realize that people are hurt when their good will is not appreciated, even though they were acting from genuine good will, and not just to get a thank you. Maybe she learns it from her own case, when others don’t show her gratitude.

So far the story is reconcilable with Williams’ internalism. What has happened, he might say, is that she had an existing motivation not to hurt people, or not to hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt, and has now realized that that motivation is served by expressing gratitude to people who help her out of genuine good will. In other words, she comes to see that she has an *internal* reason that previously she did not see she had.

But there are many ways in which one reaches novel insights into reasons. Suppose, for example, that we have a philosophical discussion about capital punishment. I think it is a good thing, so I think I have reason to vote for a party which wants to reinstate it. You try to dissuade me: you argue that punishment should always offer the criminal the possibility of coming to recognize the wrongness of what he did, accepting the legitimacy of the punishment and returning to society “with a clean slate.” This, you say, is negated by capital punishment, and that means that the necessary element of respect for the criminal is lost. I was previously a pure deterrence theorist – but now I’m persuaded by your remarks, and thus I come to see reason to vote for the abolitionists. It is implausible to argue, in this case, that my new insight is correct only if I have acquired a new desire, or already had one that would be served by this new way of voting. Although there is of course no limit to the *ad hoc* postulation of desires, it’s more plausible to allow that I may simply have been struck by a new reflection, which is that punishment should always aim at atonement and return to society. Do we then want to say that till I was struck by this thought I had no reason to vote for the abolitionists, whereas now (if the thought motivates) I have one? No. I’ve now come to *believe* that there’s reason to vote for abolition. But what I’ve come to believe is that there already was such a reason, which previously I had not grasped. And whether this new belief of mine is correct depends on a philosophical question about punishment, a question that does not turn on what I believe or desire.

In the case of Annabel, if all she comes to see is that saying thank you to people serves her existing desire not to hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt, she *still* hasn’t grasped the reason for thanking people. What gives her reason to thank people is not her desires. It’s the fact that they have done her a good turn out of good will. She may come to appreciate this normative truth by experiencing for herself the hurt involved in being on the receiving end of ingratitude, but the truth she comes to appreciate does not require that thanking people should serve a motive in her S. Whether I have reason to thank, or to apologize, does not turn on what my motives are – it turns solely on what you did to me or I did to you.²⁵

Of course it is true, indeed truisitic, that a person can only come to appreciate some new reason for acting if they have the existing capacity to do so. A new belief must emerge from an existing belief-forming capacity.

²⁵ Cf Scanlon (1998), “(Williams’) internalism seems to force on us the conclusion that our own reasons . . . are all contingent on the presence of appropriate elements in our subjective motivational sets. This rings false and is, I believe, an important source of the widespread resistance to Williams’ claims,” p. 367.

But there is a difference between a capacity to recognize reasons and a desire or even a motive; so the truism provides no support either for (II) or for (I). Still, it does provide some leverage for a form of internalism somewhat different to these. This will become clearer if we consider Williams' other argument.

It starts from what one might call the requirement of effectiveness. This is a thesis, as Williams says, about "the interrelation of 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.²⁶

Observe that particularisation to the agent is important: if *this* agent has a particular reason to φ then it must be possible that *this* agent should φ for *this particular* reason. To illustrate with one of Williams' examples: suppose I think that the activity you're proposing is unchaste, so there's reason for you to avoid it.²⁷ You respond that **chastity** is not a concept you use. Perhaps you think you can see what facts about this activity make me describe it as "unchaste," but as far as you're concerned these facts provide no reason to avoid it at all. I might try to convey to you the ethical vision to which the notion of chastity, and the conception of it as something worthy of pursuit, belong. But you remain quite baffled by this; nothing can persuade you that these remarks of mine about something called chastity have any reason-giving force at all. So it's not possible that you should avoid φ -ing because φ -ing is unchaste, that is, avoid it for *that* reason – because you simply can't see it *as* a reason. You might avoid it in order to please me, and so forth, but that's another matter.

Does it follow that you have no reason to avoid activities which are unchaste, just *because* they are unchaste? The question may be skewed by the controversial ethical status of chastity; so take the less tendentious case of gratitude. Imagine that Tom simply has no sense of gratitude. It's not just that he subscribes to an ethical ideal which regards gratitude as a futile emotion to be suppressed, in the way that Annabel does. He simply never feels it, never expects it – he just doesn't see what this thing called gratitude is about. So when Mary goes out of her way to help him, it's not possible that he should thank her for *that* reason, that is, simply and solely because he sees for himself that gratitude is appropriate. (He may of course recognize prudential reasons to observe the social conventions he's been told about,

²⁶ Williams (1995), pp. 38–39.

²⁷ Williams (1995), pp. 37–38.

etc.) Does it follow that Tom does not *have* that reason for thanking Mary – that that particular fact is *not* a reason for him to thank her?

I think our response to this kind of question is interestingly uncertain. In one mood we want to say “Certainly he has reason to thank her, whether or not he can see that he has – look at what she’s done for him!” However in the remaining sections I want to argue that it’s also important to take seriously the opposing answer, which says that he does *not* have reason to thank her.²⁸

This latter response can be seen as a kind of internalism. But before we move on to examining it let’s consider whether it would help Williams to make a case for internalism in his particular sense. If we say that Tom has no reason to thank Mary, the thought that moves us is that a fact cannot be a reason for an agent to φ if it cannot be recognized as such by him. This thought concerns not the agent’s knowledge of the reason-giving facts but his ability to recognize them as reason-giving; it is not a question of whether the agent has the information which enables him to know that the reason-giving fact obtains, or that other facts obtain in virtue of which this fact becomes a reason. The point is that the agent must have the ability to recognize the *reason-giving force* of that fact (or combination of facts) were it to obtain. He must be able to appreciate in his own right, or see for himself, that that fact or combination of facts *as such*, were it to obtain, would indeed be a reason to φ . Let’s highlight this claim:

(III) X is a reason for A to φ only if A has the ability to recognize that were X to obtain, that would be a reason for A to φ .

(III) is distinct from (I), even if we interpret (I) in a liberal, non-Humean, way which allows that agents’ beliefs about reasons can motivate. Just because A has the ability to recognize that X would be a reason to φ it does not follow that he actually believes that it is. He may not have thought about it, and you can’t be motivated by a belief you don’t have. Also, as we’ve noted, an existing capacity to recognize a reason for acting cannot be described as an existing *motive*. So (III) does not sustain the view that A has a reason to φ only if φ -ing would serve a motive in A’s S.²⁹ In short (III) allows that in Williams’ sense there can be external reasons.

Nonetheless, there is still a certain point in calling it “internalism.” For (III) says that only considerations which the agent has the ability to recognize,

²⁸ Trivially of course he does not have a reason to thank her in sense (iii) (S1); that is, he does not believe that there is reason for him to thank her.

²⁹ And of course it is quite consistent with denying the converse: that if φ -ing would serve a motive in A’s S then A has a reason to φ .

for him or herself, “from within,” *as* reasons, can *be* reasons for that agent. Moreover it has a strong affinity to the requirement of effectiveness, which Williams regards as crucial. If an agent simply lacks the ability to recognize a type of consideration as a reason for φ -ing, then it is not possible that he should φ for *that* reason, and so, by the requirement of effectiveness, this cannot be a reason for that agent, even if *we* would regard it as a reason. In contrast, if the agent can recognize the consideration as a reason to φ , then φ -ing for that very reason opens up as an option for him. It becomes possible that he should do so.³⁰ Let’s call the constraint on what it is for something to be a reason for someone, captured by (III), *cognitive internalism*.³¹ Cognitive internalism is consistent with the view that beliefs about reasons can themselves motivate. And Kant can certainly be classed as a cognitive internalist: indeed, (III) is simply a corollary of his central ideas about reason and autonomy. Autonomy, for Kant, is the capacity to see reasons for yourself, or to “give yourself” reasons, and only autonomous agents, who give themselves reasons, can be said to *have* reasons. Moreover cognitive internalism has bite: as we shall see, it has many of the implications for the scope of blame that Williams believes his internalism to have. If we view Williams’ critique of modern assumptions about morality from this standpoint, it retains its interest even for those who are unimpressed by Humeanism, psychological or normative, about practical reasons.

4. CAN SOMETHING BE A REASON FOR AN AGENT WHICH THAT AGENT HAS NO ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE AS A REASON?

I suggested that we don’t have a clear-cut response as to the truth of (III). Let’s go back to Tom, and let’s suppose that he suffers from a psychological syndrome that makes him incapable of experiencing or understanding feelings like gratitude. Can we say that Tom has reason to thank Mary?³² One might say “he has every reason to be grateful to Mary – if only he could see it.” However, does this mean that he *does* have reason to be grateful – or

³⁰ Note, however, that it may not follow from your having the ability to do something that it’s possible for you to do it – it depends on how we interpret “possible.” (You have the ability to walk a tightrope, but I’m going to distract you whenever you try.) Williams’ requirement of effectiveness should be so understood as not to fall to this kind of point.

³¹ (III), as noted, has an affinity with the requirement of effectiveness, but it’s narrower. If you can see something is a reason, but that recognition has no motivating force for you (perhaps given your psychology it could not have, then (III) still allows a consideration to be a reason for you, whereas the requirement of effectiveness rules it out).

³² Exclude again the indirect reasons he may have, such as reasons of prudence to conform to what he can see are the prevailing social conventions, for example.

just that he *would* have if he could see it? Should we read it in the first way? One also could say that the wounded bird has reason to thank the gardener who looks after it with loving care – if only it could see it. Or that the cat has reason not to torture the mouse, if only it could see it. In saying that we are not, I think, ascribing reasons to the bird or the cat.

What would count in favour of a practice of ascribing reasons to agents who are quite impervious to such reasons? It may be thought that the universality of reasons pushes in that direction.³³ Surely anyone has reason to thank a person who has helped them. True – but does “anyone” include Tom? If this seems evasive remember that “anyone” plainly does not include the wounded bird, or the cat. Whether it includes Tom is precisely the question.

Reasons are universal in this sense: if the fact that p is a reason for A to ϕ in circumstance C then for any x , the fact that p is a reason for x to ϕ in circumstance C .³⁴ But over whom or what does x range? Who or what is included? The universality of reasons tells us that reasons of gratitude are universal, but not over what domain they are. If any x has reason to thank a person who has helped them, then every x has; but that does not include the wounded bird, so the wounded bird does not fall within the scope of this class of reasons, and thus within the range of “ x .” The cognitive internalist explains this by invoking the obvious fact that the bird is not an agent capable of appreciating considerations of gratitude and their reason-giving force. It falls outside the range of “ x ” because the range of “ x ” is constrained by (III). On this explanation it follows that if Tom is *really* incapable of understanding or feeling gratitude then he too falls outside the range of x , as far as reasons of gratitude are concerned. If we find this disconcerting, it is because we don’t want to believe that someone in other respects so like us could be quite incapable of appreciating a class of reasons that we find obvious. Or more generally, because we want to get all human beings into the scope of all reasons. But now we need to explain why.

Reality is more complex than the stark example of Tom. There is wide variation in, and a thick margin of unclarity about, the degree to which people are able to appreciate all the variety of types of reason. Furthermore,

³³ As suggested by Scanlon, (1998), p. 367, p. 372. (Scanlon allows that reasons can have what he calls “subjective conditions.” The variably reason-giving force of ideals, discussed at the end of this section, would be an example.)

³⁴ Any occurrences of “ A ” in “ p ” and “ C ” must be replaced by “ x .” This allows for references back to the agent, that is, for “agent-relativity.” For example: if the fact that revising for my exams will help me to pass is a reason for me to revise, given that passing is to my advantage, then for any x the fact that revising for x ’s exams will help x to pass is a reason for x to revise, given that passing is to x ’s advantage.

the degree and extent to which a person has the ability can vary greatly depending on the circumstances. People can suffer a temporary blockage on their ability to see a reason, or they can have an ability that has not yet developed. We can then talk about the reasons they have, even though they're unable to see them, or are not yet able to see them – because we take as our benchmark their normal ability or the ability that they have a determinate potential to develop.³⁵

Williams considers a case of the first kind in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.³⁶ A despairing teenager, Susan, attempts to commit suicide. Even though she can see, in a way, that things will be fine in three months' time, she doesn't care. Williams' discussion centres on whether we can say that it's in Susan's real interest to stop her; our concern is with the related question: does Susan have reason not to commit suicide? Let's assume that for the moment she just can't see the fact that things will be better in three months time as a reason not to commit suicide. Her inability is caused by the very depth of her despair. In this case one can truly say "Look, there really is reason for you not to do this. You will feel much better in three months, and that really is a reason. You're not in a state to appreciate that just now, but believe me it's true, and you'll agree with me later." We reconcile that ascription of reasons to Susan, even in her suicidal state, with (III) by relying on her ability to appreciate these reasons when she is in her normal state.

Or consider some little boys playing a game of running across a railway track at the very last moment in front of an oncoming train. It's not that they don't appreciate the danger – on the contrary, the danger is the whole point. Rather, they don't value the benefits of the life before them above the benefits of the glory and respect they gain from their gang right now. Don't consider a little boy who fully sees the imprudence of the risk but is seduced by the desire to belong; consider rather a dashing one who really subscribes to the ideal of bravery and cool, and regards prudential considerations as beneath him. Can we say that this little boy has more reason to avoid playing this game than he appreciates? We may think that we can; in which case we may reconcile our response with (III) by appealing to the assessment he will make when his capacity to appreciate and weigh reasons has matured.

³⁵ "determinate potential" raises tricky questions, of course. How determinate? If there's reason to think capital punishment is wrong is there reason for a two-year-old with strong moral potential to think so? If not, what development of the potential is required? Note also the difference between realizing the potential to grasp a reason and being merely indoctrinated into counting it as one.

³⁶ Williams (1985), pp. 41–43.

But suppose that this kind of prudence is just not in his nature. He will always rate glamour and cool above everything else. Can we in *this* case say that he has more reason to avoid the game than he appreciates? He appreciates all the facts; he just cannot accept that they generate the balance of reasons that we think they do. We and he appreciate both reasons of glamour and reasons of prudence. But he, even “in the full maturity of his faculties,” gives the former a degree of strength relative to the latter which we think to be misguided. Yet surely if reasons universalise, so too does the strength of reasons.

However, in talking about glamour we are talking about *ideals*. The reason-giving force of ideals depends, at least within limits, on what matters to a person – what comes home to that person as worthy of pursuit. In Scanlon’s terms it depends in part on subjective conditions.³⁷ So if the ideal of glory is more important to a worldly hero than to an otherworldly ascetic, there *is* more reason for the hero to follow the risky path of glory than the ascetic. That is consistent with the universality of reasons, because what ideals matter to a person (stably, without self-deception, etc.) is written into the facts which generate the reasons. True – a difference of ideals is the very thing that’s most commonly experienced as a difference about what’s important, and it’s natural to put this as a difference about what the balance of reasons “really” is. Natural, but indefensible: for as between competing, universally intelligible, ideals it can happen that there is no “real,” interpersonally invariant, balance of reasons. What ideals have reason-giving force for you depends on your nature; in the case of ideals we expect to find a variety of human natures.

In contrast, however, we do not think that how much reason you have to take moral considerations into account depends on your particular human nature. Moral considerations have a reason-giving force that does not vary with the particularities that differentiate one human nature from another. One can’t just say “I can see that doing your duty is admirable, and why there’s reason for some people to do it – but I’m not that kind of person.” It seems, then, that with moral obligations, as against ideals, we have universality without subjective conditions. Nonetheless, in both cases – the reason-giving force of ideals and the reason-giving force of moral obligations – (III) applies. It’s just that with moral obligations, as against ideals, you cannot consistently accept that a moral obligation has reason-giving force for others without also recognizing its reason-giving force in your own case.

³⁷ See n. 33.

But now what if you just can't see that some putative moral considerations have reason-giving force at all, for anyone – it's not in your nature to see it?³⁸ In that case (III) says that these considerations give you no reason to act.

In the final section we shall consider the significance of this for our moral practice of blame. But first we must examine more closely the connection between moral obligations and reasons.

5. WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MORAL OBLIGATIONS AND REASONS?

Moral obligation is linked to reasons for action by a crucial implication that Williams notes, for example, in the following passage:

Blame rests, in part, on a fiction; the idea that ethical reasons, in particular the special kind of ethical reasons that are obligations, must, really, be available to the blamed agent. . . . *He ought to have done it*, as moral blame uses that phrase, implies *there was reason for him to have done it*, and this certainly intends more than the thought that we had a reason to want him to do it. It hopes to say, rather, that he had a reason to do it. But this may well be untrue: it was not in fact a reason for him, or at least not enough of a reason. Under this fiction, a continuous attempt is made to recruit people into a deliberative community that shares ethical reasons. . . . But the device can do this only because it is understood not as a device, but as connected with justification and with reasons that the agent might have had; and it can be understood in this way only because, much of the time, it is indeed connected with those things.³⁹

When Williams says "*He ought to have done it*, as moral blame uses that phrase, implies *there was reason for him to have done it*," he is not dissenting from the implication. Rather, his point concerns the consequences of combining the implication with internalism about reasons. The internalist view, in sense (I) or (II), says that A will have reason to ϕ only if ϕ -ing will serve a motive, or a desire, in A's S. By virtue of the implication, it follows that if ϕ -ing *doesn't* serve a motive, or a desire, in A's S it won't be true that A ought

³⁸ Or, perhaps, the circumstances of your social context prevent you from seeing it? To what conditions is the ability relative, if it is to play its role in (III)? That is a question to be considered, although not here.

³⁹ Williams (1995a), p. 16.

to have φ -ed, “as moral blame uses that phrase.” The fiction we are then led into, Williams says, is that of treating A as though he really *did* have the relevant ethical reasons. We are led into it because (sometimes, or often) we want to blame people who – by these internalist standards – simply do not have these ethical reasons. So, to safeguard the implication, we end up ascribing the reasons to them anyway. Clearly, the same point exactly can be made by the *cognitive* internalist. If we insist on finding people like Tom, who just lack the ability to see that considerations of gratitude have reason-giving force, *blameworthy* for their ungrateful acts, we are going to end up ascribing reasons to them that they just don’t have.

We could put the implication as follows:

(IV) If A has a moral obligation to φ then A has reason to φ .

However, this is an important point at which the ambiguity in the phrase “A has reason to φ ” is relevant. So far we have not been distinguishing it from “there is reason for A to φ .” As we noted in §1, either of these can refer in an appropriate context to (i) what there is reason for A to do, given the facts or (ii) to what A is justified in believing there is reason for A to do, given what he is justified in believing to be the facts. If the implication we are considering is to hold, then we must understand “A has reason to φ ” in sense (ii): for moral obligation and responsibility follow what we are justified in believing to be the facts, not what the facts actually are. For example, if I am justified in believing that you’ve just swallowed a glass of petrol, I probably have a moral obligation to ring for an ambulance. But if I have no reason to believe that, then I don’t. That remains true even if (unknown to me) you *have* swallowed a glass of petrol.

So let’s now use the phrase “there is reason for A to φ ” in the epistemically unrelativised sense (i). Thus, if the building is about to collapse, *there is* reason for us to leave, whether or nor there is any reason for us to believe that it’s about to collapse. Similarly, if you have swallowed a glass of petrol, there *is* reason for me to ring for an ambulance. And let’s use “A has reason to φ ” in the epistemically relativised sense (ii). “A has reason to φ ” means “A has a justification for believing that there is reason for A to φ .”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Some important points to note about *having a justification*: (i) A can have a justification for believing something *whether or not* he believes it (ii) if he has a justification he is able to recognize the justification (iii) if he has a justification for believing but does not believe – even when the context requires a verdict on his part – he may be open to criticism of his rationality, attention, care, and so on. (iv) justification is relative to his actual circumstances – not just his epistemic state, but the time at his disposal, the other things he has to do, and so on.

Understood in this way, (IV) is true.⁴¹ The connection is traceable to the constitutive emotions involved in moral blame. Emotions in general are not free-floating affects attachable to any belief; they have determinate intentional contents. For example, it doesn't make sense to be grateful for an injury, or to resent genuine hospitality; someone who reacts in these ways can only have a distorted view of what is being rendered to them. In similar fashion, it is intrinsic to the intentionality of the emotions involved in blame that you cannot reasonably blame people for failing to do what they had no justification for thinking there was reason to do – or indeed for doing what they had a justification for thinking there *was* most reason to do. What else should they have done?

This principle, internal to blame, gives rise to (IV) because moral obligation and blame are connected: if A has a moral obligation to φ then A can be blamed for not φ -ing.⁴² But the principle internal to blame says that if A is justified in thinking that what there is most reason for him to do is to refrain from φ -ing then he *can't* be blamed for not φ -ing. Putting these two together: if A has a moral obligation to φ he cannot have a justification for thinking that what there is most reason for him to do is not to φ : he must, rather, have a justification for thinking that there is most reason for him to φ .⁴³ So he has a reason to φ .

Suppose, then, that on the one hand we want *everyone* to fall within the scope of blame, whereas, on the other, there are people who just don't have certain morally salient reasons. In that case – if any of the three kinds of internalism we've discussed is correct – we must either resort to fiction or accept that we cannot have what we want. If the position is as described, then, by virtue of (IV), we shall want to “recruit” people into having reasons which they do not have. Going in the other direction, but still relying on (IV), Williams wants to say that since they have no such reasons they do not fall within the scope of blame.

At this point, of course, someone might wish to deny (IV). But although it has been disputed, we have just argued that it is firmly rooted in the

⁴¹ So I may have a moral obligation to φ even though *there is* no reason for me to φ . For example, in the case in which I am justified in believing that you've swallowed a glass of petrol even though you haven't, I have a moral obligation to send for an ambulance but there is (“in fact”) no reason for me to do so. Nonetheless I *have* reason to do so.

⁴² Again, there are complications, turning in this case on how exactly one works in the possibility of extenuating circumstances: so assume for simplicity that no extenuating circumstances apply.

⁴³ Because there's at least one thing A has most reason to do. The argument actually warrants a conclusion stronger than (IV): if A has a moral obligation to φ then A has most reason to φ . And that is often what is meant when it is said that morality is categorical. However, only the weaker (IV) is needed for present purposes.

intentionality of the emotions which are involved in blame.⁴⁴ So we need rather to ask why it should be thought that some people don't have some (morally relevant) reasons. It makes a difference whether the argument to this conclusion starts from (I) or (II) – or (III). Quite clearly, if (IV) is combined with (II) some striking consequences will follow.⁴⁵ By (II) there is no reason for A to φ unless A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by φ -ing, and by (IV), if A doesn't have a reason to φ then A has no moral obligation to φ . So A has a moral obligation to φ only if A has a justification for thinking that φ -ing will serve the satisfaction of some desire that he, A, has. But we don't think that: we think that A can have a moral obligation to φ whether or not A has any reason to think that φ -ing will satisfy any of A's existing desires.

Williams ingeniously attempts to mitigate the force of this point by invoking what he calls a "proleptic" theory of blame. It appeals to the "desire to be respected by people whom, in turn, one respects." Blaming a person who has that desire but otherwise has no motivation to avoid some particular moral wrong is "as it were, a proleptic invocation of a reason."⁴⁶ It *makes* it true that he has a reason to avoid it, in virtue of his desire to avoid blame when it comes from people he respects. For example, even if I don't have a desire to thank you for your good turn, I nevertheless have reason to do so, because I desire the respect of respectable people, and I won't get it if I don't thank you.

Unquestionably the desire to have the respect of people one respects is a pretty important element in people's psychology; but considered as a response to the specific difficulty we are at present considering Williams' appeal to it is unconvincing. First, what is the basis of the respect that is sought? If it is to be relevant to moral motivation, then it has to be that I respect you as a good judge of when I deserve blame. (If I seek your respect because I respect you as a good judge of what's cool or macho, say, that doesn't necessarily give me anything much related to a moral motivation – on the

⁴⁴ It can be disputed from a number of angles. There are, for example, accounts of practical rationality (such as instrumentalism) which accord no automatic rational force to requirements of morality. This is what Stephen Darwall calls "morality/reasons" externalism in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1997), p. 306. Externalists of this kind have to break the connection between blameworthiness and doing something you had reason not to do. In a different way, some contemporary consequentialists about morality must reject (IV). For they argue that one has a moral obligation to do that which there is, in fact, most reason to do. (These consequentialists could still hold that acting against moral obligation is blameworthy only when the agent can *tell* he is transgressing, but they would have to deny the view discussed below, that if one has a moral obligation one can tell that one has.)

⁴⁵ Similar points would apply to the combination of (I) and (IV).

⁴⁶ Williams (1995), p. 41. In this discussion, Williams seems to revert to a Humean framework.

contrary, this may cut across moral motivation.) However, if I believe (II) and (IV), and think I can tell what reasons I have, then when I find that you're blaming me for doing something I had no reason not to do I will have to revise my assessment of you as a good judge of blameworthiness. So proleptic blame will get leverage on what reasons I have only if I disbelieve (II) or (IV). Second, what about the hard cases who do not care about others' moral respect? Williams says that these are beyond blame.⁴⁷ But this is a mistaken criterion of moral agency. It is not the desire to earn respect that makes one a moral agent, but – as the cognitive internalist rightly says – the capacity to recognize a morally salient reason as a reason.

Williams might reply that all of this only serves to highlight the fictions built into our moral practice. But it's at least as convincing to say that it highlights the falsity of (II). We saw that Williams provides no convincing argument for (II); we also saw that a much more plausible case can be made from the requirement of effectiveness that he places on reasons to (III). Moreover (III), as against (II), fits better with our views about when a person simply falls outside the scope of blame. And (III), as we shall now see, has the sort of implications for the scope of moral blame that Williams wants to draw.

6. WHAT ARE COGNITIVE INTERNALISM'S IMPLICATIONS FOR MORALITY?

Suppose A lacks the ability to recognize X as a reason to φ . So by (III) X is not a reason for A to φ . In that case, even if he is justified in thinking that X obtains, that won't justify him in thinking that he has reason to φ . In other words, he won't *have* that reason. And if a person just doesn't *have* the appropriate morally salient reasons, then by (IV) that person doesn't have the appropriate moral obligations.

However this argument assumes that if X is not a reason for A to φ then A can't be justified in thinking that it is. Yet might not A be justified in thinking that it is, simply on the basis of what others tell him, even though he can't see it for himself (and, even though, therefore it is false that it is)?

The issues raised by this question call for more discussion than is possible here. In general, obviously, I can have a reason to do something simply on the basis that trustworthy people tell me that there is reason for me to do it. (They might be sworn to secrecy as to the facts and can't tell me why.) The argument must be that in morally salient cases justification requires

⁴⁷ Williams (1995), p. 43.

personal insight, or at least the capacity for it. In these cases you must be able to see the relevant reasons for yourself.

Cognitive internalism, at least about moral obligation and about morally salient reasons, has been a driving element in modern conceptions of moral agency. It is a central feature of what Kant and Hegel respectively named the “autonomy” or “subjective freedom” of moral agency; in emphasising it they were influentially capturing an already influential modern idea, connected for example with increasingly accepted views about the significance of conscience. The idea is that you have a moral obligation to act in a concrete situation only if you can tell for yourself that you have; more fully, only if you have reasons to act that you can acknowledge for yourself as being of such kind and strength as to render you blameworthy if you fail to respond to them. *You don't have to be told*. Moral agency is *responsibility*, the capacity to respond spontaneously to morally salient reasons. It carries answerability, accountability, in its train: if you can respond but fail to do so you are answerable for that and can be held to account. Yet those only are morally responsible who can recognize morally salient reasons and their strength in generating moral obligation. A moral agent is an agent who has conscience: the capacity for subjective, free or spontaneous, insight into moral requirements.

The interesting point about (IV), which connects moral obligations with reasons, is the way in which it links this “subjective” principle of responsibility to the general doctrine about rationality and reasons stated in (III). Moral obligations are open to spontaneous personal insight because reasons in general are.

This doctrine of moral agency, Hegel’s “moral point of view,” is no fiction, nor, as we have seen, does Williams claim it to be.⁴⁸ To reject it would be to give up a conception of morality which so far at least remains basic to modern ethics – that morality is self-governance:

a man must possess a personal knowledge of the distinction between good and evil in general: ethical and moral principles shall not merely lay their claim on him as external laws and precepts of authority to be obeyed, but have their assent, recognition, or even justification in his heart, sentiment, conscience, intelligence, etc.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ As Hegel puts it, “the moral point of view . . . takes the shape of the right of the subjective will. In accordance with this right, the will can recognize something or be something only in so far as the thing is its own, and in so far as the will is present to itself in it as subjectivity,” Hegel (1991a), section 107.

⁴⁹ Hegel (1991b), section 503. Hegel thought that the modern ethical life which he favoured would go beyond or supplement the “merely” moral point of view, but he also thought that

Now this “modern” point of view, as stated so far, can allow that if you fail to have the capacity of moral insight in some respects then you are not an accountable agent in those respects. If Tom just can’t “get it” about gratitude then he is not blameworthy for his failure to live up to the moral norms of gratitude. Fiction only begins to enter in when a distinct and substantial ideal of modern ethical consciousness enters onto the scene: the demand that every human being should be “recognized” as a *comprehensively* responsible – answerable, accountable – moral agent, falling under the moral law. By (IV) this means that every human being is fully capable of recognizing all moral reasons, seeing them for him or herself. This powerful drive in modern ethical thought credits everyone with comprehensive moral agency – at the philosophical limit, with equal and absolute moral agency. Or at least everyone after a few exceptional and, for most social and political purposes, ignorable cases have been set aside.

But this may be false. Various gradients of moral agency are empirically possible, in a diversity of respects, and we cannot say a priori how people will be distributed across them. Suppose then that there are people who just don’t get, can’t see, certain moral obligations. If we want to blame them for not observing those obligations in what they do, we shall have to say – contrary to the combined force of (IV) and (III) – that they have reason to observe them. Williams makes an interesting comment about that:

what would these external reasons do to these people, or for our relations to them? Unless we are given an answer to this question, I, for one, find it hard to resist Nietzsche’s plausible interpretation, that the desire of philosophy to find a way in which morality can be guaranteed to get beyond merely designating the vile and recalcitrant, to transfixing them or getting them inside, is only a fantasy of resentment, a magical project to make a wish and its words into a coercive power.⁵⁰

This criticism of “external” moral reasons has force precisely because it can be made *from* “the moral point of view,” the view that follows from (III) and (IV). It explains our desire to get people who have done obnoxious, vile, or terrible things “inside morality” as a resentful, indignant, or

it would necessarily retain it – although what place he was willing to make for it, and for whom, is an issue. In this respect the questions that concerned him, for example, about the role of conscience, were exactly the ones that we have now come to. On this, see Frederick Neuhauser (2000), ch. 7. Hegel also took “the moral point of view” to be a development peculiar to post-Reformation European morality: for the shift, in this European setting, from a conception of morality as obedience to a conception of it as self-governance see Schneewind (1998) and Skorupski (2004).

⁵⁰ Williams (1995b), p. 216.

vengeful wish to hurt them, a wish that wishes to legitimate itself as the wish to inflict due punishment. But due punishment connects to moral (not just causal) blameworthiness, and blameworthiness connects to reasons: the moral notion of punishment presupposes moral transgression and thus presupposes that punishable persons are inside morality – that moral reasons are reasons for them.

What if they are unable to see these reasons, so that in virtue of (III), these reasons *weren't* reasons for them? Then we can't blame or punish – though we can still defend ourselves, of course. However we want more than clear-headed self-defence, we also want to retaliate: the “fantasy of *ressentiment*” moralises this want by saying that these people, really, *can* see the reasons for not doing what they do. It needs to do so because punishment in its ethical sense is an instrument of atonement, reconciliation, and thus envisages that the criminal can be brought to *re-cognise* those reasons.⁵¹ Thus, the wish to hurt a bad person calls up the belief that they can see the wrongness of what they do: if we gave up the belief we could not justify hurting them as being what they *deserve*.

This is the darker side, and as we've noted, it is itself open to criticism from the moral point of view. But surely there is also a more idealistic motive at work (though one of which Nietzsche would have been scornful as well). It is the democratic desire to give everyone equal respect. And there is the feeling, not least among people who most have this desire, that the kind of respect which is most worth having, or even the only kind that is really worth having, is respect for one's capacity to recognize the moral law. The consequent desire to insulate this capacity from the actual facts of human psychology creates fictions. An immensely influential example is the Kantian fiction that rationality is, so to speak, a transcendental package-deal, not an empirical matter of more or less – a package-deal that equips *any* practically rational agent with the capacity to recognize moral reasons.

Not that Kant's “high” conception of moral agency as subjective or positive freedom is itself a fiction. Its essential element, the capacity to respond to moral reasons, does not depend on the transcendental setting he gives it. If empirical psychology shows that this is a complex and unequally distributed capacity, so that adhering to the “high” conception wars with our wish to accord equality of respect, then the right response is to review what is really important to us about equality of respect. It is not to transcendentalise moral agency, and it is certainly not to level down instead of levelling up, by pretending that these high notions of moral agency aren't really ours, that they were invented by Protestants, or German idealists, or are nowadays

⁵¹ See Skorupski (1999), ch. VIII.

beside the point, or even incoherent. We should accept that our notion of moral responsibility is the high notion of subjective freedom, that it plays a rightful role as a great ideal – but that the capacities it involves are complex and come in degrees, and that some people have more of them than others.

Recognizing the complexity and independent variability of these capacities is particularly important because it helps us to avoid a social and political picture which simplistically divides people into sheep and shepherds: those who just can't attain responsibility and those who have it absolutely. Responsibility – responsiveness to moral reasons – is a short word for a multiform capacity which comes in degrees. It is not a package-deal. Developing the various kinds of responsiveness it requires should not mainly be a matter of communing in solitude with one's private conscience (though the degree to which it has to be is a matter of the society in which one lives). It should be dialogical: I come to appreciate reasons that I wouldn't have come to see on my own by listening to what people I respect think. I am willingly recruited into this deliberative community, seeing myself as a genuine member, not a follower. This, surely, is the element of truth in Williams' proleptic theory of blame. A certain ruggedly conscience-driven and egalitarian attitude would emphasise that doing the right thing to earn respect is doing it for the wrong reason and thus cannot earn respect. The element of truth in this makes it difficult to see what is limiting and ungenerous in it. A more forgiving and worldly wisdom says that motives can't be so finely discriminated, that the desire for respect shades into the desire to do those things that command respect for the very reasons for which they command it, and that the desire for respect, or even honour and glory, is in any case in no way an ignoble desire.⁵² Respecting people is treating them, whenever possible, as partners in dialogue, hoping, whenever possible, to learn from them, and being prepared to embark on an honest effort to persuade them. Sadly, it is not always possible.

In an essay on Nietzsche Williams praises what he calls Nietzsche's "realism" in ethics; by which he means not "the application of an already defined scientific programme" but an approach that takes as its measure the outlook of an "experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter." Such "realism":

can be said to involve, in Paul Ricoeur's well-known phrase, a "hermeneutics of suspicion". As such, it cannot compel demonstratively, and does not attempt to do so. It invites one into a perspective, and to some extent a tradition (one marked by such figures as Thucydides, for instance, or Stendhal,

⁵² On this, Hegel is acute against the purism of Kant and others: see, e.g., Hegel (1991a), section 124 with its addition.

or the British psychologists of morals whom Nietzsche described as “old frogs”), in which what seems to demand more moral material makes sense in terms of what demands less.⁵³

This is really the old-fashioned injunction to clear your mind of cant. Williams’ thinking about internal reasons and the scope of blame has done service in just this way, by bringing some of the tensions that are concealed under the conventional piety and wishful thinking of modern ethical ideals into the open. But this realism also could be turned on Williams. We can, for example, ask whether a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is just another romantic-modernist posture. Equally – although Hume was one of the wisest of old frogs, who certainly stands out as an “experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter” of human beings in society – we can ask whether the “sub-Humean model” is a product of experience or just another dogma of empiricism.

In the end, both Hume and Nietzsche, and Williams so far as he follows them, bring to their account of morality unconvincing theoretical prejudices from outside morality. They end up removing moral material that is actually there. In contrast, realism in Williams’ admirable sense – seeing people, their feelings, and their practices as they are, without undue optimism and with the help of whatever empirical findings we have – is something ethics always needs and has too little of. It can help us to think more robustly, with greater awareness of human diversity, about some dominant modern conceptions of moral agency, and some powerful modern misuses of moral valuation – in ways Williams favours, even if we don’t follow him down all the Humean and Nietzschean paths he wants to tread.⁵⁴

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Underneath many of Bernard Williams' sceptical attitudes and arguments in ethics is his flat-out rejection of what he calls "the morality system." On his view, "we would be better off without it."¹ But before we can assess this claim, we need to get a better sense of what exactly *it* is.

1. WHAT IS THE MORALITY SYSTEM?

To begin with, it is fundamentally important to keep in mind that for Williams the words *ethics* and *morality* are not at all synonymous. Rather, he treats the latter as an unfortunate modern offshoot of the former. As he notes in Chapter 1 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*:

I am going to suggest that morality should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has a special significance in modern Western culture. It particularly emphasizes certain ethical notions rather than others, developing in particular a special notion of obligation, and it has some peculiar presuppositions. In view of these features it is also, I believe, something we should treat with a special scepticism.²

We can see already that Williams' thesis about the morality system is in no small part *historical*. He believes that human beings' thinking about how they should live and act has changed drastically between ancient and modern times.³ At the same time, in so far as he is particularly concerned with the

¹ Williams (1985), p. 174.

² Williams (1985), p. 6. Williams' distinction between *ethics* and *morality* is analogous in several respects to Hegel's famous contrast between *Sittlichkeit* (ethical life) and *Moralität* (abstract morality). In both cases, a more concrete "world-guided" (or, to put it closer to Hegel's language, a social-role-and-community-guided) conception of ethics is being contrasted to an abstract, universal one, and in both cases the villain defending the latter is Kant. See, e.g., Hegel (1991), §135.

³ *Ancient* here effectively means pre-Socratic. In Williams (1993), it is argued that "the basic ethical ideas possessed by the Greeks were different from ours, and also in better condition," p. 4. But the Greeks he has in mind are not the philosophically familiar Plato and Aristotle.

concepts, presuppositions, and justifications (or lack thereof) employed by people past and present in their thinking on these matters, his position is also plainly philosophical. Needless to say, some readers may disagree with the historical facets of his position, some with the philosophical, and some with both.⁴

What are the defining features of the morality system? At the end of Chapter 10 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (in a chapter entitled, “Morality, the Peculiar Institution”), Williams summarizes his discussion as follows:

Many philosophical mistakes are woven into morality. It misunderstands obligations, not seeing how they form just one type of ethical consideration. It misunderstands practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to the ethical. It misunderstands ethical practical necessity, thinking it peculiar to obligations. Beyond all this, morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life.⁵

Four broad philosophical mistakes are highlighted in this passage. Let us examine each one in a bit more detail.

Obligation. Obligation – people’s sense that they have a duty to do X or must do X (e.g., render aid to an accident victim, when they are in a position to do so) is, Williams claims, the central concept in the morality system. And this in itself constitutes a major distortion in modern assumptions about what to do and how to live. In a society less distorted by the morality system, people’s thinking about what to do and how to live would involve many different concepts, only a few of which could be captured by the snare of obligation-language. Other concepts here would include the nice-but-less-than-obligatory, the great-but-more-than-obligatory (the

Rather, as one reviewer notes: “Williams refers most often to Homer; Sophocles comes a distant second, then Aeschylus and Euripides. Roughly speaking, Williams concentrates his gaze on Homeric Troy and Periclean Athens. Plato and Aristotle are also on show – but they are not on the side of the angels. On the contrary, with Plato the rot set in: he and Aristotle were not Greeks, not, that is, in Williams’ sense,” Barnes (1993), p. 3.

⁴ E.g., Nietzsche, who shares Williams’ strong admiration for pre-Socratic Greek ethical ideas (and who harbors an even stronger animus against modern ones), would challenge Williams’ contention that “morality” is distinctly modern. On Nietzsche’s view, the trouble began much earlier: “with the Jews there begins *the slave revolt in morality*: that revolt which has a history of two thousand years behind it and which we no longer see because it – has been victorious,” Nietzsche (1887/1967), First Essay, sec. 7; Nietzsche (1886/1966), sec. 195.

⁵ Williams (1985), p. 196.

“supererogatory”), the brave, the foolish, the admirable, the despicable, and so on. And not all of the key normative concepts employed in the practical sphere would even be *moral* ones – there would be ample space for nonmoral ones as well. But on Williams’ view, modern normative outlooks concerning practical deliberation tend to be pathologically obsessed with obligation. Embedded in modernity is an objectionable flattening out of the moral landscape. At least on this particular point, Williams agrees with John Stuart Mill: “no [defensible] system of ethics requires that the sole motive of all we do shall be a feeling of duty.”⁶

A second, related kind of reductionism present in morality’s monomania over obligation is its view that obligations cannot conflict. If I have one obligation to do X (e.g., help a victim in a motorcycle accident) and a second to do Y (e.g., drive my very pregnant wife to the hospital delivery room), it must be the case that it is humanly possible for me to perform both acts. This second kind of reductionism follows from the first, on Williams’ view, *via* two common bridging assumptions: (1) *Ought implies can*. (If I have a genuine obligation to do something, then it must be within my capacity to do it.) (2) The *agglomeration principle*. (If I have an obligation to do X and an obligation to do Y, I am obligated to do both X and Y.) But here (as elsewhere), Williams’ response is that such a view simply doesn’t square with the hard facts of life. Life, particularly human life, is fundamentally about conflict and tragic choice (choice-situations where *whatever* we do will be morally wrong), and any deliberative outlook that denies this is simply a product of a fantasy-world. The view that obligations and values generally are occasionally in irreconcilable conflict with one another “is not necessarily pathological at all, but something necessarily involved in human values, and to be taken as central by an adequate understanding of them.”⁷

A third, related area involving obligation in which yet another kind of reductionism is at work concerns the emotions. Williams has long been a critic of moral philosophy’s alleged neglect of the emotions. On his own view, our “conception of an admirable human being implies that he should

⁶ Mill (1861/1989), p. 17. Williams concludes his contribution to Smart and Williams (1973) with the prediction: “the day cannot be too far off in which we hear no more of utilitarianism,” p. 150. Utilitarianism, he also notes elsewhere, “is an example of morality,” viz., of the morality system, Williams (1995g), p. 205.

⁷ Williams (1981b), p. 72. In this essay, Williams acknowledges his debts to Isaiah Berlin on the topics of value pluralism and conflicts of value. See, e.g., Berlin (1969). Williams’ strong commitment to value pluralism is also evident in Williams (2002), where he urges readers to resist Kant’s “obsession” with the view that there exists “an exceptionless and simple rule, part of a Moral Law that governs us all equally without recourse to power. There is no such rule. Indeed, there is no Moral Law, but we have resources for living with that fact, some of them no doubt still to be uncovered,” p. 122.

be disposed to certain kinds of emotional response.”⁸ But for Kant, “the philosopher who has given the purest, deepest, and most thorough representation of morality,”⁹ “the idea that any emotionally governed action by a man can contribute to our assessment of him as a moral agent – or be a contribution . . . to his moral worth” is rejected.¹⁰ Baldly put, the morality system claims that morally right action must be determined by the thought of obligation. Williams, by contrast, holds that (all?) ethically admirable acts are determined by certain appropriate emotions rather than reasoning about obligation.

Finally, a fourth feature of moral obligation that Williams also criticizes is its alleged inescapability and categorical nature. According to the morality system, a valid moral obligation is something that overrides, or takes precedence over, all other considerations. Here, too, Williams asserts, distortion and reductionism are at work again. Why assume that moral obligations alone are inescapable? What about the significant demands placed on us from other areas of life? Given his position that religion is “incurably unintelligible,” Williams could hardly be expected to embrace Kierkegaard’s notion of a “teleological suspension of the ethical” – or at least he couldn’t be expected to endorse Kierkegaard’s religious motives for suspending ethical commitments in favor of an allegedly higher religious duty.¹¹ Nevertheless, both thinkers do endorse the claim that the ethical is not the highest element in human existence. We might say that on Williams’ view there will be multiple teleological suspensions of the ethical, invoked from a multiplicity of non-religious perspectives. Morality is not the only game in town.

Practical Necessity. The second major philosophical mistake of the morality system concerns its tendency to reduce practical necessity *überhaupt* to

⁸ Williams (1973b), pp. 225–226. Cf. Williams (1973a) in the same volume, p. 166.

⁹ Williams (1985), p. 174.

¹⁰ Williams (1973b), p. 226. As noted earlier (n. 2), Kant is almost always the intended target behind Williams’ attacks on morality. For example, in another essay he notes: “The deepest exploration in philosophy of the requirements of morality is Kant’s,” Williams (1995a), p. 17. Later in this essay, I shall examine the accuracy of Williams’ portrait of Kant’s moral theory, and offer a few Kantian reflections on the morality system.

¹¹ Williams (1972), p. 78. As the title indicates, in this early work, Williams does not yet distinguish between *morality* and *ethics*. However, hints of many of his later concerns (e.g., his view that imaginative literature has more to teach us about ethics than abstract theories – p. xi, his interest in thick as opposed to thin normative concepts – p. 33, and his view that scientific knowledge is much more objective than ethical – p. 30) are nevertheless present. For another sceptical look at religious belief, see Williams’ very early essay, Williams (2006). See also his more recent remarks about ‘Feuerbach’s axiom’ in Williams (1995e), p. 238. For Kierkegaard’s discussion of the teleological suspension of the ethical, see his (1843/1983), Problem I.

moral obligation. On Williams' view, "practical necessity is in no way peculiar to ethics."¹² In other words, people in the grip of the morality system typically assume that whenever someone says: "I have thought it over, and this is what I really must do," the resulting *must* will necessarily be the *must* of moral obligation. But this too is a distortion of the facts. In real life, agents' practical deliberations about what they must do may not result in a conclusion to carry out a moral obligation at all – even when the specific question, "*Ethically speaking*, what ought I to do here?" is itself included within their deliberative processes. The moral ought, so to speak, may be overridden by a more pressing non-moral ought. As he writes in his essay, "Practical Necessity":

The question: "What ought I to do?" can be asked and answered where no question of moral obligation comes into the situation at all; and when moral obligation does come into the question, what I am under an obligation to do may not be what, all things considered, I ought to do.¹³

Williams' basic point here seems related to the issue of inescapability, discussed earlier. He denies that moral obligations are uniquely inescapable and categorical. Or rather, he acknowledges that the morality system tags them this way, but he himself denies that they function in this manner in real life. On his view, moral obligations are just one factor among many that agents might consider when deliberating about what to do, and they won't necessarily trump other considerations. Moral obligations, as he notes elsewhere, "are never final practical conclusions, but are an input into practical decision. They are only one kind of ethical input, constituting one kind of ethical consideration among others."¹⁴

There is at least one additional point that bears noting. For Williams, any and all conclusions of practical necessity "are determined by projects that are essential to the agent."¹⁵ Depending on (among other things) what kind of society people live in and how they have been brought up, the projects that are essential to them may or may not be moral or ethical ones. But this is always an empirical, contingent matter. Here Williams' position echoes Hume's: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."¹⁶

¹² Williams (1985), p. 188.

¹³ Williams (1981c), pp. 124–25.

¹⁴ Williams (1995g), p. 205. Williams' denial that moral obligations are uniquely categorical is similar to Philippa Foot's position; see Foot (1978). Cf. Williams (1981a), p. 20 n. 1; Williams (1985), 223 n. 18.

¹⁵ Williams (1995a), p. 17.

¹⁶ Hume (1739–40/1978), p. 415. Cf. Williams (1995g), p. 205).

Effective practical deliberation helps us get what we want (e. g., realize projects that are essential to us), but without a preexisting want there is no sense in deliberating.

Ethical Practical Necessity. The third major philosophical mistake of the morality system occurs within contexts concerning what Williams calls “ethical practical necessity” – that is, deliberative situations in which we are guided by ethical considerations to determine our conclusion about what we must do, but where the resulting *must* is still not the *must* of moral obligation. Here, too, he claims, the morality system tends to reduce such deliberative situations to an obsessive hunt for moral obligations, and the result is yet another flattening of our ethical experience. On Williams’ view, practical necessity, “even when it is grounded in ethical reasons, does not necessarily signal an obligation.”¹⁷

So we are talking now about cases in which people conclude that ethically they must do X, but in which there is no sense of moral obligation involved in this conclusion. The issue at hand, in other words, is not whether there can be legitimate teleological suspensions of the ethical by allegedly higher or more pressing nonethical concerns, but rather whether ethical deliberation about what we must do itself always necessarily culminates in the *must* of moral obligation. One example that Williams offers, which I have embellished a bit, goes as follows: Suppose you have promised to visit a friend in the hospital during visiting hours. However, right before setting off, you receive a phone call. A demonstration is being held in front of the university administration building (as it happens, during hospital visiting hours) to protest the lack of health benefits granted to part-time instructors at the university, and the organizers want to know if you will speak at the rally.¹⁸ You have previously written an editorial in the campus newspaper, arguing that part-time instructors should indeed be granted such benefits. Because the issue is very important to you, you decide to attend – indeed, ethically, you feel that you must go. However, you do not feel that you are under any moral obligation to participate in the demonstration, and you realize that if you do go, you will be breaking your promise (and thus failing to carry out an incurred moral obligation) to visit your friend in the hospital.¹⁹

¹⁷ Williams (1985), p. 188.

¹⁸ This example may puzzle readers outside of the United States. However, the United States lacks a national health insurance system, and at present it is also the case that not all part-time or even full-time employees working in the United States receive health insurance benefits from their employers.

¹⁹ Williams (1985), p. 190.

Williams' position here is that you should go to the rally, even though you are under no moral obligation to do so. In other words, even when we are deliberating within the ethical sphere and want to do the right thing, the thought of moral obligation should not necessarily be paramount. Even when our thinking about what we must do is based on ethical rather than nonethical considerations, moral obligation does not necessarily win out over other competing ethical considerations. Some moral obligations, ethically speaking, are not very important in the larger scheme of things.

Inclination, the Voluntary, and Purity. We have seen already that Williams attacks the concept of moral obligation from multiple perspectives: ethical life is about much, much more than moral obligation; the phenomenological sense of practical necessity is not unique to moral obligation; the presence of practical necessity in our deliberation need not necessarily signal a moral obligation, and so on. But a further attack comes *via* the mundane concept of inclination. On Williams' view, obligations are not opposed to inclinations but rather presuppose them. Obligations do not stand opposed to inclination but rather grow out of them. In other words, an agent will only be in a position to decide that she *must* do X if she has a pre-existing *desire* to do X. However, because the desire in question will be one that helps energize her to decide that she morally must do something, it needs to be particularly strong or fundamental to her: it is not just "a desire *that the agent merely happens to have*," but, as we saw earlier (see note 15), one determined by projects that are essential to the agent.²⁰ Thus here again we find Williams' neo-Humeanism at work. Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.

The morality system also leads people to think that "without its utter voluntariness, there is only force."²¹ With the concept of the voluntary we run up against another fundamental illusion of the morality system; albeit a more metaphysical one than those discussed earlier. The particular sense of voluntariness at issue here is radical – "one that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less."²² The morality system, in other words, presupposes the traditional notion of free will – on its view, moral character and the choices that issue from it are not mere products of psychological or social determination. Rather, they are free choices for which agents

²⁰ Williams (1985), p. 189.

²¹ Williams (1985), p. 196.

²² Williams (1985), p. 194.

are responsible. It should be noted that Williams himself does not reject weaker, less ambitious senses of the voluntary – indeed, elsewhere he claims that “the idea of the voluntary is essentially superficial.”²³ According to this essentially superficial sense, “an agent does X fully voluntarily if X-ing is an intentional aspect of an action he does, which has no inherent or deliberative defect.”²⁴ But Williams’ assumption here is that it is perfectly consistent with this definition that an agent “voluntarily” choose something that nevertheless is entirely a product of psychological and/or social determination. On his view, “one’s history as agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not.”²⁵ There is no possibility of escape (or even of momentary or partial disentanglement) from this all-encompassing web. Williams rejects any and all stronger free will senses of the voluntary. Our choices are always surrounded and held up and partly formed by forces beyond our control, even in cases of voluntary action.

In holding fast to its illusion of utter voluntariness, the morality system also pretends that the only options available for influencing human behavior are reason and force. In saying “you ought to have done X,” we are trying to reason with the agent, and to blame him when he does not act on the relevant reasons. But if the “fiction” of appealing to reasons is not effective (and recall here that on William’s view it can only be effective in cases where there already exists a basic desire or pro-incentive within the agent to do reason’s bidding), we resort to force. On Williams’ view, there are many other options between the extremes of reason and force. Indeed, “in truth almost all worthwhile human life lies between the extremes that morality puts before us.”²⁶

Finally, purity. The intended sense of purity is also related to the concept of the radically voluntary, for by the purity of morality Williams means “its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence.”²⁷ This sense of purity expresses an ideal that even Williams the critic of morality calls “one of the most moving: the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just.”²⁸ For the purity of morality holds out the hope that human agents can, through their own efforts to create and sustain a moral world, transcend luck and the

²³ Williams (1995f), pp. 242–243. See also Williams (1993), p. 67.

²⁴ Williams (1995b), p. 25.

²⁵ Williams (1981a), p. 29.

²⁶ Williams (1985), p. 194.

²⁷ Williams (1985), p. 195.

²⁸ Williams (1985), p. 195.

myriad natural lotteries of life. In real life, some human beings are born into communities with abundant natural resources and hospitable climates, while others are not. Some are born in periods of great cultural and technological progress, and others are not. After the initial space and time lotteries are held, everyone is subject to further lotteries associated with the class system, the race system, and the gender system (systems, we might add, whose practical effects, taken together or even singly, are often far more destructive than anything dreamed up by the morality system). Additional lotteries of natural talent, good or not-so-good looks, and psychological temperament are also held at their appropriate times. The odds of one person's drawing a winning combination for all of these lotteries are incredibly slim. But the purity of morality shields us from these contingencies of luck and misfortune. Behind the shield we create a realm of freedom, where moral agents are viewed as more than mere playthings of biology, history, and social force.

However, even though Williams readily concedes that the ideals expressed by this purity "have without doubt . . . played a part in producing some actual justice in the world and in mobilizing power and social opportunity to compensate for bad luck in concrete terms," he also believes that we should jettison purity.²⁹ For unfortunately, "the idea of a value that lies beyond all luck is an illusion."³⁰ As a liberal (albeit a pessimistic one), Williams does endorse the social justice aims of the morality system.³¹ More broadly, he also embraces the Enlightenment ideals that provide the cultural setting for the morality system, in so far as they are identified with "the criticism of arbitrary and merely traditional power."³² But he wants justice (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) without the multiple illusions of the morality system.

²⁹ Williams (1985), p. 195–196.

³⁰ Williams (1985), p. 196.

³¹ In contrasting his own views to those of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, Williams offers the following compact summary: "Taylor and MacIntyre are Catholic, and I am not; Taylor and I are liberals, and MacIntyre is not; MacIntyre and I are pessimists, and Taylor is not (not really)," Williams (1995g), p. 222, n. 19. Taylor and MacIntyre are also noted critics of the morality system. However, Williams' own brand of pessimistic, secular liberalism sets him apart from these intellectual neighbors.

³² Williams (1993), p. 159. Cf. p. 11. On this particular point, Williams' stance doesn't seem terribly different from Richard Rorty's. Both are secular liberals who endorse the moral and social ideals of Enlightenment, but they reject the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions that traditionally accompany these ideals. Rorty, for instance, summarizes his recent work as follows: "Most of what I have written in the last decade consists of attempts to tie in my social hopes – hopes for a global, cosmopolitan, democratic, egalitarian, classless, casteless society – with my antagonism towards Platonism," Rorty (2000), p. xii.

2. KANT AND THE MORALITY SYSTEM

Now that we have a better idea of what Williams means by “the morality system,” what are we to make of his complete dismissal of it? What should our own attitude toward it be? One ready sociological response is simply that the morality system is more a philosopher’s idea than a reality in today’s world. That is to say: it is highly doubtful that very many people today actually do believe that morality is only about obligation, that obligations cannot ever conflict, that there is no sense of practical necessity outside of contexts of moral deliberation, that there exist no options between the extremes of reason and force, and so on. As one reviewer of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* remarked, in questioning the fit between Williams’ depiction of morality and the contemporary context: “I think it unlikely that ordinary conceptions of morality are so highly developed in the one direction defined by Kant.”³³ However, this does still leave us with the problem of Kant. Again, Kant is allegedly “the philosopher who has given the purest, deepest, and most thorough representation” of the morality system.³⁴ To what extent *does* Kant himself articulate and defend “morality, the peculiar institution?” In the present section, I shall explore this question, with specific reference to the four philosophical mistakes of morality analyzed in the [previous section](#).³⁵

Obligation. For Kant, obligation or the sense of acting under rational constraint is indeed the central phenomenological feature of human moral experience. For creatures with greater cognitive powers than us (or who have different (e.g., less egotistical) psychological make-ups than us), the story will be different. As he remarks in the *Groundwork*: “no imperatives hold for the *divine* will and in general for a *boly* will: the “ought” (*das Sollen*) is out of place here, because volition (*das Wollen*) is of itself necessarily in accord with the law.”³⁶ But meanwhile, back on earth, so to speak, as human beings are creatures who can both be aware of the importance of moral principles and yet oppose them because of contrary inclinations, morality will confront them as an imperative. Morality’s demands and goals always

³³ Wong (1989), p. 722.

³⁴ Williams (1985), p. 174.

³⁵ Needless to say, Kant’s moral theory is very complex, and a thorough investigation of all of its myriad mysteries is far beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, my aim is the more manageable one of examining briefly those specific aspects of it that are targeted in Williams’ depiction of the morality system.

³⁶ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 414; p. 67.

remain an *ought* that we must bring ourselves to strive for; for creatures like us they are never reducible to an automatic *is*.

However, for Kant the moral *ought* that confronts humans is much broader and more multidimensional than is the case with typical moral obligations. Typically, an obligation is always something owed to others rather than to oneself. Williams endorses this common usage, calling the very idea of a duty to oneself a “fraudulent” item and an “absurd apparatus.”³⁷ But for Kant duties to oneself are the most important and fundamental kind of obligation – he sees them as necessary presuppositions of every other kind of duty. As he states in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

Suppose there were no such duties: then there would be no duties whatsoever, and so no external duties either. For I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason; and in being constrained by my own reason, I am also the one constraining myself.³⁸

On Kant’s view, it is our ability as rational agents to act on ends that we have chosen that makes us moral agents in the first place. Only creatures who can constrain themselves to act according to self-chosen principles can have moral obligations. Only by working on ourselves – making ourselves into certain kinds of people – can we carry out moral projects from the requisite motivational structure.³⁹

Kant’s view that duties to oneself “are the most important [duties] of all” means that his own position differs from the morality system in several important respects.⁴⁰ First of all, blame will not play nearly as big a role in the former as it does in the latter. According to Williams, blame “is the characteristic reaction of the morality system.”⁴¹ In Kant’s ethics, to the

³⁷ Williams (1985), p. 182; Williams (1972), p. 75. See also Williams (2002), where he dismisses Kant’s “unhelpful vocabulary of duties to oneself,” p. 107.

³⁸ Kant (1797/1996h) Ak. 6: 417–418; p. 543.

³⁹ For further discussion, see my “Morality and Oneself,” Loudon (1992), pp. 13–26. Williams’ own arguments against duties to oneself do not seem to me to be relevant to Kant’s position. He views them simply as licenses to do what one already wants to do, under the guise of a moral reason. Williams (1972), p. 75; Williams (1985), p. 182. But for Kant it is the possibility of self-constraint and self-direction (regardless of what one may happen to want) that generates duties to oneself.

⁴⁰ Kant (1784–85/1997a) Ak. 27: 341; p. 122.

⁴¹ Williams (1985), p. 177. Similarly, in Williams (1995a) he states: “there is a special form of ethical life, important in our culture, to which blame is central: we may call this special form of the ethical ‘morality,’” p. 15.

extent that we can and do criticize ourselves for failing to live up to our own commitments and ideals, there will certainly be a place for self-blame. But strictly speaking, blaming others (which for Williams is the primary kind of blame) has no proper place within Kantian ethics.⁴² Secondly, the strong self-regarding orientation of Kant's ethics opens up the possibility that morality may not after all be guilty of alienating agents from their own projects and emphasizing impartiality at the expense of the personal.⁴³ Granted, it may still alienate them from their *nonmoral* projects. But strictly speaking, the self-regarding core of Kant's ethics means that it is intensely personal. Finally, proper acknowledgment of the centrality of duties to oneself in Kant's moral scheme moves it much closer to the virtue ethics tradition – a tradition that Williams himself often points to as a promising alternative to the morality system.⁴⁴ Kant's ethics is in fact much more about long-term character development (and much less about generating a decision-procedure for determining specific obligations) than many of his foes as well as friends acknowledge.⁴⁵

A second basic way in which Kant's moral *ought* differs from the obligations of the morality system concerns the broadness of its scope. For Williams (and this is also true of many contemporary authors), obligations are always about the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of specific acts (e.g., keeping one's promise to repay a debt by a specified date; not injuring other people). But for Kant, some of the most fundamental moral obligations concern the promotion of general ideals or ends such as our own perfection and the happiness of others. The obligations of the morality system are narrow; those often emphasized within Kant's ethics are wide. Williams, however is opposed to such "general and indeterminate obligations," on the ground that they provide (too much) work for idle (as well as not-so-idle) hands.⁴⁶ There are *a lot* of unhappy people out there, and if the happiness of others really is an end that is also a duty, it would appear that we also have a moral duty never to rest, even for a second.

⁴² Christine Korsgaard also questions Williams' emphasis on blame in describing Kant's ethics in several of her essays. See, e.g., her observation that the Kantian duty of respect strongly restricts practices of blaming others in Korsgaard (1996), pp. 71 n. 24, 174.

⁴³ Williams initially aimed this "alienation charge" at utilitarianism – another alleged member of the morality system. See his contribution to Smart and Williams (1973), p. 116 ff. However, in Williams (1981a) it becomes clear that he thinks alienation from one's own projects will also be a problem for Kantian morality, see esp. pp. 38–39.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Williams (1985), pp. 8–10 and, more recently, Williams (1998).

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Loudon (1986/1999). See also O'Neill (1996).

⁴⁶ Williams (1985), p. 181.

However, the fear that Kant's ethics obligates us to do the impossible is tempered considerably by his candid admission that wide (or "imperfect") duties leave "a playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law."⁴⁷ There are infinitely many ways to pursue the general goal of promoting the happiness of others, and different people will decide to pursue it in different ways, depending on their own talents and projects. At the same time, the expansive role of imperfect duties means that they do have a tendency to crowd out, indeed replace, certain other normative notions. The most prominent example is supererogation. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes: "I do wish that educators would spare their pupils examples of so-called *noble* (supermeritorious) actions, with which our sentimental writings so abound, and would expose them all only to duty."⁴⁸ On Kant's view, people who focus on actions that are allegedly beyond duty are liable both to view more mundane obligations as insignificant and beneath their (often self-designated) heroic stature, and to get caught up in romantic and unattainable images of moral greatness. What he urges instead is a highly demanding morality that nevertheless constantly requires agents to exercise their own discretion in determining how best to pursue morality's demands within their own particular life-situations.

Self-government, acting under self-willed rational constraint, is indeed the central feature of human moral experience according to Kant. But does this mean, as Williams charges, that Kant is pathologically obsessed with obligation, and with denuding the moral landscape of other important normative categories? I would say rather that his underlying motive is simply to convince readers that they are able to bring themselves to act according to reasons that they have chosen; to show them that they are not simply creatures of desire. In this basic respect, Kant's position in ethics fits squarely into a long and multifaceted philosophical tradition that stresses the centrality of reason in human life.

What about the other reductionistic tendencies that Williams associates with the morality system's obsession with obligation? As concerns conflicts of obligation, Kant's notorious claim that "a *collision of duties* and obligations is inconceivable" would seem to rule them out entirely.⁴⁹ He does readily

⁴⁷ Kant (1797/1996h) Ak. 6: 390; p. 521. Kant's strong stress on playroom (*Spielraum*) also suggests that morality as he understands it is far from being a "system" in which every choice follows a tightly coordinated organizational scheme. In practice, it is much looser than this.

⁴⁸ Kant (1788/1996f) Ak. 5: 155; pp. 263–64. For detailed discussion of this topic, see Baron (1995).

⁴⁹ Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 224; p. 379. See also Kant (1793/1997c), Ak. 27: 273, 537; pp. 273, 296–97.

acknowledge that there can be competing *grounds of obligation* (competing considerations relevant to determining what one's duty is). However, in such cases only one of the competing grounds is held to be sufficient to actually put the agent under obligation – the other one simply is “not a duty.”⁵⁰ This is not to deny that it may often be difficult, indeed impossible, for cognitively limited creatures such as human beings to accurately determine what their moral duty is, nor is it to deny that they will sometimes be faced with hard choices where they may have to choose the lesser of two evils, nor is it to deny they may legitimately feel regret after having made a hard choice, etc. But strictly speaking, in Kant's rationalist eyes “laws and rules can never contradict one another.”⁵¹ The radical value pluralism assumed by Williams and many other contemporary thinkers – a world in which there exists an irreducible plurality of competing and conflicting values, with no single scale by which to measure them or rank them in order to determine our actual duty – is foreign to Kant's worldview.

As for the place of emotional response in human moral conduct, Kant, unlike Williams, certainly would never allow that “emotionally governed action” constitutes the moral worth of agents (see notes 8 and 9). On the contrary, action must always be rationally governed if it is to possess moral worth. Any and all actions determined by inclination – however amiable they may be – lack true moral worth.⁵² However, this is not at all to say that emotional response plays no positive role whatsoever in human morality on Kant's view. On the contrary, the presence of certain appropriate emotions constitutes a necessary and important (albeit secondary) feature in the accurate assessment of human beings' moral worth. For instance, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* he asserts:

it is a duty to sympathize actively in [the fate of others] ...; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them.⁵³

More generally, we have a duty to cultivate those specific feelings that are appropriate to the performance of each duty – for example, in the case of the

⁵⁰ Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 224; p. 379.

⁵¹ Kant (1793/1997c), Ak. 27: 296; p. 296. For a brief discussion of cases in which choosing the lesser of two evils may be necessary, see Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 426; p. 550. For further discussion of Kant and conflicts of obligation, see Donagan (1987) and Hill (1996).

⁵² See Kant's (in)famous discussion of the “naturally kind-hearted person,” see Kant (1797/1996d), Ak. 4: 398; p. 33.

⁵³ Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 457; p. 575.

duty to help others, compassion. And we are also to discipline our emotions so that we truly enjoy doing what our reason tells us to do:

a heart joyous in the *compliance* with its duty (not just complacency in the *recognition* of it) is the sign of genuineness in virtuous disposition. . . . This resolve, encouraged by good progress must needs effect a joyous frame of mind, without which one is never certain of having *gained* also a *love* for the good, i.e., of having incorporated the good into one's maxim.⁵⁴

In virtuous agents, the emotions work in harmony with reason: both converge to point agents in the same direction. Reason must ultimately govern action, but an important part of reason's task is to cultivate the emotions so that this humanly-necessary harmony between reason and emotion can be achieved. This cultivation work in turn focuses on the proper development of "moral feeling"; "a motive in which our sensibility concurs with understanding."⁵⁵

Practical Necessity. Practical necessity, again, is shorthand for agents' sense that they must do X. Williams' position here is that practical necessity is not unique to ethics; the morality system, by contrast, claims that it is. On Williams' view, agents can legitimately conclude that they must do X (e.g., pursue a career in music, join the underground, help the poor) based on any number of nonmoral considerations. And even when moral considerations are included as part of the deliberative picture, what agents legitimately conclude they must do may not necessarily involve the carrying out of a moral obligation. How is Kant's position on this set of issues best summarized?

Kant would not deny the common sense view that agents often feel they "must" do something based on non-moral considerations. Most soldiers ordered by their commanding officers to stand guard after midnight feel they must do so; some people feel they must pursue a certain career, and so on. But for Kant the important question always concerns the rational assessment of such musts. For Williams, recall (see n. 15), moral obligations as well as all other forms of practical necessity grow out of preexisting pro-desires and inclinations. If the desire for X is sufficiently strong and is related to one of the agent's essential projects (and if the agent deliberates

⁵⁴ Kant (1793/1996i) Ak. 6: 24 n.; p. 73 n.

⁵⁵ Kant (1784–85/1997a). Ak. 27: 361; p. 138. Earlier in this lecture – though in a section which the translator has taken from the text of Mrongovius, that is, from Kant (1784–85/1997b) – Kant notes: "Anyone can see when an action is abhorrent, but only he who feels this abhorrence has a moral feeling," Ak 27: 1429; p. 72.

correctly, has access to the relevant facts, etc.), then she will conclude that she must do X. On Williams' account, this seems to be the end of the story.

In Kantian language, this means that Williams accepts only hypothetical imperatives, not categorical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative, Kant notes, is a command to perform an action because it is viewed "as a means to achieving something else that one wills."⁵⁶ In the present context, the "something else that one wills" would stem from an agent's fundamental desires and projects. Agents will feel they must do what is necessary for realizing their essential projects. Kant, however, famously contrasts hypothetical imperatives to categorical imperatives. A categorical imperative is a command to perform because it is viewed "as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end" – that is, regardless of one's personal desires and projects.⁵⁷ And for Kant, only the categorical imperative "may be called the imperative of *morality*."⁵⁸

This points to a very significant difference between Williams and Kant on the topic of practical necessity. The sense of practical necessity that Williams assumes throughout his writings is for Kant not real practical necessity. Real practical necessity, in Kant's sense, exists only when a conclusion of practical deliberation convincingly represents an action as in itself good, regardless of the agent's desires and projects. But according to Williams, practical necessity exists only when agents have fundamental desires and projects and then start deliberating about what they need to do in order to realize them. For Kant, agents' desires and projects always need to be evaluated – they are not given *carte blanche*. But for Williams, there is no court of appeal outside of one's basic desires and projects. One reasons instrumentally on how best to achieve them, and that is it.

Thus for Kant, hypothetical imperatives do not present us with cases of genuine practical necessity, but only with cases of practical contingency. For if, after reflecting on the personal desire and project that generated the particular hypothetical imperative in question we decide that they are, in the larger scheme of things, not that important after all, then we no longer need to follow the ought:

the categorical imperative has the tenor of a practical *law*; all the others can indeed be called *principles* of the will but not laws, since what it is necessary to do merely for achieving a discretionary purpose can be regarded as in

⁵⁶ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 414; p. 67. See also the opening footnote to Williams (1981a), where he states that he agrees with the substance of Philippa Foot's position in Foot (1978).

⁵⁷ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 414; p. 67.

⁵⁸ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 416; p. 69. See also Ak. 4: 425; p. 76.

itself contingent and we can always be released from the precept if we give up the purpose; on the contrary, the unconditional command leaves the will no discretion with respect to the opposite, so that it alone brings with it that necessity which we require of law.⁵⁹

Briefly, on Kant's view we are to assess the conclusions of all of our practical deliberations (including those stemming from our desires and projects) by means of the concepts of universality and necessity. Those desires and projects that upon reflection do not carry a firm sense of universality and necessity with them, if and when they conflict with other practical concerns that do convincingly convey a sense of universality and necessity, must take a back seat to the latter. For example: suppose the project of mastering Corelli's violin sonatas is extremely important to me. When I deliberate about how this project is to be realized, I conclude correctly that I will need to devote a great deal of practice time to the violin. However, if in the middle of an intense practice session (when I am finally figuring out how to pull off some of the tricky double-stops with finesse), I suddenly see a neighborhood child crying alone in agony on the sidewalk because he has just slashed his foot on a broken window pane, then I must put down the fiddle and go help the child. The latter ought is clearly more pressing in the larger scheme of things.

Admittedly, in real life it is often difficult to correctly determine which projects truly are most important. Kant is perhaps a bit too sanguine (not to mention over the top, in his Star Trek conviction that true moral oughts necessarily reach beyond the human species to all rational beings) in assuming that it is always possible for agents to know which ones do as a matter of fact involve absolute necessity and universality.⁶⁰ But he at least puts forward a fundamental criterion (one which he firmly believes "common human reason also agrees completely with") by means of which we are to test and evaluate the conclusions of our practical deliberations.⁶¹ Williams, as far as I can see, offers nothing in its place. Agents are charged with determining which projects are "essential" to their own lives, but they are given

⁵⁹ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 420; p. 72.

⁶⁰ "Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command 'thou shalt not lie' does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason" (Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 389; pp. 44–45). See also Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 408; pp. 62–63.

⁶¹ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 402; p. 57. For further discussion, see Louden (1992), pp. 116–120.

no conceptual tools by means of which to ascertain what should really count as essential and why.

Ethical Practical Necessity. The third philosophical mistake of the morality system concerns the issue of whether or not conclusions of practical necessity, even when they are grounded in ethical reasons, necessarily signal a moral obligation. On Williams' view, they don't. Sometimes, what we legitimately conclude we must do, ethically speaking, has nothing to do with moral obligation.

As noted earlier in our discussion of Kant and obligation, Kant is committed to the general view that, because human beings are less-than-perfectly-rational beings whose psychological make-ups often hinder them from fulfilling moral projects, morality confronts them as an *ought* which they must bring themselves to strive to carry out – not as an automatic *is* (or even a *will be*) that necessarily comes about. Again though, this does not mean that human moral agents always experience moral oughts as unwelcome demands. Quite the contrary. Virtuous agents, in most cases, will in fact want to do what they ought to do, because they have educated their emotions to work in harmony with practical reason. But even here, in the ideal case, reason will be in charge: desire is guided by reason. However, it does follow from Kant's basic "morality-confronts-human-beings-as-an-ought" starting point that on his view all cases of practical necessity grounded in ethical reasons (which, as we saw earlier, are also the only legitimate cases of practical necessity, strictly speaking) will signal a moral obligation of some sort. For in all such cases, there will be a particularly strong ought (one indicating universality and strict necessity) leading to the practical conclusion about what to do.

But the debate does not quite stop here. The issue is complicated on Kant's side due to the fact that he recognizes a plurality of different kinds of obligation. Agents are often subject to conflicting grounds of obligation, and in such cases they need to try and determine which particular ground should prevail. Some of the most difficult cases will involve imperfect obligations, obligations which, as we saw, leave a playroom for free choice in determining how best to fulfill them. We have an imperfect duty to promote the happiness of others, but which others shall we help? Family relatives? People in our local community? Strangers in other parts of the world? In cases involving competing grounds of imperfect obligation, the ought that prevails will be an imperfect rather than a perfect one. And in such cases, what Williams calls a case of ethical practical necessity that does not signal a moral obligation would simply be, in Kant's language, one ground of imperfect duty prevailing over another.

However, the example given earlier (see *Ethical Practical Necessity*) involved an apparent conflict between a perfect duty (keeping one's promise to a friend) and an imperfect one (trying to help others, in this case, part-time university faculty). Williams, recall, holds that in this particular case we should break the promise and attend the demonstration in support of health insurance benefits for part-time faculty. Kant, by contrast, holds that "imperfect duties always succumb to perfect ones."⁶² A perfect duty, he notes at one point in the *Groundwork*, "admits no exception in favor of inclination";⁶³ whereas every imperfect duty gives us some leeway in determining how best to fulfill it. Kant's conviction that perfect duties always trump imperfect ones give his position an absolutist color that contemporary nonconsequentialists are not always eager to defend, but it does square well with (parts of) traditional moral codes – for example, St. Paul's maxim that we may not "do evil that good may come" (steal from one person in order to help needy others, kill one person in order to save five, or – less dramatically but much more problematically – break an appointment with one person in order to help others).⁶⁴ At any rate, regardless of what kind of duties are at stake, Kant does hold that ethical practical necessity signals obligation.

Inclination, the Voluntary, and Purity. As regards inclination, much of what was said earlier concerning the proper role of emotions in ethics is relevant here as well. Again, it is certainly not Kant's view that obligation

⁶² Kant (1793/1997c), Ak. 27: 537; p. 296.

⁶³ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 421 n.; p. 73 n.

⁶⁴ Romans 3: 8. See also Donagan (1977), pp. 149–57, who invokes Paul's maxim to defend Kant's absolutism. Kant's own defense of the priority of perfect duties is more abstract. Maxims opposed to perfect duties, he holds, cannot even be *conceived* as universal laws of nature without contradiction; whereas maxims opposed to imperfect duties cannot be so *willed*. E.g., a world in which the maxim of promise-breaking is universalized is conceptually incoherent, for the practice of promising would then no longer exist. But a world in which the maxim of not helping others is universalized is conceptually coherent, though Kant claims we could not coherently wish to live in such a world – we might need others' help sometime, and it would thus be irrational to choose to live in a world where it would never be given. This distinction between a contradiction in conception vs. willing, Kant holds, is the ground for the priority of perfect over imperfect duties (see, e.g., Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 424; p. 75). I am a contemporary non-consequentialist who denies the absolutist conception of perfect duties. That is, on my view, keeping an appointment is not always what matters most, morally speaking. Donagan's use of the Pauline principle helps make sense of the traditional view that negative duties (e.g., not to harm) are more stringent than positive duties (e.g., to aid). But I don't think it helps support Kant's more controversial claim that perfect duties (regardless of how trivial they seem) must always outweigh imperfect duties. I am also sceptical of Kant's blanket assertion that *every* maxim opposed to *each and every* perfect duty necessarily involves a contradiction in conception. On my view, this is an open question – each such maxim needs to be analyzed. Or, to use Paul's language: it is not clear that every single instance of breaking an appointment constitutes "doing evil" to someone.

and inclination are always necessarily opposed to one another – that, as Schiller famously objected, it is only when we act “with aversion” that we can be sure to have acted from the motive of duty.⁶⁵ Rather, virtuous agents will educate their emotions so that they truly enjoy pursuing morality’s demands whenever possible, and so that they exhibit the appropriate moral feelings in the right contexts (e.g., compassion when helping others). Kant would thus not necessarily oppose weaker versions of Williams’ thesis concerning the relationship between inclination and obligation – for example, he could accept the claim that in human experience obligation sometimes or even frequently presupposes inclinations and projects that are essential to the agent. But again, even in those cases where an inclination to perform the obligation is already present, reason must still be in charge. It is only the stronger, neo-Humean version of Williams’ claim (viz., obligation necessarily always presupposes inclination) to which Kant is firmly opposed. To assert that moral agents are incapable of bringing themselves to do something unless they already feel like doing it is to assume much too paltry a picture of practical reason. The human being is not merely “a plaything of his instincts and inclinations.”⁶⁶

With the concept of the voluntary (which, again, is to be construed here in a particularly strong sense: “utter voluntariness”) we encounter one of the starkest differences between Williams and Kant. For Williams, as we saw earlier, free will is an illusion. Our choices are always surrounded and held up and partly formed by things over which we have no control, and any ethical outlook that seeks to overcome illusion and superstition simply must accept this fact. Kant on the other hand asserts that “we must assume freedom of the will in acting, without which there would be no morals.”⁶⁷ It does not make sense to think that people could even have moral obligations unless we presuppose that they can be the authors of their own actions. As Williams notes, Kant’s account of freedom “presents great difficulties and obscurities,” not the least of which is the “extravagant metaphysical luggage of the noumenal self.”⁶⁸ But Kant has no desire to hide these difficulties and obscurities from readers. Freedom, he declares in the *Groundwork*, “can never be comprehended or even only seen. It holds only as a necessary

⁶⁵ Schiller (1965), vol. I, p. 300. This objection notwithstanding, Schiller did have an enormous appreciation for Kant’s philosophy. E.g., he begins Schiller (1795/1967) by exclaiming: “I shall not attempt to hide from you that it is for most part Kantian principles on which the following theses will be based,” p. 3.

⁶⁶ Kant (1783/1996b) Ak. 8: 14; p. 10.

⁶⁷ Kant (1783/1996b) Ak. 8: 14; p. 10.

⁶⁸ Williams (1985), pp. 64–65.

presupposition of reason.”⁶⁹ Or, as he remarks somewhat less prosaically in a Review: “the nexus of the physical and the moral in the human being surpasses what his spirit can grasp”; when we try to grasp this nexus we become aware that we are “in the presence of a mystery (*ein Geheimnis*).”⁷⁰ Without plunging further into these difficulties and obscurities, suffice it to say that here we are confronted with two radically different outlooks: with Williams, an outlook that views “human beings as part of nature” and urges us to adopt a correlative naturalistic moral psychology; with Kant, an outlook that views human beings as capable of acting according to “a rule and order that is entirely other than the natural order,” and that subsequently rejects any wholly naturalistic account of who and what we are.⁷¹

However, this is not at all to say that Kant allows room only for the blunt dichotomy of reason and force in influencing human behavior. Here Williams’ depiction of the morality system strays significantly from Kant’s own position. As a strong defender of autonomy (“the sole principle of morals”), Kant certainly is no friend of brute force.⁷² But to a much greater degree than most philosophers, he is also acutely aware that appealing to abstract reason is not generally the most effective way to get a moral message across to human beings. As cognitively limited, image-dependent creatures, human beings always stand in need of tangible symbols of morality. And they are also creatures who, to a much greater degree than other animals, require enormous expenditures of care, nurture, education, and enculturation in order to develop their capacities. (“The human being is the only creature that must be educated.”)⁷³ As a result, a wide variety of cultural supports need to be enlisted to help get morality’s message across to human beings and to instill moral dispositions in them. To begin with, art and aesthetic experience generally are both viewed by Kant as humanly-necessary preparations for morality. The experience of beauty, whether in nature or in artworks, “greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it” by cultivating the disposition “to love something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention

⁶⁹ Kant (1785/1996d) Ak. 4: 459; p. 105. An additional complication, which need not detain us here, is that Kant’s position on freedom is not static throughout his works. E.g., at the beginning of his *Critique of Practical Reason* he announces that practical reason “furnishes reality . . . to freedom . . . , and hence establishes by means of a fact” what in speculative reason could only be thought. Kant (1788/1996f) Ak. 5: 6; p. 141. This is a much stronger claim concerning our ability to comprehend freedom than anything he asserts in Kant (1785/1996d).

⁷⁰ Kant (1788/1996e) Ak. 8: 125; p. 125.

⁷¹ Williams (1995c), p. 67. Kant (1781/1787/1998) A 550/ B 575; p. 543. (The first reference to the *Critique* is to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions.)

⁷² Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 440; p. 89.

⁷³ Kant (1803/2007), Ak. 9: 441; pagination forthcoming for the translated version.

to use it.”⁷⁴ Through the enjoyment of colors, sounds, and patterns for their own sakes, without regard to any extraneous considerations, we are given a palpable glimpse of moral freedom. Similarly, the arts and sciences generally, though they do not necessarily make human beings “morally better” (*sittlich besser*), do, “through a pleasure that can be communicated universally, and by bringing polish and refinement into society, make human beings civilized (*gesittet*), and do much to overcome the tyranny of the senses and thereby prepare human beings for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have power.”⁷⁵ Here too a sense of disinterested pleasure and universality are promoted; and psychological states strongly analogous to those found in moral judgment are cultivated.

Much of Kant’s *Religion* is also premised on the assumption that “for the human being the invisible needs to be represented through something visible (sensible).”⁷⁶ Like many Enlightenment authors, he sees a unified moral core beneath the surface differences of the various historical faiths. But “because of the natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that *the senses can hold on to*, . . . some historical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used” to bring us into touch with this moral core.⁷⁷

Finally, democratic nation-states also help to promote morality, for in them each citizen;

believes that he himself would indeed hold the concept of right sacred and follow it faithfully, if only he could expect every other to do likewise, and the government in part assures him of this; thereby a great step is taken *toward* morality (though it is not yet a moral step) toward being attached to this concept of duty even for its own sake, without regard for any return.⁷⁸

In sum, Kant recognizes and explicitly endorses a wide variety of cultural practices as humanly-necessary vehicles for edging us closer to morality. He is well aware that abstract reason and brute force are not the only options.

Turning finally to the issue of purity, it is clear both that Kant was strongly committed to the foundational project of “a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology”; and that Williams is deeply suspicious of all

⁷⁴ Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 443; p. 564. Kant explores this theme in greater detail in Kant (1790/2000), see, e.g., Ak. 5: 211, 267, 354, 433; pp. 96, 150–51, 228, 301. For discussion, see Guyer (1993).

⁷⁵ Kant (1790/2000), Ak. 5: 433; p. 301.

⁷⁶ Kant (1793/1996j), Ak. 6: 192; p. 208.

⁷⁷ Kant (1793/1996j), Ak. 6: 109; p. 142.

⁷⁸ Kant (1795/1996g) Ak. 8: 376 n.; p. 343 n. I explore these cultural inducements to morality at greater length in Loudon (2000), esp. chs. 4–5.

“purist views of morality” that reject biological as well as historical and psychological understandings of morality.⁷⁹ But Kant was equally adamant that pure ethics was only the first step: “The metaphysics of morals or *metaphysica pura* is only the first part of morals – the second part is *philosophia moralis applicata*, moral anthropology, to which the empirical principles belong.”⁸⁰ The second part, Kant notes in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, is a “counterpart of a metaphysics of morals, the other division of practical philosophy as a whole, . . . moral anthropology.”⁸¹ Unfortunately, philosophical friends as well as foes of Kant, in their own desire to “keep philosophy pure,” have virtually ignored this second (impure, empirical) part of his ethics.⁸² However, because its aim is to determine how best to make morality efficacious in human life, the second part forms an integral part of his system of practical philosophy, and he explores it sporadically not only in his published works on moral philosophy but also in his classroom lectures on anthropology, geography, and education, his essays on the philosophy of history, and in selected aspects of his work in aesthetics and religion.⁸³

Williams exhorts us to recognize that ethics and philosophy generally “cannot be too pure, and must merge with other kinds of understanding.”⁸⁴ Kant is opposed to any such forced merger, in part because of the massive layoffs among philosophers that would follow (“that which mixes . . . pure principles with empirical ones does not even deserve the name of philosophy”).⁸⁵ But Kant does nevertheless insist that moral theory “needs anthropology for its *application* to human beings”; indeed that “morality cannot exist without anthropology.”⁸⁶ Both Kant and Williams recognize that ethical theory needs a massive infusion of relevant and accurate empirical data if it is to be applied successfully to human life.

3. WOULD WE BE BETTER OFF WITHOUT THE MORALITY SYSTEM?

Although I have challenged several subsidiary aspects of Williams’ identification of the morality system with Kant’s own view of ethics, as concerns

⁷⁹ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 389; p. 44. Williams (1995d), p. 104.

⁸⁰ Kant (1785) Ak. 29: 599. (This particular lecture transcription from the *Moral Mrongovius II* is not included in the Cambridge Kant translations.)

⁸¹ Kant (1797/1996h), Ak. 6: 217; p. 372.

⁸² Cf. Rorty (1982).

⁸³ For further discussion, see Loudon (2000), esp. Chap. 1; and Loudon (2003). See also Part II (Anthropological Applications) of Wood (1999).

⁸⁴ Williams (1996), p. 37.

⁸⁵ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 390; p. 46.

⁸⁶ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 412; p. 65. Kant (1784–85/1997a), Ak. 27: 244; p. 42.

the four broad “philosophical mistakes” with which we began this essay, his analysis is substantially correct. First, obligation, at least in the broad sense of acting under rational constraint, is for Kant by far the central type of ethical consideration in human experience. Second, genuine practical necessity is on his view peculiar to the ethical – the moral ought, unlike all varieties of nonmoral oughts, “expresses a species of necessity and a connection with grounds which does not occur anywhere else in the whole of nature.”⁸⁷ Third, ethical practical necessity on Kant’s view is peculiar to obligation, though again the resulting obligation may be perfect or imperfect, a duty to oneself or to others. And finally, although Kant does hold that inclinations and emotions play an important and positive role in human moral experience, that many factors besides abstract reason and brute force influence human behavior, and that relevant empirical data are necessary for the study of human morality, it remains the case that his ethics presuppose a strong commitment both to free will and to pure (nonempirical) foundational principles.

However, the important philosophical question is whether we really “would be better off without” the morality system. In this [last section](#), I wish to address this question, albeit all too briefly. To simplify matters, in what follows I will construe the morality system to refer to the intersection between Kant’s ethics and the morality system, as analyzed earlier, focusing now on the core differences between Kant’s view of morality and Williams’ conception of ethics. The core differences, on my reading, come down to Kant’s robust commitment to strong senses of free will and practical reason, and Williams’ firm rejection of both of these two commitments.

Let me start with a few remarks about free will. Traditionally, the question of free will has been seen as linked to that of moral responsibility. Freedom of action, that is, has been viewed as a necessary prerequisite for moral responsibility – responsibility both in cases where things go wrong (and judgments of criticism, rebuke, censure, blame, or punishment seem appropriate), as well as in cases where they turn out well (and judgments of encouragement, congratulation, praise, or reward follow). In my view, Williams’ desire to decouple ethics from the presupposition of free will would, if widely adopted, be a disaster not only for the morality system and Kant’s ethics but for any ethical outlook worth taking seriously. Among other things, it would become exceedingly difficult (I’m tempted to say impossible) to distinguish convincingly cases where agents were responsible

⁸⁷ Kant (1781/1787/1998), A 547/B 576; p. 540.

from those where they weren't.⁸⁸ And the rich vocabulary of terms traditionally used to refer to the former type of case would no longer make sense. Gradually, a picture of human beings as creatures who are simply shaped by various combinations of natural and cultural forces would replace the contrasting picture of human beings as creatures who at least sometimes are the authors of their own actions.

It also seems a relatively safe bet to predict that most people would not ever *want* to replace the latter picture with the former. For there are compelling and hard-to-shake-off psychological reasons for believing that sometimes we are responsible for what we do. For instance, often when we make a choice (practical or theoretical, moral or nonmoral: for example, it can happen while constructing a philosophical argument or writing a short story) and reflect on what we are doing, it certainly *seems* as though the next step is up to us. ("Should I do this – or that? Say A – or B? I could go either way.") While we are choosing, it is very hard to believe that we are not free and that what we choose is not up to us.⁸⁹

By contrast, were we somehow able to convince ourselves (and again, I don't think it will be easy) that we lack free will, the psychological repercussions would be severe. Here too a different picture of ourselves and our possibilities would need to be adopted. For many people, a sort of cosmic lethargy or ennui would take over. ("What will be will be, so what's the use of thinking or trying otherwise? I know that as an agent I am trapped in a web that I didn't create and cannot escape from, so why waste the energy trying?")

Asserting that most people *want to believe* they are free is of course not the same as providing a convincing-to-all-sides argument that *proves* they really *are* free. For many people want to believe many things that turn out not to be true. But there is also no convincing-to-all-sides argument that proves free will is an illusion coming from the numerous ranks of compatibilists or determinists either, and since the psychological weight is on the side of freedom, the other side has a lot of work to do. Given this apparent theoretical stalemate on "the most contentious question in metaphysics, the

⁸⁸ For some hints in this direction, see Williams' scepticism about the very notion of moral responsibility in Williams (2003), pp. 56, 67; and his proposal to replace the concept of a responsible agent with that of a mature agent in Williams (1995b), pp. 28–32.

⁸⁹ This is Kant's point when he asserts that reason "must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences," Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 448; p. 96. Thought seems less than fully rational if it is causally determined. For some expected scepticism, see Williams (1985), pp. 66–67, 211 n. 16.

most contentious science,”⁹⁰ Kant’s own philosophical agnosticism seems to me to be a virtue: “reason would overstep all its bounds if it took it upon itself . . . to explain *how freedom is possible*. . . . [Freedom] holds only as a necessary presupposition of reason in a being that believes itself to be conscious of a will.”⁹¹

Next, a few remarks about practical reason, which for Kant is in effect but a different way of talking about freedom. For on his view, the human experience of moral obligation itself convinces us that we have free will. Once we come to the conclusion as a result of practical reasoning that, morally speaking, we *ought* to do X, we are also convinced that we also *can* (have it in our power to) do X, regardless of whether we feel so inclined or not. As he remarks in the *Religion*, once we experience a moral obligation to do something, “we are certainly and immediately conscious of a faculty enabling us to overcome, by firm resolve, every incentive to transgression, however great.”⁹²

Here too, a phenomenological description of how things *seem* is no proof that this is how they really *are*. But here as well, I do think Kant’s own analysis of this particular aspect of human experience rings truer to many more people than does Williams’, and that the non-Kantians therefore have a lot of work to do. When Williams asserts that obligations are merely expressions of desire and thus always presuppose them (albeit desires that are “essential” to the agent and “have” to be satisfied), there is likely to be a loud phenomenological rejoinder coming from many quarters: “In my experience I certainly have recognized the force of obligations that I had no desire to fulfill. And after reflecting on them I saw that I could in fact fulfill them.” And underneath the rejoinder is a sense that the power of practical reason is much stronger in human life than Williams is willing to acknowledge.

Williams is firmly convinced that the *I* of practical deliberation “must be more intimately the *I* of my desires than [Kant’s] account allows.”⁹³ I don’t think most people are inclined to follow him here. There are many, many areas in human life – moral as well as non-moral – where we assess

⁹⁰ Hume (1748/1975), p. 95. The opening epigraph of Kane (1996), also seems apt here: “There is a disputation [that will continue] till mankind are raised from the dead between the Necessitarians and the partisans of Free Will. – Jalalu’ddin Rumi, twelfth-century Persian poet,” p. 3.

⁹¹ Kant (1785/1996d), Ak. 4: 459; pp. 104–05.

⁹² Kant (1793/1996h), Ak. 6: 50 n.; p. 93 n.

⁹³ Williams (1985), p. 67.

and critique our own as well as others' desires based on (what we think are) reasons. (For example: "But dad, I don't *want* to practice piano," "Yes, but there are good reasons why you should." Or: "He needs to work on his anger." "Yes, you're right.") Granted, some of these alleged reasons turn out to be better than others. And here the most promising path for minimizing bias and prejudice would seem to lie in addressing one's reasons "to the public in the strict sense, that is, the world"⁹⁴ – so that the widest number of people possible can test and debate them. But to get back to my point: this mundane possibility of a critique of desire seems to be foreclosed by Williams' neo-Humeanism. Most people, I submit, are not willing to settle for a picture that says their cognitive selves are simply slaves to the *I* of their desires.

Morality, like other all-too-human practices, is prone to error and illusion, and part of a philosopher's job is to correct its mistakes. But to assert that we would be better off without it, once we see what this *it* encompasses, is to ask us to accept a very uninspiring picture of ourselves and our possibilities – a picture that our own experience also speaks against. Do we have a choice on the matter? Can we think about it? If so, I vote to keep it.⁹⁵

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⁹⁴ Kant (1784/1996c) Ak. 8: 38; p. 19.

⁹⁵ *Concluding not-entirely-philosophical postscript*: I did not know Bernard Williams very well, and last saw him in April 1994, at a conference held at the University of Chicago. The conference itself went very well – the results were later published in Louden and Schollmeier (1996). However, after it was over, I somehow managed to miss the last shuttle-bus back to the airport, and as a result became quite worried that I would also miss my flight home. My only option at this point was to take a cab, but unfortunately I did not have enough funds to cover more than a small fraction of the fare. Just as panic was setting in, Bernard Williams strolled by and said: "Why don't you come with me in the cab I've reserved? My treat." We were in the cab with each other for over an hour, during which time we talked about (among other things) African politics, California, Nietzsche, Kant, universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and elsewhere, and opera. I have very fond memories of the philosopher who made it possible for me to catch my plane.

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5

Shame, Guilt, and Pathological Guilt: A Discussion of Bernard Williams

MICHAEL STOCKER

*Shame and Necessity*¹ continues Bernard Williams' trenchant critique of *Morality, Our Peculiar Institution*.² One of its main themes is that our ethical theories overemphasize guilt and, concomitantly, underemphasize, even ignore, shame. They, thus, make serious theoretical and ethical errors: they misunderstand themselves, misunderstanding even their central notion, guilt; and they encourage us to misunderstand ourselves and our relations with others. Three quotes from chapter four, "Shame and Autonomy," which focuses on these errors, give a good indication of those claims:

[Guilt] can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparations in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which one has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and how one is related to others.³

Shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself.⁴

The conceptions of modern morality . . . insist at once on the primacy of guilt, its significance in turning us towards victims, and its rational restriction to the voluntary . . . if we want to understand why it might be important for us to distinguish the harms we do voluntarily from those we do involuntarily, we shall hope to succeed only if we ask what kinds of failing or inadequacy are the sources of the harms, and what those failings mean in the context of our own and other people's lives. This is the territory of shame; it is only by moving into it that we may gain some insight into one of the main preoccupations of the morality that centers itself on guilt.⁵

¹ Williams (1993).

² To modify the title of ch. 10 of Williams (1985).

³ Williams (1993), p. 94.

⁴ Williams (1993), p. 93.

⁵ Williams (1993), p. 94.

Even just these quotes give rise to any number of questions: Is Williams right that shame reveals values that are misunderstood, if they are even noticed, by our ethical theories? Is he right that because of their overfocus on guilt and underfocus on shame, these theories misunderstand their own central notion, guilt? Is he right that guilt, and those theories that so focus on guilt, cannot help understanding and rebuilding the self?

My concern in this work will be to show that what Williams charges our theories with are serious mistakes and inadequacies. It will ignore the question of whether he is right that our theories make these errors. It will also ignore other questions raised by those quotes, such as whether Williams intends to restrict guilt to wrongs or damages to a *person*, instead of also allowing, as I would, that damage to a work of art, say, can be sufficient; and whether he holds, as I would – and as he may be taken to suggest by “wronged *or* damaged” – that guilt goes beyond the realm of morality, to “merely” evaluative harms and damages.

In the [first section](#), I argue that inadequate attention to shame and an overemphasis on guilt are connected with mistaken, problematic, or pathological forms of guilt and that adequate guilt understood adequately is deeply involved with shame. The next sections explore some other ways shame is evaluatively important. The [final section](#) criticizes the ways Williams and others characterize and distinguish between shame and guilt.

1. GUILT WITHOUT SHAME: PATHOLOGIES AND MISTAKES

To show how guilt – adequate guilt, adequately understood – requires shame, let us focus on guilt over a particular act, schematized by “I feel guilt (or guilty) over doing act b,” and on shame over the same particular act, schematized by “I feel ashamed of myself for doing act b.” It will help to think of the shame here as well-contained shame of healthy, mature adults of adequate ego strength. (On this, see the discussion of one’s whole being in the [final section](#).)

By focusing on these cases, I am ignoring or postponing discussion of various important issues. Guilt need not be restricted to acts. I can feel guilt over wishes to act and over “mere” thoughts, such as unkind or unjust thoughts as in “I feel guilty that I thought that you were the thief.” So too, there is survivor’s guilt and guilt over states of being, for example, being so rich when others are so poor.

Further, shame need not be well contained. It can be of the whole self, seeing the whole self as through and through bad. (Again, see the discussion

of one's whole being in the [final section](#).) Nor need shame be connected with acts in the simple way just schematized or at all. I can feel shame over being uneducated or poor. So, too, I might be ashamed, not of what I have done, but of what my country has done.

Where shame is connected with acts, I can be ashamed of myself for being the sort of person who too often does such an act. And even where I am ashamed of myself over a particular act, for example, making a fool of myself, I may well not feel guilty about doing it – because I did nothing wrong in doing it.

Discussing all of these many cases of shame or guilt would involve untold complexities, in part because it would involve discussing more than just the relations between shame and guilt, but also, for example, the relations between acts and character. Fortunately, there are many cases that do fit my focus. Here is such a case: I slap my eight year-old child – because, as it then seems to me, he has once again been obnoxiously disrespectful to me and my wife, his parents. I think it is obvious that I can – perhaps even that I should – feel guilty about slapping him; and also that I can – again, perhaps even that I should – feel ashamed of myself for slapping him. It is in virtue of the very same thing – my slapping my child – that I feel both guilty and ashamed. Here, the shame and guilt are connected by sharing the same ground – my slapping my child. They may also be connected by being the ground for each other: It is wrong to do this shameful act and it is shameful to do this wrongful act.

If this is right, the difference between shame and guilt here seems not one of having different grounds, but what is being evaluated. In this case of shame, the agent is focused on and evaluated. In this case of guilt, it is the act. Perhaps, then, quite generally guilt is of acts and shame of agents.⁶

Williams does not go as far as this. He holds only that guilt is *primarily* of acts: “*What I have done* points in one direction towards what has happened to others [i.e., the province of guilt], in another direction to what I am. Guilt looks primarily in the first direction.”⁷ My discussion will also be a discussion of his more moderate claim.

To examine the claim that guilt is of acts and shame of agents – and that this enters into the characterization and differentiation of shame and guilt – let us ask what can be shown by a person's feeling guilt, but no shame.

⁶ This can be seen as an instance of the common, contemporary ethical view that there are no important conceptual connections between agent evaluations and act evaluations. In what follows, this view is rejected, as it is in Stocker (1973) and in Hegeman and Stocker (1996).

⁷ Williams, (1993), p. 92.

At times, little if anything problematic is shown. Borrowing from legal theory, we could here consider some *malum prohibita* cases, where an act is wrong because it is prohibited, especially many cases of administrative or technical wrongs, and many cases of strict liability. In many of these cases, feeling no shame may be consistent with feeling all a person should feel: the person need only acknowledge guilt, not feel guilty. In fact, to feel shame in these cases could, itself, indicate problems.

But sometimes guilt without shame can show that the person does not understand what guilt is, or that the person really does not feel guilty, or that the felt guilt is only partial or inadequate. For example, if a person pleads guilty in court to a felony of, say, assault with deadly force, but expresses no contrition, no remorse, no shame over committing the assault, that can be taken as showing that she does not really feel guilt or that she feels only partial and inadequate guilt. In J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, this is the substance of the criticism Swarts levels at his colleague, David, for saying repeatedly that he pleads guilty to the charge of sexual and academic impropriety with one of his students: "Don't play games with us David. There is a difference between pleading guilty to a charge and admitting you were wrong . . ." ⁸

So, guilt – correctly understood and adequately felt – can require shame. Another way to see this is by examining how guilt without shame can show serious moral, moral psychological, and psychological defects and problems.

One sort of person I am concerned with here is a person who, perhaps dissociating, knows that he acts but does not think of himself as a being who acts.⁹ He might "simply" not attend to this. He might be the sort of person who says "mistakes happen" or "I'm sorry it happened" and thinks that this says all that needs to be said. There is inadequate acknowledgment of agency here.

Another sort of person is one who, again perhaps dissociating, thinks of herself as a being who acts, but fails to see that the evaluative nature of what she does bears on evaluations of herself. Again, we may have someone who simply fails to make the connections or we may have someone who denies the connections. A person of this last sort might see that what she does is bad and merits guilt, but does not think, and may even deny, that this "touches" herself. Such a person might sincerely say, "I do bad things, but I am in no way bad. Despite the badness of my acts, I am a perfectly good person." Here, any number of problematic evaluative views or problematic views about the self may be in play to account for this extraordinary claim.

⁸ Coetzee, (2000), p. 54.

⁹ For psychoanalytically-informed discussion of dissociation, see Bromberg (1998).

Explanations of how one can feel guilt without feeling shame involve different mixes of dissociation; of failures of integration of various parts and aspects of one's life; of failures to recognize and acknowledge agency; of failures to draw even simple moral conclusions; of strange, perhaps perverse, misunderstandings of what makes for a good or bad person; of a lack of concern with one's person or character.

Shame without guilt also deserves attention. But here I will only register a claim and ask a question. The claim is that it, too, can show mistakes and pathologies. In many cases of shame without guilt – and also of being ashamed of oneself without being ashamed of what one does – the person focuses excessively on himself and inadequately on (to use Williams' characterization of duty) what is done and on those “who have been wronged or damaged” and the “demand [for] reparations in the name, simply, of what has happened to them.”¹⁰

The question is that if shame without guilt is problematic, what conditions would have to be met – and has any culture met them, could any culture meet them – for a culture to be so exclusively a shame culture that guilt plays no, or only the smallest, role in it? This raises an issue for claims, made by Williams and others, that classical Greeks did not think of themselves in terms of, as subject to, guilt and that they did not have our, or even a, conception of guilt.¹¹

To return now to guilt without shame: The discussion of the pathologies and mistakes that can account for guilt without shame started by examining the suggestion that guilt is of acts and shame is of people. It was then argued that to feel guilt at certain acts, for example, slapping one's eight-year-old child, without also feeling shame at oneself for doing that, can reveal pathologies or mistakes. However, that argument can be run the other way, showing a problem with the initial claim that guilt is of acts and shame of people.

The problem has to do with how guilt was pictured and what was not said about it. It was pictured as being only about the act and not also about the person. That was needed to show the pathologies or mistakes. What was not said is that guilt need not involve pathologies or mistakes: that in many cases of guilt, there can and should be shame.

That guilt can and often should involve shame is important for us in many ways. It raises the methodological question whether a proper understanding of such notions as guilt should make reference to guilt as

¹⁰ Understood psychoanalytically, guilt without shame and shame without guilt may be reaction formations, defenses against focusing on and evaluating what is given short shrift. For this and other help, thanks are owed to the psychoanalyst Ernest Wallwork.

¹¹ Williams (1993), p. 95–98.

experienced by mature, healthy people of sound moral views, or alternatively whether it can include only what is common to all cases of guilt, including guilt without shame whether with or without pathologies and mistakes. We might think of this as a dispute between, on one side, those Aristotelians and others who look to what is true of good instances and deviations from this as the basis for characterizing all instances, and, on another side, those given to a certain sort of austere conceptual analysis, who look to what is common to all instances for this characterization.

Another issue is what we are now to make of the claim that guilt is of acts, not people, and the subsequent claim that this can be used to distinguish between guilt and shame. For if what I have just said is right, in many cases guilt is of both acts and agents. And of course, in many cases, shame is of both agents and acts. If there is a difference between guilt and shame or between what guilt and shame are of, the act/agent distinction fails to give it. (Other attempted characterizations and differentiations are considered and rejected in the [final section](#) of this work.)

2. SELF-REGARDING AND INDECOROUS SHAME

We have already made a start on showing how widely shame ranges by showing some of its roles in guilt. To get a better understanding of its range, and how in other ways it can aid understanding and rebuilding the self – and how any adequate ethics must go beyond guilt, even guilt with shame – we must add the several sorts of shame without guilt discussed in the next sections: self-regarding and indecorous shame, identificatory shame, and shame without responsibility.

Acts we consider wrong and warranting guilt are typically not self-regarding. We need to tell a special story to make sense of such claims as “I wronged myself” or “Because of the way I harmed myself, I acted in a morally wrong way,” and correlatively, in regard to these acts, “I feel guilty for doing that.” Shame, however, is not so restricted. I can feel shame over both how I harmed you and how I harmed myself. So for example, I can feel guilty about short-changing you in your education. But again absent a special story, I cannot be guilty of short changing myself in my education. But, I can feel ashamed of doing that.

Decorum, decency, honor, beauty, grace, and the like give us another range of cases where there can be shame without guilt, without any problems, mistakes, or pathology. I can feel shame over doing what is ugly or graceless or otherwise lacking in decorum. I can feel shame over making a spectacle or a fool of myself. But unless in doing that I also do something

wrong, there is no need and indeed no room to feel guilty. These last points, especially when taken together, invite an examination – with, I think, a favorable outcome – of the classical Greeks’ conjoining the beautiful to the good and offering *kalokagathia* as the ideal.¹²

3. IDENTIFICATORY SHAME

These last comments have concerned shame about the agent, as in “I am ashamed of myself for slapping my child.” Many other cases of shame *involve* the agent, but seem not to be *about* the agent, as in “I am ashamed of my child’s behavior” and “I am ashamed of what my country is doing.” As can be said, instead of being about the agent, they are about other parts of the agent’s evaluative worlds or identities. Examining these cases of shame help show that there are such worlds and identities and what their contours are.

To be sure, “I am ashamed of my child’s behavior” can be about myself, saying, perhaps, that I am ashamed of how I raised my child. But it can also be used to say that I am ashamed of what I *identify* with: I am ashamed of my child, not on account of what I have or have not done, but on account of his behavior. Other examples of identificatory shame are easy to come by: for example, the shame I feel over something my grandparents did; the shame I feel over what the Americans and Australians have done to the original inhabitants of these lands; the shame I feel over the boorish behavior on the streets of Paris by someone I know only as a fellow American.

We can understand my shame in these cases even if the shame is in no way of me. To be sure, it is important, indeed vital, that I somehow identify with what I am here ashamed of. But there is no difficulty in this: They are my great grandparents; I am an American citizen; I lived in Australia and considered it my home for close to two decades. Those relations help make up my world. A world lacking such identifications would, indeed, be unfriendly.¹³

The need for identifications for such shame helps explain why I am not – and perhaps why I cannot be – ashamed of, say, what your great grandparents did, or what the Spanish did to the original inhabitants of the lands they colonized, or the boorish behavior in New York of a Frenchman I do not know. To be sure, were I to think of them and myself as, say,

¹² My thanks are owed to Harold Skulsky for help with the material in this paragraph.

¹³ As Aristotle, discussing a somewhat similar issue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.ii, said, it would be an unfriendly doctrine to deny that one’s descendants and friends can affect one’s own happiness, even after one’s death. See, too, his comments on external goods in *NE*, I.8.

coreligionists or white people, I could feel ashamed of them. But that just makes my point. Identification is needed for such shame.

We can take these cases to show that my identity is more diffuse and is located in other places and times than is my self. As it might be put, I have the identity – the locus of possible shame and guilt – that is my self. But I also have a political identity, a cultural identity, a social identity, and many other identities as well. They locate what is valuable, good or bad, for me: what can make my life whole or challenged, flourishing or troubled, something I can feel proud or ashamed of.

(If, as I think, shame and pride are similar enough on this score, these considerations also show that it is in part right and in part wrong to hold that being proud of something requires one to think that one has done that something and that it is good. We can take this as showing that the person must think of it as, somehow, his, at least to the extent of identifying with it. But we can also take it as showing that a person can think of something as his, even if he does not think he has done anything to create or sustain it.)

As will be discussed in the *final section*, Williams holds that shame is felt as diminishing or lessening one's whole being. I do not know his views on identificatory shame. But as I see matters, in at least some cases, I can feel identificatory shame without feeling that my being is at all diminished or lessened. My self/world boundary protects me from that. In these cases, identificatory shame affects only my world, not my whole being. It makes my world somewhat darker, somewhat unfriendlier, somewhat harder to bear. But it does not make me worse off.

I do not think that all cases of identificatory shame are like this. In some cases, especially of strong identification – like a child's identification with her parents – even if we think of this in terms of an increase in darkness of the child's world, we can also think that this is strong enough to lessen or diminish the child's very being.

I want now just to list some questions that arise here: First, is there identificatory guilt, perhaps requiring identificatory culpability and in that sense identificatory responsibility? I do not think I can feel guilty on account of my great grandparents' wrongdoings. I can, of course, feel guilty for retaining my share of their ill-gotten wealth. But this is guilt for an act or omission of mine.

But perhaps identificatory guilt or some other guilt without culpability is possible. After all, *agent regret* involves a sort of felt responsibility without culpability.¹⁴ To be sure, agent regret seems to require some sort or amount

¹⁴ See, e.g., Williams (1981). See also Williams (1995) reprinted from Statman, (1993).

of agency that connects the person who feels it with what is regretted. This is seen in cases of justified dirty hands and the case of the truck driver who is in no way at fault for running over the child. The question now is whether there are forms of identification that can make the connection needed for identificatory guilt.

I have been told that many Germans born after 1945 felt not only shame but also guilt on account of what the Nazis did.¹⁵ Perhaps this is identificatory guilt, taking on the guilt of others or feeling guilty on account of the doings of others. But perhaps it is, rather, a way or result of accepting responsibility for these horrors – not responsibility in the sense of having done those things nor in anything deserving to be called identificatory culpability, but as an acknowledgment of the fact, or rationalization of the feeling, that making reparations is their responsibility.

My second question is whether we can say anything useful about which cases of identification and identificatory shame are reasonable and which unreasonable. What are the proper limits of our world(s), when does the absence of identification make for, or show, a world that is too unfriendly, too solitary? When have we taken on and identified with what really isn't ours to be ashamed of?

Third, can we say anything useful about what determines whether identificatory shame affects one's being or world too much ("You should not be so despondent about yourself on account of what your great grandparents did") or too little ("How can you not care about what your great grandparents did to mine?"). Fourth, can we say anything useful about what identificatory shame can justify by way of other feelings or action? ("If you are ashamed of what your great grandparents did, you might consider helping their victims' descendants.")

Williams, unfortunately, is silent on these issues. He tells us that Ajax felt that he must be true to his identity and kill himself out of his shame at killing the sheep.¹⁶ Does Williams think that being true to one's identity can make the justification – especially the ethical justification – of such action irrelevant or less weighty? That being true to one's identity provides all the justification there need be? The only time I can think of where he comes close to holding something like this is with Gauguin in his discussion of moral luck.

We might well agree that Gauguin would have suffered – that he would have experienced the world as a very hard place, a place to try his soul – if he

¹⁵ My thanks are owed to Adrian Piper here.

¹⁶ Williams (1993), p. 75 ff.

had been false to his identity as a painter and remained at home. But we can also hold that nonetheless, in many, even though not all, important ways, he should have stayed with his family – and perhaps should have painted there, rather than abandoning them, going off to Tahiti to paint. Sometimes, a correct response upon hearing what it would take to be true to someone's identity is "That's too bad!" or "You must be joking!" This can be in the first person, present: I can be appalled by what has become so central to me.

The considerations and arguments here are difficult and contentious. But an adequate ethics must ask them.

4. SHAME WITHOUT RESPONSIBILITY

I now turn to a different case of shame without responsibility: the case of the deformed girl in Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. She suffered from intense and pervasive shame, over a congenital facial deformity. She was born without a nose and she was fully, indeed dreadfully, ashamed of her appearance, of her incomplete face. But she was not guilty and did not feel guilty. However, she wonders whether she might have done something wrong, albeit in a past life – something to be guilty of – that earned her that terrible punishment.

What I am concerned with here is the naturalness and force of her wondering about a wrongful act that, as she thinks, might go some way toward justifying her shame, that is, showing that her shame is *accurate*, that she has something to be ashamed of.¹⁷ It might be said, offering a psychological account of why she is attracted to this view, that people find it easier to accept guilt than helplessness. It might be held, making a conceptual claim, that culpability is required for justified, accurate shame: that unless she has done something wrong, she has nothing to be ashamed about. Claims to the effect that where there is no culpability, no guilt, there is nothing to be ashamed of are commonplace and are part and parcel of various therapeutic and liberation movements.

But there is the contrary conceptual view that justified, accurate shame does not require culpability and wrongdoing and that she does have

¹⁷ The issue here is whether the shame is accurate, not whether it is good to feel it. On this distinction, see D'Arms and Jacobson, (2000). My thanks are owed to D'Arms and Jacobson for discussion on this distinction and other aspects of shame.

something to be ashamed of, her face.¹⁸ This view has it that her shame is an accurate response to her face being horribly deformed, which quite understandably, perhaps even reasonably, dashes her ideals and aspirations.

Yet another case questioning the accuracy, and in this sense the justifiability of shame without culpability comes up in one of Williams' central cases: the case of Ajax who, in his madness, slew the sheep having misidentified them as Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus, on whom he intended to take revenge for slighting him. His madness precluded culpability for what he did. But certainly he felt ashamed, not only of what he did, but of himself for doing it. He certainly did extraordinary things, things that were terrible and, in a horrible way, a suitable target of derision. Madness does not preclude those evaluations. They may well be enough for us to agree with Ajax that what he did was, in fact, shaming and that he made no mistake in being ashamed of himself for doing them.

I am torn between these two accounts: that because the girl and Ajax did nothing wrong, they have nothing to be ashamed of and their shame is not justified; and despite not doing anything wrong, they do have something to be ashamed of and their shame is justified.¹⁹ I am unsure which account to accept and which Williams accepts.

5. SHAME'S UNDERSTANDING OF GUILT AND GUILT'S UNDERSTANDING OF SHAME

In ways discussed above, shame is like moral luck in showing that the range of the ethical and evaluative goes well beyond guilt. As I understand him, Williams holds that various ethical theories are doubly mistaken: first in denying that moral luck and many cases of shame reveal ethical values; and second in their misunderstandings of their own favored notions. He does not suggest that an adequate account of shame can provide all the materials needed to develop an adequate account of guilt. Nor does he suggest that an adequate ethics of shame would eliminate all need for an ethics concerned

¹⁸ This view was put to me by Charles Chastain, a philosopher, and Melvin Lansky, a psychoanalyst. For a psychoanalytically oriented discussion, see Lansky (1996). My thanks are owed Chastain and Lansky for other help with this work.

¹⁹ His madness may have exculpated Ajax from doing any wrong in, having grounds to feel guilty about, *killing the animal*. But there were other wrongs and grounds for guilt: his murderous intentions and his choosing suicide at the cost of allowing his family to suffer harm. If his shame was in order not to feel guilty about these, it may be the sort of reaction formation discussed in note 10. My thanks are owed to Anthony Long for discussion here.

with guilt. But he does hold that various notions central to guilt, such as voluntariness, can be understood only in terms of shame. As he says, “Shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself.”²⁰

I agree that to understand guilt’s concerns with voluntariness, we must understand matters in the territory of shame. It is unclear to me that we can understand shame without going into the territory of guilt. At the least, wrongness, responsibility, voluntariness, and autonomy are, in varying ways, important for warranted, accurate shame.

6. WILLIAMS ON DISTINGUISHING SHAME AND GUILT

Williams joins many philosophers in holding that it is easy enough to distinguish between shame and guilt. Somewhat in tension with this, the psychoanalytic theorist Helen Block Lewis says in her indispensable *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*²¹ that she and many other therapists and theorists find it very difficult, often impossible, to distinguish between shame and guilt both in practice and in theory – among other reasons, because there is a flow and oscillation between them, they are frequently present at the same time, and whether a patient is experiencing shame or alternatively guilt at a given time can be determined only in light of such factors as the overall style and character of the patient, not by the episode itself or the patient’s experience of that episode.²²

I agree with these philosophers and with Lewis and other theorists that there are important differences between shame and guilt – differences that bear on conceptual issues, moral psychological issues, and also straight-out evaluative issues, both moral and legal. But, as I will argue in this section, Williams’ and other philosophers’ attempted philosophical distinctions between guilt and shame fail.

My arguments here do not rely on the earlier arguments about pathological and nonpathological guilt and shame. Nor am I concerned to investigate the relations between these two sets of arguments. Even apart from these issues, examining these distinctions and their failures should further our understanding of shame and guilt and dispel some all too common mistakes about them.

²⁰ Williams (1993), p. 93.

²¹ Lewis (1971).

²² For recent discussions of these difficulties as seen by psychologists, see Tangney and Dearing (2002), coauthored by the psychologists June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, especially ch. 2, “What Is The Difference Between Shame And Guilt?”

Williams writes,

differences in the experience of shame and of guilt can be seen as part of a wider set of contrasts between them. What arouses guilt in an agent is an act or omission of a sort that typically elicits from other people anger, resentment, or indignation. What the agent may offer in order to turn this away is reparation; he may also fear punishment or may inflict it on himself. What arouses shame, on the other hand, is something that typically elicits from others contempt or derision or avoidance. This may equally be an act or omission, but it need not be: it may be some failing or defect. It will lower the agent's self-respect and diminish him in his own eyes. His reaction . . . is a wish to hide or disappear, and this is one thing that links shame as, minimally, embarrassment with shame as social or personal reduction. More positively, shame may be expressed in attempts to reconstruct or improve oneself.²³

Williams joins many other theorists in offering these as characterizing and differentiating features.²⁴ But I think that these features fail to differentiate shame and guilt. In at least one case, Williams, himself, gives us materials to think this. As just seen, he uses anger felt by others to characterize guilt and distinguish it from shame. But several pages earlier, he says – correctly, in my view “An agent will be motivated by prospective shame in the face of people who would be angered by conduct that, in turn, they would avoid for those same reasons.”²⁵

One way to take this is as suggesting that what arouses guilt can also arouse shame, perhaps that doing what is wrong warrants both guilt and shame. I think this is right. I also think that this is how it is for many of the features Williams offers here: each of them can be found in at least some *cases* of shame and also at least some cases of guilt. The other features fare even worse. They characterize neither shame nor guilt. This leaves open the possibility that the first features can be used to characterize and differentiate between the *concepts* of shame and of guilt – perhaps when one of these features of, say, guilt is a feature of a case of guilt, it is so necessarily or it helps make it a case of guilt, but when it characterizes shame, it does so accidentally or it does not help make it a case of shame.

I think that what has been shown about the connections between guilt, especially nonpathological guilt, and shame show that this claim about concepts is almost certainly mistaken. The present section, however, is concerned

²³ Williams (1993), pp. 89–90.

²⁴ He mentions Morris (1976) on p. 198, n. 35; Wollheim (1984), ch. 7 on p. 198, n. 35; Rawls (1971), §§ 67, 70–75 on p. 198, n. 38; and Gibbard (1990), ch. 7 on p. 198, n. 38.

²⁵ Williams (1993), p. 83.

to show how the features Williams and others offer fail to differentiate or characterize cases of guilt and shame.

Reparations: If I am ashamed of how I have treated a student, I may well think or be told that I should make amends, to make things right. The reparations the Germans think they owed can certainly be connected with their shame, not just their guilt.

Punishment and Indignation: It is completely ordinary to expect punishment from others, and to mete it out to yourself, for doing what they or you think is shameful, for example, revealing family secrets. So, too, other family members may well feel indignation at what you have done.

Derision: Wrongdoing, which gives rise to guilt in me, can often be met by the jeers and derision of others.

Self-improvement or reconstruction: These seem quite naturally associated with guilt, too. Indeed, one way to acknowledge one's guilt is to commit oneself to self-improvement.

Wanting to disappear: It seems common enough that those who feel guilty want to hide and avoid being seen. Indeed, if a person does not want to hide, to be unnoticed and unremarked on, it is difficult to sustain the claim that the person feels guilty – unless we also hold that the person is trying to brazen it out. But such brazenness seems possible in cases of shame, too.

Audiences and Shame: There is, I think, a common, somewhat inchoate view that shame is more outward and guilt more inward. Shame's outwardness has to do with shame being over failure to live up to community values, or with shame being generated or warranted by some part of the community witnessing failures, or both. Guilt's inwardness has to do with guilt's values and failures being the agent's own, in origin or acceptance, or with guilt being generated or warranted by the agent's own recognition of failure, or both. Some of what I say about Williams' view joins him in rejecting this view.

At one point, Williams claims that audiences are important for shame:

The basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. It is straightforwardly connected with nakedness, particularly in sexual connections. The word *aidoia*, a derivative of *aidos*, "shame," is a standard Greek word for genitals and similar terms are found in other languages.²⁶

²⁶ Williams (1993), p. 78.

I say “at one point,” for despite the clarity of what we just read, it is difficult to determine Williams’ final view on shame and audiences. His sentence about the “basic experience connected with shame” ends with a footnote referring us to “a rather more complex account of the basic experiences of shame.”²⁷ In this account, he says that his earlier claim about shame and being seen, especially when naked, was too simple and misleading; that the more accurate view is that nakedness and being seen naked are signs of being at a disadvantage and suffering a loss of power; and that recognition of disadvantage and suffering is what is central to shame.²⁸

He also writes, “The internalised other [viz., the audience needed for shame] is indeed abstracted and generalised and idealized, but he is potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me.”²⁹ As I see matters, this eliminates even the vestiges of the claim that shame, unlike guilt, involves an audience. At most, it seems to invoke an “observing other” as that is found in self-examination, reflection, conscience, all of which seem as relevant for guilt as for shame.

Of course, shame often does involve other people, often in an audience-like way. Repute, face, and one’s standing with others often figure importantly in shame. But our account of shame should not be put simply that (one believes that) one has been seen failing to achieve one’s value(s). Often enough, shame is neither experienced nor warranted even though (one believes that) one has been seen failing to achieve one’s value(s).

That account also fails to note that in many cases, where (one believes that) one has been seen to fail and this does engender or warrant shame, what we value (or also value) includes another person(s): for example, we value (or also value) meriting and enjoying others’ esteem. Many of the values important for shame do involve relations with others: for example, how one is to be, how one is to act, and how one is thought of, by, with, or in the presence of, others. Some of these relations can involve other values that do not, themselves, directly involve other people: for example, to merit others’ esteem for being a good member of a building team, one may have to do well at, say, driving nails. When shame is warranted by failing to achieve these values that involve other people, often enough it is warranted not (or not only) because we do something shameful in the

²⁷ Williams (1993), p. 194.

²⁸ Williams (1993), p. 220. In Taylor (1985), she, too, says that shame needs an audience and then almost immediately denies that shame needs an audience, p. 38.

²⁹ Williams (1993), p. 84.

presence of others, but because (or also because) we fail to achieve these values, which involve others.

Furthermore, shame can be warranted by the failure to achieve values that do not involve other people at all. They can be the agent's own, even idiosyncratic, values and the failure need not be (believed by the agent to be) witnessed by anyone else, not even by an "abstracted and generalised and idealized – potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than" himself.

My claim here is that shame does not require this observing other; nor, I would add, does guilt. But, as suggested earlier, both shame and guilt can involve this observing other.

Indeed, some cases of guilt can involve an audience. I can harm and wrong others by, and feel guilt about, the way I present myself to others, where the wrong or harm involves not just doing something, but by doing it in public, in front of others. And a stock scene of guilt and feeling guilty is being stared at or pointed at – stared or pointed at in accusing ways, as one may guiltily think.³⁰ (This may reenact some of how we develop our conception of guilt.)

Moving away from others functioning as an audience, cases of wrongdoing or harming another are among the clearest cases of warranted guilt. This helps explain why what warrants shame may well not warrant guilt – because shame, but not guilt, can be warranted where there is no wrong and any damage is self-regarding. My loss of others' esteem is a loss for me. Such a loss can, of course, involve harm to others: for example, to my family by my having to leave the team. And what leads to the loss of esteem – hitting the wood, not the nails – can involve harm to other team members, slowing them down, diminishing their pay, and damage to what we were building. These failures can warrant shame, or guilt, or both.

Nakedness: I am unsure what to make of Williams' use of nakedness. There are so many ways that the body and nakedness are taken up by different peoples, even by people like us, that the usefulness of this characterization of shame must be questioned.

If I understand what Williams is suggesting by his talk of being caught naked, especially in sexual contexts, and his claim about a "recognition of disadvantage and suffering," he seems to be thinking of serious, major cases of shame. But there are many cases of minor shame, where both the occasion and the feeling are minor.

³⁰ My thanks are owed to Joseph Ullian for discussion here.

I can be ashamed in a minor way of the somewhat naughty behavior of my dog, or of wearing a stained shirt to a department meeting, or of having spoken somewhat too harshly to a colleague at that meeting. I am unable to understand these and other minor cases of shame in terms of what I think Williams had in mind when he talked of what it is like to be caught naked, especially in sexual contexts, or to involve a recognition of “disadvantage and suffering.” Indeed, were I to understand those cases of shame in either of these ways, I would have to reclassify them as cases of major shame. (Discrepancy between the extent of the shame and what gives rise to it is often a matter of concern.)

One’s whole being: These last considerations about major and minor shame also tell against a claim made by Williams and many other theorists: “in the experience of shame, one’s whole being seems diminished or lessened.”³¹ Making what seems a similar point in an especially strong, even florid, way, the psychologists Merle A. Fossum and Marilyn J. Mason write, “Shame is an inner sense of being *completely* diminished or insufficient as a person.”³²

There are three parts, easily run together, to these claims. The first is that it is one’s *being*, one’s *self*, that is involved in shame. The second is that it is the *whole* self that is involved in shame. The third is what is felt about the whole self: that *all* of it is bad, that it is *through and through* bad.³³ I will take these in turn.

Nothing but the self: Williams writes that “in the experience of shame, one’s whole being seems diminished or lessened.” I can be ashamed of myself. But, as discussed above, I can also be ashamed of what I identify with.

Wholeness: The claim that if I am ashamed, I am ashamed of my whole self can, perhaps, be understood as pointing out that just as in “I am angry at John,” so too in “I am ashamed of my whole self,” it makes little sense to ask “At which *parts*?”

That claim can also be understood as saying that the self involved in shame is an undifferentiated whole, all of it taken at once. Many psychoanalytic theorists – and relying on them, many other theorists – hold that this is how shame is experienced by infants.³⁴ In many cases, this theoretical view is connected with seeing infantile shame as a failure of the ego ideal taken as a whole, rather than, say, the failure of a particular ego ideal. It is

³¹ Williams (1993), p. 89.

³² Fossum and Mason (1986), 5, my emphasis.

³³ The last two issues are discussed more fully in Hegeman and Stocker (1996), 222 ff.

³⁴ See, e.g., Gerhart Piers’ contribution to Piers and Singer (1953), which has influenced many philosophers.

also connected with a contrasting view of infantile guilt, which is seen as developmentally a later, less primitive, and more particularized response to failures of particular, nonglobal superego requirements.

No matter what we think of these theoretical views about infantile shame, I think it beyond doubt that adults' shame is often enough not like this. Adults' shame can be of particular failures, which can be (conceptualized as) ego ideal failures, superego failures, or both: I can be ashamed of, and feel guilty about, failing to fulfill a particular requirement. I can be ashamed of and feel guilty about not living up to my ideal of being obedient to that requirement. For these and other reasons, the influential psychoanalytic theorist Roy Schafer holds that adults' shame and guilt typically involve "composites" of both failures.³⁵

But no matter how we conceptualize adult shame – in particular, as an ego-ideal failure, a superego failure, or both – it need not be of the whole self. If I am ashamed of myself for something I have done, for example, speaking mean spiritedly to a colleague, I can be ashamed just of that. I need not be ashamed of *all* of myself, of every *aspect* of myself, or of myself as an *undifferentiated whole*. I need not be ashamed of everything or anything else about me. While ashamed of myself because of my mean spirited remark, I can also be proud, for example, of how I treat my friends; I can be overall, on the whole, all things considered, proud of myself. (This in no way is meant to deny that even such well-contained, limited shame can trigger, develop or degenerate into one of these other forms of shame.)

The self as through and through bad: Shame as experienced by adults can involve feeling oneself through and through, perhaps utterly, inadequate; as calling into question one's whole being. The cases of shame that come most readily to mind here are cases, not just of shame, but of mortification. Many of these involve a narcissistic injury or even a narcissistic melt down. Many involve severe, aggressive, harshly punitive attacks on the self. Portrayals of these sorts of shame are found in psychoanalytic accounts of seriously neurotic and pathological shame, and, as noted, of infantile, primitive shame.

There are these sorts of shame. But, especially if an adult experiences such shame over something minor, that is diagnostic of a problem: for example, of a borderline personality, of hysteria, of a disturbing lack of ego strength, or some other less-than-healthy state. Such shame, especially over something minor, shows that the person experiencing the shame is in trouble, in need of rest, help, or other succor.

³⁵ Schafer (1967), p. 138.

Williams recognizes that shame need not be so major. Earlier, we read him as saying, “More positively, shame may be expressed in attempts to reconstruct or improve oneself.” It can hardly be this way while it is also felt as a serious narcissistic wound, or as lessening or diminishing the whole self, or as calling the whole self into question.

It might be of interest to explore why in their general discussion of shame many theorists focus on cases of shame at the self seen as an undifferentiated whole, on primitive, infantile shame, on florid, pathological, major shame, or the shame of troubled people. But whatever their reasons for this, we must recognize that in mature adults of adequate ego strength, shame can be well-contained and limited.

These arguments against the commonly offered, philosophical distinctions between shame and guilt – especially when coupled with the difficulties Lewis talks about of determining whether it is shame or guilt that a patient is experiencing – might suggest that there are no differences between shame and guilt. But I think they show only that those particular, attempted distinctions fail. Considerations offered in the earlier sections – about pathological, nonpathological, correct, and mistaken guilt and shame, about self-regarding and indecorous shame, identificatory shame, shame without responsibility, and shame’s and guilt’s understandings of each other and of themselves – help show that there are important differences between shame and guilt. Whatever we say about how Williams distinguishes them, we must thank him for emphasizing the many ways – too often ignored – that shame is evaluatively important.³⁶

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6

Williams on Greek Literature and Philosophy

A. A. LONG

Having studied Greek and Latin at school and in the Oxford Mods and Greats curriculum, Bernard Williams received the philological and historical training that would have equipped him, if he had wished, to make a career as a professor of classics. He chose instead to make his mark as an exceptionally creative philosopher engaging with largely modern issues, but his classical education, his interests in Greek literature and philosophy, and his commitment to the history of philosophy, shine throughout his illustrious career, especially during its later years.¹ In 1989, as Sather Professor of Classical Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, he delivered a series of six lectures on Greek literature, ethics, and moral psychology under the general title *Shame and Necessity*. Appointment to the Sather professorship is regarded in the community of classical scholars as the equivalent of a Nobel Prize. Williams' lectures, which attracted a large and appreciative audience, were published in 1993 in the book also entitled *Shame and Necessity*.²

Because this volume is his most extended foray into the field of classics, I shall concentrate on it in this study; but by way of introduction, I begin with brief remarks about Williams' reflections on Greek philosophy and the Greeks in some of his other publications. Much of what he says in these works anticipates ideas he develops in *Shame and Necessity*. This book in its turn presupposes or draws upon numerous thoughts that Williams explores in other books, especially *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.³ While the arguments and positions he advances in *Shame and Necessity* are self-standing, the book's force and significance can be most fully appreciated

¹ Shortly before his death, Williams collected twenty of his essays on the history of philosophy for publication in Williams (2006). I am grateful to Myles Burnyeat for sending me his 'Introduction' to this volume, before its publication. It gives an excellent appreciation of the increasing importance that historical (especially ancient Greek) themes assumed in Williams' thinking over the course of his life.

² Williams (1993).

³ Williams (1985).

when it is set in the context of the philosophical and historical interests that chiefly occupied him during the last three decades of his life.

1. WILLIAMS' WRITINGS BEFORE *SHAME AND NECESSITY*

In 1981, Williams published an extensive account of Greek philosophy for *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal*.⁴ He finds the Greek philosophers (by whom he means primarily Plato and Aristotle) not only starting but also distinguishing “what would still be recognized as many of the most basic questions” in almost all the major fields of subsequent philosophy.⁵ As radical exceptions to this generalization he identifies perhaps “just two important kinds of speculation”: idealism “according to which the entire world consists of the contents of mind,” and historicist explanations of mental categories, as in Marxism or historical consciousness.⁶

Williams focuses this account of Greek philosophy on metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Starting, in the case of the latter, with Socrates’ attempts in Plato’s *Republic* to refute Thrasymachus’ “entirely egoistic conception of practical rationality,” Williams observes that the Thrasymachean position derived some of its historical grounding and appeal from the “aristocratic or feudal morality” evidenced in the competitive success highly valued by Homeric heroes. For such a morality, he observes, “shame is a predominant notion, and a leading motive the fear of disgrace, ridicule, and the loss of prestige.”⁷ However, we should not suppose that shame is only occasioned by failures in competitive and self-assertive exploits; for it may also be prompted by “a failure to act in some expected self-sacrificing or co-operative manner”:

The confusion of these two things [i.e. the value set on competitive success and the occasion for shame] is encouraged by measuring Greek attitudes by the standard of a Christian . . . outlook. That outlook associates morality simultaneously with benevolence, self-denial, and inner directedness or guilt (shame before God or oneself). It sees the development of moral thought to this point as progress, and it tends to run together a number of different ideas which have been discarded – or at least rendered less reputable – by that progress.⁸

⁴ Williams (1981a).

⁵ Williams (1981a), p. 202.

⁶ Williams (1981a), pp. 204–205.

⁷ Williams (1981a), p. 243.

⁸ Williams (1981a), p. 244.

This dense passage, when read retrospectively, can be seen as setting much of the agenda for *Shame and Necessity*, especially that later book's close attention to Homer, the recognition that shame can motivate cooperative as well as competitive action, the pejorative assessment of a Christian moral outlook, and criticism of the progressivist moral attitude for being confused and irrelevant to much human experience. But Williams devotes most of his treatment of Greek ethics in *The Legacy of Greece* to a largely positive appraisal of the view of morality defended by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

He seems to approve Plato for rejecting "an instrumental or contractual view of morality" and for trying to show "that it was rational for each person to want to be just, whatever his circumstances."⁹ Taking this project to be neither "a moralizing prejudice on Plato's part," still less a Kantian "autonomous demand which cannot be rationalized or explained by anything else," Williams takes Plato's position to "be grounded in an account of what sort of person it was rational to be," or "to show that each man has good reason to act morally, and that the good reason has to appeal to him in terms of something about himself."¹⁰ Here we already get a foreshadowing of Williams' insistence in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* on the necessity for a satisfactory ethical imperative to address internal reasons, first person deliberations and interests, and facts to do with an agent's character, as distinct from presenting themselves as external impositions and purely objective obligations.

Williams in *The Legacy of Greece* finds certain aspects of Greek ethics problematic: for instance, the Socratic ideal that a clear-headed person always has "stronger reasons to do acts of justice . . . rather than acts of mean temporal self-interest," or Aristotle's "rational integration of character."¹¹ Summing up, however, he concludes that in many respects "the ethical thought of the Greeks was not only different from most modern thought, particularly modern thought influenced by Christianity, but was also in much better shape":

It has, and needs, no God. . . . It takes as central and primary questions of character, and of how moral considerations are grounded in human nature: it asks what life it is rational for the individual to live. It makes no use of a blank categorical imperative. In fact – though we have used the word "moral" quite often for the sake of convenience – this system of ideas basically lacks the

⁹ Similarly, Williams (1985), pp. 30–1, although in this later treatment of the same points Williams' approval of Plato is more qualified.

¹⁰ Williams (1981a), p. 246.

¹¹ Williams (1981a), pp. 249–250.

concept of *morality* altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand . . .

Relatedly, there is not a rift between a world of public “moral rules” and of private personal ideals: the questions of how one’s relations to others are to be regulated, both in the context of society and more privately, are not detached from questions about the kind of life it is worth living, and of what it is worth caring for.¹²

Williams acknowledges that the Greek philosophers’ application of this outlook is neither fully recoverable nor fully admirable: we cannot inhabit a Greek city-state, and we certainly should not endorse Greek attitudes to slavery and women. In addition, he finds that Greek ethical thought, like “most ethical outlooks subsequently,” rested upon an “objective teleology of human nature,” which “we are perhaps more conscious now of having to do without than anyone has been since some fifth-century Sophists first doubted it.” Even so, he approves Greek philosophical ethics for representing “one of the very few sets of ideas which can help now to put moral thought into honest touch with reality.”¹³

In the final page of his contribution to *The Legacy of Greece*, Williams turns from Greek philosophy to tragedy; and here, as in his brief remarks on the Homeric world, he adumbrates ideas he will strongly develop in *Shame and Necessity*, and which will also resonate in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.¹⁴ Whereas Greek philosophy, “in its sustained pursuit of rational self-sufficiency” seeks to insulate the good life from chance, Greek literature, above all tragedy, offers us a sense “that what is great is fragile and that what is necessary may be destructive.”¹⁵ This page, like parts of those later books, is strongly marked by his qualified endorsement of Nietzsche.

Granted the range, the power, the imagination and inventiveness of the Greek foundation of Western philosophy, it is yet more striking that we can take seriously, as we should, Nietzsche’s remark: “Among the greatest characteristics of the Hellenes is their inability to turn the best into reflection.”¹⁶

¹² Williams (1981a), p. 251.

¹³ Williams (1981a), p. 252.

¹⁴ Williams (1981a), p. 253.

¹⁵ Both in Williams (1981a), p. 248, and in Williams (1985), p. 34, Williams raises against Plato’s Socrates the telling question that “if bodily hurt is no real harm” to the good man, why are we strongly required by virtue not to harm other people’s bodies? Williams’ scepticism about the possibility of freeing morality from chance, first articulated in Williams (1981b) becomes an important theme in *Shame and Necessity*.

¹⁶ Williams (1981a), p. 253.

The Sather lectures that generated *Shame and Necessity*, as we shall shortly see, gave Williams an opportunity to expatiate on Nietzsche's dictum, an opportunity he clearly relished; for the most notable feature of that book is Williams' sympathetic engagement with the *implicit* ethics and psychology of Homer and the Greek tragedians. Equally notable in *Shame and Necessity*, and in surprisingly sharp contrast to his chapter in *The Legacy of Greece*, is the strongly critical posture he adopts in relation to the moral psychology of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato. To understand this shift, we need to take account of his sceptical challenges to what he calls "morality" or "the moral system," as articulated in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, the book that he wrote after his chapter in *The Legacy of Greece* and before *Shame and Necessity*.

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, building on many of Williams' earlier studies, is a vigorous challenge to the coherence, psychological plausibility, and practicality of contemporary moral philosophy. Although he discusses numerous "styles of ethical theory," the principal target of his critique is "the special notion of moral obligation," inherited from Kant, which he characterizes as "the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us." The many problems Williams has with the concept of moral obligation include its categorical claims to trump all other kinds of motivation, its focus on a supposedly autonomous will undetermined by particular persons' dispositions, interests, and social roles, and, in sum, its insulation from their lived experience as members of a community with an outlook that is both partly shared but also meaningfully individual. This book presents a wholesale challenge to the idea that philosophical reflection, just by itself, can generate ethical norms and shape people's outlook in abstraction from their social context and psychological particularities.

Williams approaches his criticism of "the morality system," as so characterized, by contrasting it in the above respects with Greek philosophical ethics. Yet, right from the outset of his book he raises doubts about whether any moral philosophy, including that of the Greeks, "can reasonably hope to answer" the question of "how one should live."¹⁷ None the less, he identifies that Socratic question as "the best place for moral philosophy to start," in as much as the question, in its generality, is noncommittal about any specifically "moral" considerations or assumptions about duty or goodness.¹⁸ In Williams' terms, the Socratic question pertains to "ethics" rather than to

¹⁷ Williams (1985), p. 1.

¹⁸ Williams (1985), p. 4.

“morality,” which he uses as his name for the narrow kind of ethics that emphasizes the notion of obligation.

Williams grants, as he must, that the life approved in Greek philosophical ethics had to be a “good” life and a “whole” life, marked by virtues – admirable dispositions of character. (In the time since he wrote *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, virtue, with strong influence from Aristotle, has become a major topic of contemporary moral philosophy.) What he especially approves in that book is that, in asking the Socratic question, the Greek philosophers did not presuppose “respectable justifying reasons” in answering it.¹⁹ However, because the “ethical,” as Williams uses the expression, pertains to considerations that go beyond self-interest, the Socratic question is hardly as free from such presuppositions as he suggests.

Plato, and especially Aristotle, take centre stage in the third chapter entitled “Foundations: Well-Being.” As in *The Legacy of Greece*, Williams approves Greek philosophical ethics for its rational, non-religious appeals to persons in terms of the structure of the self, showing that “it was rational to pursue a certain kind of life or to be a certain sort of person.”²⁰ Aristotle in particular is singled out as providing in his *Ethics* “the paradigm of an approach that tries to base ethics on considerations of well-being and of a life worth living.”²¹ But what of persons who are not impressed by the Aristotelian treatment of these considerations? Williams correctly observes that Aristotle, owing to his teleology of human nature, must say that they misconceive their *real* interests. Yet, that rejoinder, Williams plausibly says, opens a highly problematic gap between the person’s own point of view and “our” view of his or her interests. Moreover, he continues, the complexity and diversity of the modern world, together with what we don’t know about psychological health, vastly complicate any prospects for an Aristotelian harmonisation of internal ethical dispositions with external values and the outside point of view. Williams concludes this chapter with the following observations:

Aristotle saw a certain kind of ethical, cultural, and indeed political life as a harmonious culmination of human potentialities, recoverable from an absolute understanding of nature. We have no reason to believe in that. We understand – and most important, the agent can come to understand – that the agent’s perspective is only one of many that are equally compatible with human nature, all open to various conflicts with themselves and with other

¹⁹ Williams (1985), p. 19.

²⁰ Williams (1985), p. 34.

²¹ Williams (1985), *ibid.*

cultural aims . . . We must admit that the Aristotelian assumptions which fitted together the agent's perspective and the outside view have collapsed. No one has yet found a good way of doing without those assumptions. That is the state of affairs on which the argument of this book will turn.²²

In *Shame and Necessity*, to which I now turn, Williams looks back beyond Plato and Aristotle to Homer and the tragedians, whose work was untouched by philosophy in the sense of a special type of discourse and inquiry that Plato was the first to inaugurate fully. In that material, he finds evidence for an ethical outlook that escapes his strictures against moral philosophy in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* thanks to its ways of integrating the agent's perspective and the outside view.

2. SHAME AND NECESSITY: THE CRITIQUE OF "PROGRESSIVISM"

Williams sets the scene for his project in the first chapter of *Shame and Necessity*, entitled "The Liberation of Antiquity."²³ What he wants to liberate the ancient Greeks from is a "progressivist account," according to which "the Greeks had primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience."²⁴ Instancing moral guilt, moral agency, and "a proper conception of the will" as ideas that the progressivist account finds the Greeks lacking, Williams argues that our own lack of clarity about these ideas undermines the progressivist claim that we are thereby in better shape for having them. He does not discountenance all progress, "notably to the extent that the idea of human excellence" has been freed from determination by social position and gender.²⁵ None the less he proposes that the Greeks were actually better off for having different ethical ideas from those instanced earlier, and, furthermore, that we shall be better off by coming to realize how much we rely, though without acknowledgement, on their conceptions rather than those of the progressivists.

²² Williams (1985), p. 52.

²³ Throughout the volume, he looks back to E. R. Dodds, whose Sather Lectures of 1949 were published in his remarkable book, Dodds (2004). Dodds, as Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, had a profound influence on Williams (see his expression of homage in Williams (1993), xi). Taken together their two books, though very different in their methodology and assessments of where we stand in relation to the Greeks, represent and equally challenging set of perspectives.

²⁴ Williams (1993), p. 5.

²⁵ Williams (1993), pp. 6–7.

This is a very large and bold agenda. Before seeing how Williams works it out in the succeeding chapters, some clarifications and questions are in order. First, the Greeks whose ethical outlook Williams would have us approve are a very small set of authors, predominantly Homer, the three Attic tragedians, and Thucydides. In this book Plato and Aristotle come in for as much criticism as the progressivist account, and partly for similar reasons. Moreover, Greek reflection on ethics proceeded apace in post-Aristotelian philosophy with the highly influential schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism. Williams' Greeks do not include these later figures at all, nor does he draw on such major writers from the classical period as Herodotus, or Aristophanes, or Demosthenes. He does not explain his selection of material, but it soon becomes clear that his approvable Hellenes, notwithstanding his many generalizations about "the Greeks," are precisely and only those early authors whom he takes to adumbrate the ethical outlook he independently recommends.

A reader who knows the scholarship that Williams labels progressivist will find his generalizations about it too breezy to do full justice to the two figures whose influential work he chiefly has in mind. One of these scholars, Bruno Snell, we shall come to in discussing the second chapter of *Shame and Necessity*. The other is Arthur Adkins, author of *Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values* and other related works.²⁶ Williams makes it clear that Adkins is the leading target of his attack on the view that our own moral outlook has greatly progressed beyond that of the (early) Greeks. Yet, instead of letting Adkins speak for himself, Williams largely confines his mentions of Adkins' work to footnotes, giving the reader of his main text the impression that Adkins convicts "the Homeric shame culture" of "basic egoism."²⁷ In fact, Adkins' book is less grounded on progressivist premises than Williams implies. Its starting point is not a claim that we today are in better ethical shape than the Homeric Greeks, but the proposition, which Williams himself more or less admits, that "we are all Kantians now."²⁸ Adkins does not set out to justify our Kantian outlook, but to understand why "there should exist a society so different from our own as to render it impossible to translate 'duty' in the Kantian sense into its ethical terminology at all."²⁹

Moreover, Adkins and Williams actually agree on the importance of interpreting ethical concepts in terms of social realities as distinct from

²⁶ Adkins (1960). Adkins acknowledges his strong indebtedness to the work and influence of Dodds (see n. 23), Adkins (1960), p. vi.

²⁷ Williams (1993), p. 81.

²⁸ Adkins (1960), p. 2; Williams (1985), p. 174.

²⁹ Adkins (1960), p. 2.

making them logically primary. Thus it is central to Adkins' argument that the shame culture he finds pervasive in Homer is a system of values that "suit Homeric society, inasmuch as they commend those martial qualities which most evidently secure its existence."³⁰ Williams is able to show that Adkins' account of Homeric shame is far too rigid to capture the subtlety and diachronic relevance of Homeric values, and he is right to characterize Adkins as someone who unsurprisingly thinks that moral thought has "advanced" in the period since early Greek antiquity. But neither Adkins nor the many others who share that position are as neatly captured by Williams' progressivist label as his rhetorical use of it implies.

Another question that arises from Williams' "Liberation of Antiquity" concerns his claim that we modern westerners have a special relation to the (early) Greeks:

They do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us. They do that in every case in which they can be made to speak, because they tell us who we are.³¹

Strongly distancing himself from the anthropological fashion of emphasizing the Greeks' "otherness," Williams insists that "the modern world was a European creation presided over by the Greek past" (3).³² Although he grants "the formative influence" and "overwhelming role" of Christianity and the impossibility of thinking of people who would be *ourselves* independently of Christianity, he finds it worthwhile to imagine a route from fifth-century Greece to the present that did not run through Christianity. This is a very curious thought experiment; for it is equally possible to imagine a route to the present in which Rome shaped us more powerfully than Greece did, as in fact it did for our pre-Renaissance ancestors. The Greek bedrock of our modern identity is hardly more determinate than our Christian heritage, and Williams' claim about the Greek presidency does not include the massively influential Plato and Aristotle but earlier authors untouched by philosophy. It is, then, a highly selective Greek past that he wants us to find "specially the past of modernity." Thus he gets a basic premise for his argument that, by recovering the early Greek ethical outlook, we can not only avoid the errors of progressivist philosophy but also achieve a better grip on our basic human identity.

What he means by both these propositions begins to emerge most clearly and eloquently in his introductory observations on Greek tragedy.

³⁰ Adkins (1960), p. 55.

³¹ Williams (1993), pp. 19–20.

³² Williams (1993), p. 3.

Rather than approach tragedy as if it were simply philosophy, he locates the relevance of these dramas to his project in two related facts – first, their representing, but not *expounding*, such ideas as necessity and responsibility, and second, their embeddedness in the historical context of Athenian society, whose conflicts, tensions, concepts, and images they reflect. I take him to be saying that tragedy's innocence of formal philosophy enables it to register human experience in ways that cut directly to psychological data that we can all recognize to be germane to ourselves. He meets the objection that the tragedies draw on religious ideas quite alien to us with the following retort:

What the tragedies demand is that we should look for analogies in our experience and our sense of the world to the necessities they express.³³

Undeniably, modern readers and audiences do respond enthusiastically to the Greek tragedians, albeit generally through the treacherous medium of translation. Williams is asking the fascinating question of how that is possible in view of the cultural distance between us and them. The answer he develops in *Shame and Necessity* is that, notwithstanding the cultural distance, especially Greek concepts of supernatural intervention, “our ideas of action and responsibility and other of our ethical concepts are closer to those of the ancient Greeks than we usually suppose.”³⁴

3. PROGRESSIVISM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

Some of the doubts one might have about Williams' project, as announced in the first chapter of *Shame and Necessity*, are brilliantly resolved in the book's second chapter, “Centers of Agency.” Here he argues, with excellently chosen examples, that the Homeric epics invoke an ethical outlook and implicit psychology that we intuitively recognize to be coherent and salient, provided we do not complicate our responses by worrying about concepts that are absent. These concepts include (1) the distinction between soul and body, (2) the idea of the will as a mental action mediating between decision and doing something, and (3) the notion that mental functions with regard to action derive their significance from ethics. Such concepts, Williams argues, are all “accretions of misleading philosophy.”³⁵ Far from Homer's

³³ Williams (1993), p. 19.

³⁴ Williams (1993), p. 16.

³⁵ Williams (1993), p. 21.

being ethically primitive because he lacks these concepts, his treatment of his characters and their actions is profoundly on target precisely because he does without them. Williams' argument is cogent with respect to the first two concepts, but I shall question whether he is right about the third.

He acknowledges that Homeric characters are often subject in their thoughts and actions to divine intervention. However, that is far from always so, and even when it is so the gods frequently give the characters reasons for acting; they do not simply manipulate them like puppets. Williams attributes to Homer an implicit recognition of a "system" of action, according to which human beings behave on the basis of deliberation, reasons, desires, beliefs, and purposes. "If it is a theory of action at all, then it is the same as ours," by which Williams means the theory that a modern thinker would or should endorse.³⁶

Setting aside for the moment Williams' claims about the misleading philosophical concepts, I find his argument about the coherence and experiential accessibility of Homer's characters completely persuasive. Why was it even necessary for him to prove this? The answer is an influential tradition of scholarship, chiefly associated with the work of the German scholar Bruno Snell, which had found Homeric characters to be fragmentary as distinct from unitary individuals and unable, in virtue of this fragmentation and also in virtue of divine intervention, to be capable of regarding themselves as the source of their own decisions.³⁷

Williams is not the first scholar who has shown why this account of Homeric characters' mentality lacks credence, but his refutation of it is more philosophically penetrating than most previous criticism. What Snell and his followers found lacking in Homer was principally a clear distinction between the body as such and the soul construed as the unitary centre of human agency. These scholars took Homer's lack of a single word for the body and his use of many different words to designate the sources of thought and feeling to indicate a conception of human beings as a disunited assemblage of parts. In doing so, as Williams tartly remarks:

Snell overlooked the whole that they, and we, and all human beings have recognised, the living person himself . . . and the thought that this thing that will die, which unless it is properly buried will be eaten by dogs and birds, is exactly the thing that one is.³⁸

³⁶ Williams (1993), p. 33.

³⁷ Snell (1948/1953).

³⁸ Williams (1993), p. 24.

Williams' rebuttal of Snell serves his larger purpose. His exoneration of Homer's conception of human identity and agency turns on his own rejection of body/soul dualism. What was supposed to indicate Homer's primitivism proves to be a Cartesian concept of the mind that we have every reason to reject.

Williams' rapier thrusts against Snell hit their target, or rather they mainly do. Yet, there are points to be made on the other side. What primarily interested Snell was the "discovery" of what he called Geist, taking this in the Hegelian sense to connote not simply mind, as in everyday English usage, but explicit recognition of self-consciousness, intellectual autonomy, spirituality, and scientific inquiry. In his discussion of Homer Snell muddled his arguments by conflating Geist with "person" and "character." Naturally finding no Geist in the Hegelian sense, he reached the absurd conclusion that the Homeric figures are mentally defective. If he had not made this conflation, he could respond to Williams that the unity Williams offers him – that of the whole living person – is not the unity he was looking for and missing. What Snell was not finding in Homer was explicit recognition of the "mind" as the unitary locus of action, practical and theoretical thought, and consciousness. He is quite right to contrast Homer in that respect with "discovery" he attributes to the Greek philosophers. Snell's mistake was to suppose that mind of this kind is the prerequisite for persons to have an explicit conception of their identity.

It is an instructive mistake because it shows why, as intellectual historians, we need to wear two hats. On the one hand, to avoid anachronism, we have to attend to the original language and concepts present in our texts. Yet, we can only attempt to understand those texts by translating them into our own terms and concepts. That is the dilemma of interpretation. In the case of Snell versus Williams, one horn of the dilemma is embraced without due attention to the other. The result is that Homer becomes either unduly distant from ourselves or unduly modern.

If Homer has a perfectly intelligible and coherent understanding of human agency, does he lack something else that has unfortunately led people to find his characters strangely different from ourselves? The answer Williams proposes is that both Homer and the Greek tragedians lack the idea that "the functions of the mind, above all with regard to action, are defined in terms of categories that get their significance from ethics."³⁹ He attributes the invention of this idea, which he calls an "ethicized psychology," to Plato, illustrating it by Plato's famous tripartite model of the soul. With this model, partly adopted later by Aristotle, we get the idea of

³⁹ Williams (1993), p. 42.

a type of psychic conflict generated by a self divided between two kinds of motive – “rational concerns that aim at the good, and mere desire.” What makes the model an ethicized psychology is not simply its imputing ethical dispositions to the mind or its assigning an instrumental role to reasoning (Williams has no quarrel with these ideas) but its taking reason to operate distinctively and normatively only when it has full charge of the self and controls non-rational desires.

Williams’ attribution to Plato of this ethicized psychology, and its supposed absence from Homer and the tragedians, is a fundamental premise of the argument of *Shame and Necessity*. On the one hand, he wants us to regard Plato’s psychology as being both highly influential on modernity because of its adumbrating the idea of distinctively “moral” motivation, and hence of an idea of the rational will. On the other hand, because Williams strongly distrusts this idea, he approves the pre-Platonic Greeks for feeling no need of it. Williams hardly justifies his pejorative assessment of Plato, but rather than pursue that fully here I want to ask whether he is correct to claim that Homer altogether lacks an ethicized psychology.

Williams fully recognizes that Homer is familiar with mental conflict and with the kind of self-control in which persons restrain themselves from instantly acting on their emotions in the interests of a long-term objective. A case in point is when Odysseus, tempted to kill the servant women who have been consorting with Penelope’s suitors, rebukes his “heart” (*kradie*) and urges it (himself) to “endure,” with a reminder of how “intelligence” (*metis*) has served him well in similar situations.⁴⁰ As Williams observes, Plato cites this passage in support of his own division of the soul into better (rational) and inferior (nonrational) components.⁴¹ However, Williams detects the following difference between the Homeric passage and Plato’s ethicized psychology. Odysseus is simply pursuing his long-term interests, and so his recourse to intelligence does not invoke a special kind of ethical (moral) motivation.

Two points need to be made here. Williams does not tell us in *Shame and Necessity* how he defines the domain of the ethical. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* he says:

However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and generally, the lives of other people.⁴²

⁴⁰ Homer (1965), *Odyssey* 20.17–24.

⁴¹ Williams (1993), p. 38; Plato, *Republic* 4. 441b.

⁴² Williams (1985), p. 12.

With this criterion of the ethical, it is far from clear that Plato actually has an ethicized psychology. His tripartite division of the soul, and his consequential analysis of the soul's virtues, make no appeal to *other-regarding motivations*. These doctrines are grounded, rather, in the claim that whatever reason deems to be best is in the interest of the entire soul, without reference to the lives of anyone else. Homer does not have an articulated concept of rationality, but Odysseus' recourse to "intelligence" is hardly as distant from Plato's psychology as Williams would have us think.

Furthermore, the goal that Odysseus is pursuing – punishing the suitors for their wanton disregard for appropriate conduct – is one that Homer persuades his readers to regard as not only humanly proper but divinely sanctioned. The psychology he attributes to Odysseus and indeed to other characters is ethicized if we take that property to signify the idea that mental operations are not value neutral but inherently conceived in normative terms. Homeric characters are constantly praised for having a "seemly" or "sensible" or "prudent" mentality, where the reference for these attributes is the social norms of Homeric conduct. And correspondingly, characters are criticized for their "stupidity" in flouting these norms. I agree with Williams that Homer does without a concept of an explicitly "moral" will, but I do not agree with his claim that Homer differs from Plato because the former's implicit psychology lacks mental categories that get their significance from ethics.⁴³

4. SHAME, GUILT, AND "HETERONOMY"

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Shame and Necessity*, "Recognising Responsibility" and "Shame and Autonomy," are the most successful parts of Williams' book, as reviewers have noted, and in both of them his main target is the progressivist story with Adkins as its principal exponent.

According to Adkins, competitive values, premised on heroic status and martial success, are so dominant in Homer that "quiet" and "cooperative" virtues lack the social authority to exert a strong claim against an aggressive agent who flouts them. "*Moral* responsibility," he writes, "has no place in [the competitive scheme of values]; and the quieter virtues, in which such responsibility has its place, neither have sufficient attraction to gain a

⁴³ For further doubts about Williams' sharp differentiation of Homer from Plato in terms of an ethicized psychology, see Irwin (1994), pp. 50–56, who extends his argument to include Williams' similar assessment of Thucydides.

hearing nor are backed by sufficient force to compel one.”⁴⁴ It has been so widely recognized that Adkins’ distinction between competitive and cooperative values fails to fit the essence of Homeric ethics that Williams has no need to argue this point.⁴⁵ Instead, he focuses his attention on related claims that Adkins makes concerning first, the supposed irrelevance of intentions in Homer and, second, Adkins’ account of Homeric society as a “shame-culture” in which public opinion is the only sanction an agent needs to consider.

Williams shows brilliantly that Homer does possess all the basic elements necessary to a conception of responsibility, which he lists as cause, intention, state of mind, and response.⁴⁶ As for *moral* responsibility, he suggests that the archaic Greeks’ supposed difference from our outlook is due to the following thought:

[They] blamed and sanctioned people for things that they did unintentionally, or again . . . for things that . . . they did intentionally but in a strange state of mind. We are thought not to do this, or at least to regard it as unjust. But if this means that the Greeks paid no attention to intentions, while we make everything turn on the issue of intentions, this is doubly false.⁴⁷

Such difference as there is between our allocation of responsibility and Greek practice is not due to our having “a purified notion of something called moral responsibility,” but to the way we moderns deal with “criminal responsibility under the law” and how we conceive of the relation between the punitive powers of the state and the political freedom of individual citizens. Even so, Williams argues, our law of torts is sufficient to show that like the Greeks we hold people responsible for damages they have caused, irrespective of their intentions.

Williams clinches his anti-progressivist case by considering examples from Greek tragedy, in which the protagonist, who has acted disastrously but quite unintentionally, accepts responsibility for what he did in ways that are entirely self-imposed and intelligible to us. When Oedipus acknowledges that he unwittingly did the terrible things that prompted him to blind himself, and when Ajax concludes that he cannot live with the knowledge that he unwittingly slew livestock when he thought he was wreaking just revenge on the Greek generals, “we understand . . . because we know

⁴⁴ Adkins (1960), p. 52.

⁴⁵ Long (1970); Cairns, (1993).

⁴⁶ Williams (1993), p. 55.

⁴⁷ Williams (1993), p. 64.

that in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done."⁴⁸ With great sensitivity and perceptiveness Williams asks us to respond to the "manifest grandeur" of these artistic representations. What they invoke, he proposes, is "a type of ethical thought as far removed as may be from the concerns of obligation."⁴⁹ It is not that Oedipus or Ajax is required by objective criteria to respond to their situations in the way that they do, but that "their understanding of their lives and the significance their lives possessed for other people is such that what they did destroyed the only reason they had for going on."

Here we begin to observe Williams' recourse to the "internal reasons" the ethical significance of which he emphasizes so strongly in his other work. We shall now see him develop an anti-Kantian argument along the same lines in his analysis of shame in Homer and Greek tragedy.

Leading characters in these texts sometimes invoke "necessity" in expressions of their attitudes and decisions. Ajax does so in Sophocles' play of that name when (line 690), determined on suicide, he tells the Chorus that he is going where he *has to go*.⁵⁰ What necessity is involved here, Williams asks? If the question is posed in Kantian terms, the necessity should be either the categorical imperative of morality or the non-moral and hypothetical imperative of something necessary relative to satisfying one's contingent desires or avoiding what one contingently fears. Yet, the necessity that Ajax invokes appears to be unqualifiedly categorical. Rather than concede that this necessity, when properly scrutinised, is hypothetical after all – which would make Sophocles' outlook "pre-moral" from a Kantian perspective – Williams makes a claim that is central to *Shame and Necessity*:

What does concern us, and should concern the Kantian, is that in the Greek nursery itself people were able to realise that mere self-indulgence and fear were not all that were expected; they recognised, for instance, virtues of courage and justice. If that is so, there must be options for ethical thought and experience that the Kantian construction conceals.⁵¹

The option he proposes is the concept of shame (*aidos*). What motivates Ajax, in his decision to commit suicide, is shame at the mess he has unwittingly made of his entire life. As the hero that he is, he can at least exercise

⁴⁸ Williams (1993), p. 69.

⁴⁹ Williams (1993), p. 74.

⁵⁰ Sophocles (1969a), *Ajax*, line 690.

⁵¹ Williams (1993), p. 77.

the second disjunct of his code: “the necessity of either living nobly or dying nobly.”⁵²

According to Adkins, shame in early Greek literature is entirely a feeling generated by losing face in the scheme of competitive values; it is shame at “what people will say” and at “mockery” or “indignation” directed at one’s failings. He is quite right to highlight these Greek accompaniments of shame. But, if that were all that there is to this concept of shame, a Kantian would say that the values it underpins are heteronomous and the reactions of the person they apply to are egoistic. To complicate and counter that response, Williams makes several powerful points.

He acknowledges that “the basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong circumstances.”⁵³ However, this pertains no more to the values Adkins calls competitive than to shortcomings in meeting the norms of so-called cooperative values. It is also a mistake to suppose that shame is a purely externalist sanction and effective only if those to whom it applies are literally seen or caught out. Homeric characters can be internally motivated by shame and they can evoke the gaze of an imagined other. Furthermore, the identity and reciprocated values of the actual or imagined observer are critical. Which is not to say that the other must be either an identifiable external individual or social group, on the one hand, or simply a clone of oneself without an independent role to play, on the other:

The internalised other is indeed abstracted and generalised and idealised, but he is potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me.⁵⁴

In illustration of all this Williams returns to the Sophoclean Ajax. What the hero meant, when he said that he “had to” leave life, was that “he has no way of living that anyone he respects would respect.” And the internalised other, in this case, is his father, or rather the standards of excellence represented by his father with which Ajax himself identifies.

This is excellently said. Yet, Williams’ discussion of Ajax completely omits the response of Ajax’s wife to the hero’s declaration of his necessitated suicide. In her extremely moving plea, Tecmessa urges Ajax to reconsider

⁵² Sophocles (1969a), *Ajax*, lines 479–480.

⁵³ Williams (1993), p. 78.

⁵⁴ Williams (1993), p. 84.

his decision.⁵⁵ She begs him to consider her widowed plight, arguing that his suicide will besmirch his reputation by leaving her helpless. She presents to him a very different picture of his father – not as an intransigent patriarch but as a needy old man, whose loss of his son, notwithstanding Ajax’s motives for suicide, should cause Ajax to feel shame. She beseeches him to have pity on their young son and his orphaned future. And in conclusion, she offers Ajax an alternative “necessity” to consider, namely, that of reciprocating the benefits he has received from her whom he seized as a bride from her home and who is now without parents of her own. Ajax initially rejects all her pleas, telling her that she is idiotic to think she can “train his character” at this stage of his life. A choral interlude follows. Then, in a remarkable speech, Ajax expresses a complete change of mind, strongly motivated by pity at the thought of making his wife a widow and his son an orphan.⁵⁶ He will make his peace with the Greek commanders, and bury his wrath. Finally, after we learn from a prophecy that Ajax will be safe if he can survive just this one day, we observe him alone, as intransigent as before, and resolved on the suicide that he then commits.

Does Williams’ omission of all this complexity matter? I think it does; for Sophocles leaves us in no doubt that Ajax had responsibilities which he not only discounts, in his initial response to his wife, but that were actually required of him by his own principle of *noblesse oblige*. Williams admits that Ajax’s “necessity” was grounded on “a narrow base of personal achievement” and that the “demands of the honour code were particular and perilous.”⁵⁷ Yet, he seems to approve Ajax’s authenticity, his being true to himself, and also his appeal “to some genuine social expectations.”⁵⁸

When Ajax announces his change of heart, he appears to accept the principle that “ought implies can”: if he can change by internalising his husbandly and fatherly responsibilities as his “other,” he takes that change to be required of him.⁵⁹ But, in the event, his character is so fixed that he cannot do so. If the ethical, as Williams would have us think, must involve some “other-regarding” concerns, Ajax should be judged a tragically conflicted figure, trapped by the necessity of honouring his own internalised shame and unable to act according to the “other-regarding” claims on him whose emotive force he does perceive. The fact that the immensely pre-Kantian

⁵⁵ Sophocles (1969a), *Ajax*, lines 485–524.

⁵⁶ Sophocles (1969a), *Ajax*, lines 646–92.

⁵⁷ Williams (1993), p. 101, p. 102.

⁵⁸ Williams (1993), p. 98.

⁵⁹ Unlike many critics, I take Ajax’s expression of his change of heart to be sincere at the time he states it. He tries out an alternative self, predicated on his wife’s appeal, but his character is so fixed that he is unable to make it actual.

Sophocles can make us see that and see why it is so suggests that Williams' "internalised other" may be a dangerously fragile basis for a satisfactory criterion of "real social expectations."

The *Philoctetes*, another Sophoclean play, gives Williams a much better example of shame's positive effects in motivating other-regarding concerns. The young hero Neoptolemus initially presents himself as someone who is ashamed to win the confidence of Philoctetes by lying. Odysseus persuades him to set shame aside for one day in the interests of victory; whereupon Neoptolemus complies.⁶⁰ Later, having successfully deceived Philoctetes, Neoptolemus experiences sharp pangs of what one can only call conscience, reproaches himself for having departed from his own "nature," and describes himself as someone who has manifestly acted shamefully.⁶¹ He then reveals to Philoctetes the Greeks' plan to take him to Troy, fully knowing Philoctetes' implacable resistance to that project.

Williams does not draw the connection between conscience and shame, but he rightly observes that the episode shows how shame "can transcend both an assertive egoism and a conventional concern for public opinion."⁶² Does the shame that Neoptolemus experiences – a shame that Williams says "we recognise in our own world as shame" – correspond to what we also call "guilt"? To pursue that question, he argues that, while Greek shame may appear to overlap with our guilt, in that shame as well as guilt may be a reaction associated with indignation, reparation, and forgiveness, there is none the less an important difference between the Greeks and ourselves. Guilt, he suggests, buys into the distinction between "moral" and "nonmoral" qualities, whereas shame is as liable to be felt by "a failure in prowess or cunning as by a failure of generosity or loyalty."⁶³ Questioning how far we really make use of this distinction in our lives or even fully understand it, Williams offers the following differentiation between shame and guilt: guilt (not necessarily having to do with the voluntary) points primarily to what "I have done to others," shame to "what I am," as in falling short of what one might have hoped of oneself.

This focus of shame on "what I am," he argues, makes shame, as the Greeks understood it, a more realistic and truthful conception than guilt. If we think otherwise, that is probably because we "have a distinctive and

⁶⁰ Sophocles (1969b), *Philoctetes*, lines 86–118.

⁶¹ Sophocles (1969b), *Philoctetes*, lines 902–909.

⁶² Williams (1993), p. 88; Cairns (1993), whose book appeared in the same year as *Shame and Necessity*, makes similar points to Williams concerning internalized shame, and also argues persuasively that we may attribute conscience to Homeric characters, albeit a conscience based on social standards rather than personal ethical principles.

⁶³ Williams (1993), p. 92.

false picture of the moral life, according to which the truly moral self is characterless,” with “reason” supposedly supplying moral norms and limited attention paid to other people’s opinions of us: otherwise “morality is thought to have skidded into the heteronymy that . . . we recognised as a familiar charge against the mechanisms of shame.”⁶⁴

I am not sure what to say about this proposal, to the extent that I understand it. Williams’ point that Greek shame and our shame can motivate other-regarding concerns is very well taken. However, I think that his interest in stigmatizing the modern concept of moral guilt and its Kantian and Christian associations muddies the waters as far as understanding early Greek ideas is concerned. He says that the Greeks “had no direct equivalent for our word guilt.”⁶⁵ True, they had no noun equivalent to “moral guilt,” but they had the adjectives *aitios* and *anaitios*, which they used to express guilty or responsible, and not guilty or not responsible. Does Neoptolemos in Sophocles’ play feel shame as distinct from guilt? The answer, in my opinion, is that he feels both of these, and precisely in Williams’ terms: guilt at what he has done to Philoctetes and shame at not living up to his own self-image as someone who should set a premium on honesty. And while he is plainly distressed at being “shown” and “caught” as a cheat, there is no suggestion that his distress is motivated by what others will say about him or even by an internalised other: it appears to spring entirely from his sense of having besmirched his own ethical norms.

This example – and more could be given – shows that Williams does not need to devote so much space to defending the Greeks from the charge that their ethics was “unacceptably heteronomous.”⁶⁶ His pursuit of this anti-Kantian agenda in Greek contexts can be more distracting than illuminating. A similar objection may be made to his alignment of Plato with Kant on the grounds that both philosophers have a conception of “the moral self as characterless,” meaning a self that “is simply the perspective of reason or morality.”⁶⁷ In making this claim about Plato, Williams is contrasting him with the earlier Greek view he has approvingly developed concerning the ethical value of shame and its attention to the internalised other. Plato, we are asked to suppose, makes the “implausible” proposal that reason, abstracting from everything that one contingently is, suffices by itself to distinguish good from bad.⁶⁸ Such an idea of autonomy, if it lacks “an

⁶⁴ Williams (1993), p. 94.

⁶⁵ Williams (1993), p. 88.

⁶⁶ Williams (1993), p. 97.

⁶⁷ Williams (1993), p. 159.

⁶⁸ Williams (1993), p. 100.

internalised other that carries some genuine social weight . . . may become hard to distinguish from an insensate degree of moral egoism.”

As I have already remarked, the social weight of an internalised other is hardly as promising an idea as Williams suggests. Moreover, so far as Plato is concerned, which for Williams means Plato's *Republic*, it is hardly true that he regards the “moral self” as either characterless or lacking construction through a social process.⁶⁹ For one thing, the Platonic candidates for “moral self,” if they are the guardians of the ideal state, have been acculturated from childhood by a system of education that requires them to internalise good role models. Second, their selves are not restricted to their rational faculty but include nonrational faculties, each with its own desires, whose normative condition, when guided by reason, contributes to the good of the whole person. Third, the entire procedure of Socratic dialectic is premised on the idea that ethical deliberation, so far from being a solipsistic or purely introspective exercise, requires social interaction and the testing of beliefs in an interlocutory context with people of quite various characters. Platonic ethics, though it does not exclude the motivation of shame, undoubtedly places a radically new premium on the guidance of reason. I sympathize with many of Williams' worries about the efficacy of reason on its own to deliver appropriate ethical motivations, but his juxtaposition of Plato and Kant is too strained to show that the earlier Greeks were better off (and by implication we ourselves would now be better off) without Plato's ethical psychology.

5. NECESSITY AND LUCK

In the final chapters of *Shame and Necessity* Williams continues to develop his anti-progressivist argument, now focusing on ideas of external necessity, bad luck, and coercion. Given the cultural differences between the Greeks and ourselves, including especially their beliefs in “supernatural necessity,” it is easy to suppose that they inhabited a quite different mental universe. What, for instance, do we have in common with people who largely accepted the institution of slavery without demur and who took themselves to be subject to the arbitrary power of mysterious divine beings? Notwithstanding these historical parameters, about which Williams shows keen understanding, he makes a powerful case for the proposition that modern liberalism

⁶⁹ For further objections to Williams' claims about Plato's characterless self, see Irwin (1994), pp. 60–62, and Woodruff (1996), p. 180.

has a long way to go before it can congratulate itself on having supplanted Greek necessities with fully effective ideas of justice and their social implementation.

Greeks in general, as he says, neither questioned the legitimacy of slavery nor sought to justify it.⁷⁰ They knew that it rested on coercion and was often terrible for those who experienced it, but it fell outside most debates about justice because it was seen as a social and economic necessity. Because “we have economic arrangements and a conception of society with which slavery is straightforwardly incompatible,” it may appear that the Greeks had a radically defective idea of justice.⁷¹ To ward off that comforting conclusion, Williams powerfully observes:

We have social practices in relation to which we are in a situation much like that of the Greeks with slavery. We recognise arbitrary and brutal ways in which people are handled by society, ways that are conditioned, often, by no more than exposure to luck. We have the intellectual resources to regard the situations of these people, and the systems that allow these things, as unjust, but are uncertain whether to do so, partly because we have seen the corruption and collapse of supposedly alternative systems, partly because we have no settled opinion on the question . . . how far the existence of a worthwhile life for some people involves the imposition of suffering on others.⁷²

He grants that liberalism, unlike the Greek outlook, *hopes* that considerations of justice will mitigate the effects of necessity and chance on individual lives, but he is surely right to insist that something like the Greek concepts of economic or cultural necessity and individual bad luck are still very much alive in the modern world.

To investigate what we can make of the Greeks’ “supernatural necessity,” Williams returns to tragedy and Homer. In this chapter, more than in any other parts of the book, he offers sustained and insightful readings of passages that have been greatly discussed in modern scholarship. When Agamemnon, in Aeschylus’ play of that name, faces the awful dilemma – should he sacrifice his daughter in order to secure his fleet’s sailing to Troy, or should he abandon that military expedition? – the play’s Chorus tells us that “he put on the harness of necessity” and proceeded to the sacrifice in a frenzied state of mind. Williams, quite correctly in my opinion, finds

⁷⁰ Williams (1993), pp. 110–115, includes a trenchant criticism of Aristotle’s defence of “natural” slavery.

⁷¹ Williams (1993), p. 125.

⁷² Williams (1993), *ibid.*

no invitation in this remarkable text to ask questions about Agamemnon's freedom of will or to apportion moral blame. The "harness of necessity" invokes the idea that Agamemnon's decision is not simply what he thinks he has to do but also what he thinks he is externally required to do in order to placate the goddess Artemis.

With reference to this and some similar passages, including those that draw upon oracular pronouncements, Williams asks us to analyse the notion of being subject to supernatural necessity. What it invokes, he suggests, is "the image of being in someone's power" where the someone, especially in the contexts of Greek tragedy, "has no characteristics except purpose and power."⁷³ Yet, if we think that our own rejection of supernatural necessity has liberated us from much that oppressed the early Greeks, we had better think again:

Human beings are metaphysically free in the negative sense that there is nothing in the structure of the universe that denies their power to intend, to decide, to act, indeed to take and receive responsibility in the fundamental and intelligible sense that were found . . . already in Homer. But metaphysical freedom is nothing – at any rate, very little.⁷⁴

It is little or nothing because what really threatens anyone's freedom is not supernatural necessity but the constraint that the Greeks called *anangke*, as manifested in the psychological, social, and political situations that place coercion on choice, making us subject to the will of another.

The historian Thucydides, though contemporaneous with Sophocles and Euripides, gave no thought to supernatural necessities. Acknowledging Thucydides' remarkable capacity to explain events in terms of typical, nonmoralistic motivations, Williams finds common ground with Sophocles in spite of the latter's theological assumptions. What he finds them sharing, and moreover sharing with himself, is no belief that

in one way or another the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations. . . . Each of them represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency, and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations.⁷⁵

⁷³ Williams (1993), p. 151.

⁷⁴ Williams (1993), p. 152.

⁷⁵ Williams (1993), p. 164.

It does not greatly matter whether this assessment of Sophocles and Thucydides needs qualification; for in the end, *Shame and Necessity* is most illuminating and provocative for what it shows us about Williams the philosopher and his remarkable ability to cut through the hackneyed distinction between thoughts that are strictly “philosophical” and ideas that are only “literary.” Ever since he published the seminal essay “Moral luck,” with its subtle discussion of Anna Karenina and an imagined Gauguin, we have known his gift for drawing cogent insights from “literature,” and it is superbly evident in his account of Rousseau and Diderot in *Truth and Truthfulness*.⁷⁶ What many readers of *Shame and Necessity*, including myself, find most impressive about this book is Williams’ philosophical engagement with great texts conventionally called literary.⁷⁷ In the copious notes he attaches to each chapter he discusses relevant linguistic details with all the skill and sensitivity of an expert philologist. Under his guidance, which stands as a model for the practice, the leading characters in Homer and Greek tragedy offer material for ethical and psychological reflection without losing their contextual identity; and that, I take it, is precisely what Williams intended to achieve in his mission to make moral philosophy an enterprise that is true to the complexity of human life as it is actually lived or brilliantly imagined. The passage quoted above captures the essence of the mind at work in this book and its author’s characteristic qualities – ruthlessly honest, utterly secular, humanely imaginative, impatient of anything that smacks of conceptual fuzziness or pietistic edification or the claims of reason to deliver more than a cool experience of human life can warrant.

Williams sets four great philosophers on the other side from Sophocles, Thucydides, and himself – Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. They and their modern adherents encapsulate the progressivist outlook. *Shame* invites us to contrast with the Greek “traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by . . . attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible.”⁷⁸

6. PLATO REVISITED

In *Shame and Necessity*, as we have seen, Plato’s moral psychology comes in for such severe criticism that readers of the book might form the impression

⁷⁶ Williams (1981b); Williams, (2002).

⁷⁷ It is worth noting that some Greek philosophers, especially the Stoics, regularly interpreted Homer and other poets as lending support to certain of their doctrines; and in later antiquity Homer could even be regarded as a philosopher.

⁷⁸ Williams (1993), p. 164.

that Williams' assessment of Plato was consistently negative. Such an impression would not only clash with his earlier account of Plato's philosophy in *The Legacy of Greece*, it could also suggest a willful reluctance to engage with the literary complexity of the Platonic dialogues and the virtuoso range of Plato's philosophical imagination. Like many reviewers of *Shame and Necessity*, I find the book's treatment of Plato unduly negative. Happily, it was not Williams' last word on Plato as he later published *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy*.⁷⁹ Here, in less than sixty pages, he offers a splendid account of Plato's dialectical methodology and a remarkably compact appreciation of the dialogues' continuing vitality.

Appropriately to this book's compendious purpose Williams is reticent about his own philosophical positions, but reading between the lines we find once again his scepticism about the practical value of ethical theory. Plato, by contrast, has the distinctive idea "that theory, in one way or another, must change one's life."⁸⁰ But we do not need to share that idea in order to find Plato congenial company and a constant source of philosophical stimulation. Plato speaks with many voices, and he tempers his other-worldly aspirations with a deep sensitivity to the character differences between people and to everyday realities:

The dialogues are indeed sometimes tendentious... but their faults are almost always those of a real person. They speak with a recognizable human voice, or more than one, and they do not fall into the stilted, remote complacency or quaint formalism to which moral philosophy is so liable. ... Plato is constantly aware of the forces – of desire, of aesthetic seduction, of political exploitation – against which his ideals are a reaction. The dialogues preserve a sense of urgency and of the social and psychological insecurity of the ethical.⁸¹

In the last sentence of this quotation, which is completely apt, we see Williams acknowledging a strong affinity between himself and Plato, an affinity which his agenda in *Shame and Necessity* conceals. We can only regret that he did not have the time to turn *Plato* into a full-length study, developing his conclusion⁸² that no other thinker has combined so many of the qualities that constitute philosophical greatness.⁸³

⁷⁹ Williams (1998).

⁸⁰ Williams (1998), p. 15.

⁸¹ Williams (1998), p. 43.

⁸² Williams (1998), p. 45.

⁸³ I am grateful to Tom Rosenmeyer for reading this essay and giving me the benefit of his helpful and encouraging comments.

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The opening chapters of Bernard Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness* are an appetizing invitation, which I here gratefully accept, to reflect on a question which in its most general form is of very wide application indeed: what kinds of light can one shed on something by recounting its history?¹ Restricted to the philosophical tradition this becomes a question about the nature and effectiveness of what are nowadays often called “genealogies” and “state-of-nature theories,” and it is on these that Williams’ attention is concentrated. The same is true of mine in this essay; but I shall not bother too much about the limits set by those terms as they are usually applied, in the belief that since this is an aspect of a broader issue a broader approach is desirable, at least so long as there is any suspicion that our present borderlines, which are certainly fuzzy, may be arbitrary, too.

Much that I shall say Williams has said already – rather more succinctly and deftly, the reader may feel – and I doubt whether anything of mine conflicts with anything of his, once a few terminological matters are sorted out. But his purpose in these chapters was to prepare the ground for a specific exercise of the state-of-nature and genealogical methods: his own application of them, which forms the rest of the book, to the twin virtues of truthfulness, sincerity, and accuracy. With nothing on my plate but the methodological questions *per se*, I can afford to plod around the terrain a little more widely.

1. THE FORMS OF GENEALOGY

Whether there is any important difference of type that we might mark by selective use of the expressions “state-of-nature theory” and “genealogy” is a question I shall shortly return to. (All of them, in the usage I shall recommend, may properly be called genealogies – and this appears to be Williams’

¹ Williams (2002).

preferred usage, too; but many genealogies make no reference to anything that can plausibly be called a state of nature.)² Drawing for the moment no distinction between them, we may observe that they cover a range of procedures employed for a range of purposes. They can be subversive, or vindictory, of the doctrines or practices whose origins (factual, imaginary, and conjectural) they claim to describe. They may at the same time be explanatory, accounting for the existence of whatever it is they vindicate or subvert. In theory, at least, they may be merely explanatory, evaluatively neutral (although as I shall shortly argue it is no accident that convincing examples are hard to find). They can remind us of the contingency of our institutions and standards, communicating a sense of how easily they might have been different, and of how different they might have been. Or they can have the opposite tendency, implying a kind of necessity: given a few basic facts about human nature and our conditions of life, this was the only way things could have turned out.

At the head of the subversive genealogists are Nietzsche, pre-eminently in *The Genealogy of Morals*, and Foucault, in a number of works; though let us not forget Hume and *The Natural History of Religion*, nor omit to ask whether Darwin's genealogy of man has any place in the genre. Specimens of the vindictory type are mostly found in political philosophy – one thinks immediately of Hobbes and Nozick – but not exclusively: Williams' own book offers an ethical application.

We can distinguish between the intrinsically subversive and the merely accidentally subversive genealogy. In the intrinsic type we have an account of the history of certain attitudes, beliefs or practices that their proponent cannot accept without damage to his esteem for, and certitude in, the attitudes, beliefs or practices themselves. For one thing, it may in some cases actually be a part of the belief-system that the belief-system itself had a quite different kind of origin – most religions are like this, perhaps all. And that point quite apart, it would be a very well-padded Christian who could accept Hume's account of the origins of monotheistic belief and continue with faith unabated, for Hume presents these beliefs as arising out of processes that have no apparent connection with truth, and in some cases out of motives that are positively disreputable, such as the wish to appear, to oneself and others, the kind of person so favoured as to be capable of believing things that others find literally unbelievable. Nobody who accepts what Nietzsche tells us in *The Genealogy of Morals* could continue in a calm conviction of the sanctity of Christian moral principles, as he presents these

² For Williams' preferred usage of the term "genealogy," see Williams (2002), pp. 20–21.

principles as an expression of hatred, resentment, and bewilderment. Not, notice, just as arising out of these emotions – which a Christian moralist could construe in a sense that would make it quite harmless (see how the Holy Spirit has transformed hatred into love!) – but as being an *expression* of them, and a self-deceptive expression at that.

Darwinism, by contrast, is only accidentally subversive. Those who come to accept the Darwinian history of man can continue to lead a human life without any trace of insincerity – may indeed under certain circumstances feel that they are for the first time living it without insincerity. *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* were subversive only because of their conflict with a particular view of the status and provenance of the human race, and one that was at the time widely and fervently held; only where it still is are they subversive today. Some, as Williams points out, might regard Hume's account of the origins of justice as subversive, if they begin by thinking that only being the embodiment of some kind of Platonic absolute standard was good enough for it, and then find him presenting it as a human solution to a human social problem.³

Some genealogies, by contrast, are vindictory: the story they tell is in one way or another a recommendation of whatever it is they tell us the history of. Again, we can apply the distinction between the intrinsic and the accidental. The genealogies – by which I mean the causal histories – of many of our beliefs are intrinsically justificatory in a very strong sense: they give an essential place to the very facts believed in, so if *that* is how they came about they must be true. Or a genealogy may vindicate a practice, exhibiting it as arising out of the need to find a solution to a problem; and we may then regard it as intrinsically vindictory if the problem is one that any human society (or any individual – though in fact the best known examples are social) will want to solve. (Although if that is all it does it would of course be vulnerable to the appearance of another possible solution with additional advantages – “intrinsically” does not imply “conclusively.”) A genealogy is accidentally vindictory, on the other hand, when the increased prestige it confers on its object is due to features that are relatively local, or of limited timespan. That the history of a certain College custom began with the express wish of the Founder may serve to justify its continuation – in the eyes of some people, so long as the Founder is held in high esteem. That the royal line has an extremely ancient pedigree, preferably going back to a demigod, is a political device which itself has an extremely ancient pedigree,

³ Williams (2002), p. 36.

but it will not bolster the loyalty of subjects who think the present king a scoundrel if they have an even lower opinion of his ancestors.

There may also be neutral genealogies, which give us a history of X without either impugning or enhancing the standing of X. I doubt whether there can be such a thing as an intrinsically neutral genealogy, if that means one containing no feature which human beings could, even locally and temporarily, find to tell for or against the item whose history it purports to narrate. But I also doubt whether this is a very interesting class for philosophy, and don't propose to spend time or energy on it. Indeed unless we use the word very broadly, genuinely neutral genealogies of any type may be vanishingly rare. Williams is surely right that very many genealogies work by ascribing functions to their objects, telling us what they are for.⁴ If the function is of some importance to us and the object performs it well, we have to that degree a recommendation, if we find the function in some way disreputable, then a critique. If the function really is one to which we are indifferent it becomes unclear what the genealogist can be aiming for: certainly not an evaluation of the phenomenon whose genealogy is offered; but not even a neutral explanation of its existence either – for how could it explain the existence of any practice or institution to show that it has a certain function, if it is a matter of indifference to us whether anything performs that function or not?

2. HISTORY DISTINGUISHED FROM GENEALOGY

What distinguishes genealogy from history more generally? To begin with, a genealogy is the story of how something or other (a practice, a concept, a system of beliefs, a political constitution) came about, the story of its “birth” or of the processes leading up to it. A second minimal requirement is that it should not just describe this “target phenomenon” as it formerly was and as it is now, but that the historical narrative should throw some light, descriptive, explanatory or justificatory, on the phenomenon in its later shape. That means that the kind of history that describes successive earlier versions of X until it reaches the one obtaining now, but without conveying a sense of the development of the stages out of their predecessors, though it may well be called a “history of X,” is not genealogy. The line of demarcation is not in practice a sharp one (no sharper than the expression “conveying a sense of”), and may invite controversy: to take a case here

⁴ Williams (2002), pp. 31–32.

very much in point, I would say – but expecting some to disagree – that chapter 7 of Williams’ *Truth and Truthfulness*, on the conception of time first in Herodotus and then in Thucydides, was genealogical as well as historical, since it tells us why the later conception was sure to appear, given the situation created by the earlier one; whereas the historical material of chapters 5 (esp. §5) and 8, although fascinating in itself, was in the terms of this distinction historical only.⁵

Should we also distinguish between genealogies and state-of-nature stories? I think we should. I have been using “genealogy” very broadly, allowing it to include even the detailing of the causal processes, perhaps lasting only a fraction of a second, that lead to a belief. But even on a much narrower usage there seems to be a point in keeping the two expressions separate. If we take the normal meanings of the words as our starting point, we would expect state-of-nature theories to begin by considering conditions as they are supposed (by the theory itself) to have been in some very early stage of human existence and association, a state characterized only in terms of factors to which any human society must at one time have been subject. So famous a genealogy as Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morality*, beginning as it does from a position in which there is a ruling class and a subject class, and a ruling class with a quite specific behavioural code and specific attitudes towards its subjects, is hardly a state-of-nature theory thus understood; most of Foucault’s projects certainly aren’t, for the same kind of reason. By contrast, Hobbes’ equally famous account of the origins of government could well be a state-of-nature theory, at least in intention; and so (if I may intrude myself on this company, taking shameless advantage of the kindly helping hand from Williams) could my own construction of the concept of knowledge in *Knowledge and the State of Nature*.⁶ What the words themselves suggest, to put it roughly, is that state-of-nature theories are those genealogies which start from human prehistory. But we shall soon see that this is not the only way to look at things, and may not be the best.

What is the status of genealogies, including state-of-nature stories? I implied earlier that they might be factual, imaginary, or conjectural, and in doing so I was taking my cue from Williams:

A genealogy is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about.⁷

⁵ Williams (2002).

⁶ Williams (2002), p. 31 ff; Craig (1990).

⁷ Williams (2002), p. 20.

But is that really so, and in any case what do these terms mean? If “imaginary” really does mean imaginary, in the sense of just made up, a piece of fiction, then there are going to be awkward questions about how a fictitious history can either explain anything or lay claim to affect our attitudes toward it. As Williams says, now thinking of state-of-nature theories as being fictional genealogies, “It is a good question, how a fictional narrative can explain anything.”⁸ One might well think that a genealogy could do that only if it was, or at least purported to be, true, and was received as true by its audience.

In some cases this seems clear, almost obvious. Suppose Nietzsche had added a brief appendix to the *Genealogie der Moral* saying that his apparent history was not intended to be factual, that he was not claiming that things really happened that way. No, he was only telling a story, imaginatively supplying a fictitious past for the actual present; the only sense in which he wanted to claim truth for it was that of psychological plausibility, the sense in which a novelist might want to claim truth: in the situations in which he fictionally placed them, human beings might very well act much as he described his characters as acting. Wouldn't the devouter section of his readership feel relieved? They can now regard Nietzsche's narrative as an ingenious piece powered by a dark, even misanthropic imagination – whilst continuing to think of morality as having whatever prestigious pedigree they were previously inclined to ascribe to it: it began when God communicated with humanity through prophets, or when men first encountered and read the eternal Vedas, or whatever. The more scrupulously honest among them might feel that now, since Nietzsche's imaginary genealogy had shown that it *could* have originated in another way, it would take just a little more weight of evidence to be quite sure that really it originated as they had previously thought – for whatever the subject matter the appearance of a new hypothesis that isn't obviously absurd puts a little more epistemic pressure on the old, familiar incumbent. But beyond that, no change of action or attitude, just moral business as usual. Likewise, no believer need shift their position as a result of accepting that Hume's account of the origins of religious belief *could* have been true, so long as they remain convinced that it isn't.⁹

⁸ Williams (2002), p. 21.

⁹ Strictly speaking, that does depend on just what the believer's position was. A system of religious beliefs may include beliefs about man and human psychology, or about the kind of thing the deity would allow to happen, in which case acceptance of a genealogy as merely possible, in the sense in which the plot of a good novel is possible, might indeed conflict with them.

Nietzsche's essay pretty clearly claims to be real, if sketchy, history; it has already been remarked that it is some way from being a paradigm instance of the state-of-nature method. Hume's *The Natural History of Religion* undoubtedly claims to be real history (witness, for instance, the first couple of paragraphs), but when we ask whether it is to be classified as state-of-nature theory the answer is mixed. In his chapters 2 ("Origin of Polytheism") and 3 ("The Same Subject Continued") he is at times thinking of conditions in which there are kingdoms and nations well enough organized to be capable of fighting wars; at other times he writes of events that could and would be experienced in a far less complex and developed society. People go in for elementary observation of nature and causal thinking about it:

Storms and tempests ruin what is nourished by the sun. The sun destroys what is fostered by the moisture of dews and rains.

We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want; which are distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable. These unknown causes, then, become the constant object of our hope and fear . . . ¹⁰

There is no change of voice noticeable anywhere, such as might suggest that some of this is supposed to be factual, some imaginary. All is factual, at least in intention. For some parts of it (e.g., the passage about nations that are at first successful and then suffer military reverses) we have historical documentation; for other parts it is just that we know enough about human life to know that that is how things were, because it is how things must have been.

Now we should all surely agree that, even at the earliest times when human beings were interested in what nature offered them to gather, "storms and tempests [sometimes] ruined what was nourished by the sun." That is not imaginary, nor would I even call it conjectural. But it isn't all that Hume's explanation of the emergence of polytheistic beliefs needs – he has to make a claim about how the human beings who experienced those natural facts reacted to the experience, and it is the status of this claim that threatens to make trouble for the state-of-nature theorist.

Initially, we were worried by the question "If the state of nature is something imaginary, how can it explain anything?" But it seems – for the moment at least – that that may not be the problem. Where, as in this

¹⁰ Both these passages are from Hume (1757/2006) Ch. 2.

example from Hume, the posited state of nature isn't imaginary, it can't be the problem. But there surely is one. Whether or not it is definitive of the state-of-nature method, as distinguished from genealogy more generally, that the posited state of nature is taken to be prehistorical, in the sense of being something that obtained way back beyond the reach of historical evidence, that is how it is being taken here. We are relying on judgments about what the natural world, and the human beings in it, must have been like, even all that indeterminately long time ago. No doubt storms and tempests ruined what was nourished by the sun; no doubt our ancestors, who had been hoping to eat it, noticed.

There is something liberating about prehistory. If we can get agreement that "things must have been like that," then we can proceed without the painful business of assembling detailed evidence – of which there isn't any. But precisely because of that there is a cost, and the bill arrives when a chink appears in the agreement. Sticking with Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, suppose we are asked what reason we have to think that human beings reacted to the experience of those facts by imagining, and coming to believe in, a number of invisible person-like powers manipulating nature. We aren't talking about any particular people, so our answer must take the form "Human beings are like that" or, rather, as it can hardly be maintained that all humans would react in that way (most of us wouldn't for a start) "Human beings with property X (e.g., untouched by the cultural developments of the last three thousand years) are like that." And once we see this we can also see that the state-of-nature theorist has an epistemic hill to climb, if not a mountain. Unless we are dealing with the most basic, almost animal, reactions, or those without which their very survival would have been threatened, how sure can we be that they were indeed like that? The tendency to pass from the experiences Hume describes to primitive polytheistic beliefs does not appear to fall into either of those categories.

It may help a little if we try to fill in the gap. They are sure, we might say, to have found that they can control nature in certain respects, so they are bound to become aware of the fact that they cannot control it in others, equally or more important. They can't avert the damaging storm, or make it rain to end the drought. They have all had, in early life, the experience of not being able to do something themselves, but being able to get it done for them provided they could engage the powers, and good will, of adults. Later, as adults themselves, it will be natural to repeat the thought: there are superior powers who will do for us what we can't do ourselves, provided we can maintain their good will. And polytheism has arrived.

That may be an improvement, but it leaves plenty of business still to be done. The tricky bit came when I said that it would be natural to repeat the childhood thought about superior powers. Would it? Given that these powers have to be invisible, perhaps the thought of them wouldn't have been natural at all; perhaps pragmatic evolutionary forces had so structured humans' mental processes that it was very difficult indeed for them to think of something as existing but imperceptible. Perhaps that thought is a major cultural achievement. Or perhaps it isn't – how do I know? So none of this entitles me to say that that is how they would have reacted, but at most that were we somehow to discover that that is how they *did* react we shouldn't be too surprised.

We may however imagine a somewhat different position. Suppose we knew that the earliest stirrings of religious belief were polytheistic; and suppose we knew that they came *very* early in the development of mankind. Then we might conjecture that they must be a reaction to some basic and as it were “pre-cultural” experience, whereupon that of encountering uncomfortable distortions in the basic rhythms of nature would become a good candidate, and our narrative about the experience of superior (parental) powers along with it.

But all this is fanciful and uncritical. A project like Hume's ought not to assume that the very first religious beliefs were polytheistic, not even if the earliest we find are polytheistic without exception. It could be that the first beliefs were about a single guardian spirit of the group, and that polytheism arose by gradual assimilation of the beliefs of other groups as human society became more integrated and its groupings fewer and larger. We do not know that the earliest religious beliefs arose *very* early in the history of the human race. Even if we did there would still be quite a wide range of candidates for the post of “trigger” for belief in the supernatural, and besides that no guarantee that such belief arose everywhere in the same way. We are just speculating in something which is not quite a vacuum, but very nearly: the “fact pressure” is pretty low around here.

Is this a criticism of the genealogical method as a whole, or is it just a sceptical review of the early chapters of Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*? More the latter, as far as anything we have said up to now goes, and you might even think that the sceptical review itself was one-sided and ungenerous. After all, Hume didn't just talk about storms and tempests versus the sun, he also mentioned military successes and reverses. A sympathetic critic might see this as a move towards real history, the study of societies that have left written documents bearing on what they thought their gods were good for and how they were to be propitiated. These might,

if Hume was lucky, support his contention that anxiety and bewilderment were central to the motivation of religious belief. Or they might not – that’s always the risk when you get into real history.

Nevertheless, the foregoing considerations might still amount to a general criticism of the state-of-nature method, exposing as they do the weaknesses of its position at the less well-evidenced end of the genealogical spectrum. But I think they would be better seen as a warning to state-of-nature theorists to make responsible use of the near factual vacuum in which they operate; it becomes a general criticism only if responsible use is impossible. For that we have as yet no argument; what our discussion of Hume’s *The Natural History of Religion* suggests is that, although admittedly it is very easy to become too speculative, one can find some reasonably firm points for building a state-of-nature story, and it remains to be seen whether one can ever find enough of them to bring such a story to an effective conclusion.

3. EXPLAINING THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE VIA A “STATE OF NATURE” NARRATIVE

I would now like to take a retrospective look at my own state-of-nature account of the origins of the everyday concept of knowledge in *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, to see how it looks in the light of the preceding discussion. A point to be made straight away is that I am not at liberty to declare either the state of nature from which my story begins or the events that transpire in it imaginary, in the sense of altogether fictional. I do and must suppose that there were societies whose members, collectively and individually, had the needs I ascribe to them and were able, whether as the outcome of some conscious process or of other equally real tendencies, to find their way to the solution I describe; furthermore, that whereas some of my particular examples were indeed imaginary, many events that would have served equally well as examples really did happen, and happened often. (So when Williams says, drawing on Nozick’s distinction between “law-defective” and “fact-defective” explanations, that my genealogy was “fact-defective,” the response must be “Well, yes and no.”)¹¹ I was trying to explain how certain real results have arisen, and only real pressures can produce real results. There is of course a sense in which imaginary pressures can lead to real results, but only when that means imaginary pressures in the minds of the real people whose responses produced the results, people who really do imagine that they are subject to certain pressures and so act

¹¹ Williams (2002), p. 32.

as if they really were. Possibly something like that might apply to some of the situations Hume describes in *The Natural History of Religion*, but in *Knowledge and the State of Nature* I wasn't in that business at all. My line was, and had to be, that the needs were real and the persons concerned would have come, in one way or another, to satisfy them.

However, in spite of the fact that I had to be appealing to real situations, real needs, real responses – even if this appeal could afford to be of the indirect kind characterized in the preceding paragraph – it may be questioned (and I am about to do so) whether the method used essentially involves any reference to the past at all. Right at the beginning of the book I described the procedure in these terms:

We take some prima facie plausible hypothesis about what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like . . .¹²

the core of the concept of knowledge is an outcome of certain very general facts about the human situation . . .¹³

The first of these remarks suggests the present, in so far as it appears to refer to any time at all; and the second reads as if it were pretty much indifferent which time or times we are talking about, so long as there are human beings in it. I did, as a matter of fact, use some examples which hinted at state-of-nature philosophy, but I could have stuck exclusively to examples which readers would have recognized as part of their own everyday lives. And, indeed, I had to maintain that the circumstances that favour the formation of the concept of knowledge still exist, or did until very recently, since otherwise I would have had no convincing answer to the obvious question why it should have remained in use, nor any support for my thesis that the method reveals the core of the concept as it is to be found now. It was only in so far as I hoped to explain the presence of the concept of knowledge – our present everyday concept of knowledge – in early cultures and their languages that I needed to think in terms of historical examples at all, and then only historical, not putatively prehistorical, examples. It is true that in saying that the “very general facts about the human situation” were:

so general . . . that one cannot imagine their changing whilst anything we can still recognize as social life persists.¹⁴

¹² Craig (1990), p. 2.

¹³ Craig (1990), p. 10.

¹⁴ Craig (1990), p. 10.

I effectively committed myself to the view that there must have been plenty of prehistorical examples, as we surely don't think that in prehistoric times there was nothing we would have recognized as social life. But a reader who, although finding that remark too sweeping, was nevertheless prepared to agree that the facts in question have held in every society of which we have much knowledge would find this weakened premise no less adequate to support the whole of my argument than the stronger version was. Reference to mankind's prehistory was no essential part of my argument, but so to speak epiphenomenal to it. It was essential to Hume's – not because it was essential to his method, but because of what he was using the method for: to account for a state of affairs which we find (so he thought) at the very beginning of detectable history, namely near-universal polytheism.

4. TWO DIVERGING USES FOR "STATE OF NATURE" NARRATIVES

I have been looking at a number of genealogical enterprises. Some of them (those of Hume and Nietzsche) clearly and essentially presented themselves as real histories, though without committing themselves to times and places. Earlier I also mentioned that of Hobbes, saying that it could well be read as making claims about human prehistory, but that remark must now be revisited. For one thing, the chapter of *Leviathan* in which "the warre of every man against every man" makes its celebrated appearance sticks firmly to the present tense, and happily accommodates sentences like:

It may peradventure be thought, that there never was such a time, nor condition of warre as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places, where they live so now.¹⁵

I won't belabour the textual evidence, though there is plenty more of it, because there is a decisive methodological point as well. Hobbes is making a constitutional recommendation. What he needs to claim is that human nature *is* such that without a unitary and powerful restraining agency life will soon be "nasty, brutish and short." The temporal range of that "is" can be as wide as he likes – or dares – but it must include the present. For one could hardly recommend absolute monarchy to one's contemporaries just on the grounds that once, a long time ago, men had need of it. His central claim, to put it another way, was not about human prehistory but human nature; though if you think that human nature is invariant, at least in respect

¹⁵ Hobbes (1651/1996), Bk. I ch. 13 "Of the Naturall Condition of Mankind."

of those particular features of it needed for your theory, the central claim will have implications about a prehistoric state of nature as well.

Our fourth example (the present writer's own) turned out to be in a somewhat similar position. Whereas Hobbes wanted to recommend a certain political constitution to his contemporaries, I wanted to explain something about our contemporary conceptual equipment. So I needed to make claims about contemporary (or at least near-contemporary) facts, and any implied reference to a state of nature was a nonloadbearing frill rendered harmless by the basic character of the particular facts in question. That suggests, I suppose, that my claim to membership of the state-of-nature tradition was spurious; but then again, how could it be spurious if I am in such good company as that of Hobbes, on whose membership I have just cast exactly the same slur? Perhaps the defining feature of the tradition is not an argumentative strategy but a literary device, that of presenting a generalisation about the human condition as a sketchy description of the early life of the race. In that case we misrepresent it if we see it as a type of genealogy, namely that in which the facts appealed to are prehistorical (and hence likely to be so conjectural that we might be inclined to use the word "fiction"). The truth is that it is not essentially historical at all, and if it appears so then only because of its tendency to stick to generalisations so general that they don't sound absurd if occasionally applied to cavemen. Williams tells us that the state of nature is not the Pleistocene.¹⁶ Indeed not. The question "when?" just doesn't apply to it. When it does apply, as for instance to some of the things Hume wrote in *The Natural History of Religion*, that is not because of the state-of-nature method *per se*, but because of the particular phenomena it is being used to illuminate.

State-of-nature theories are "imaginary" then, at most in the sense that they weave fictions around factual claims about human nature. If those claims are false so is the theory; it is not just an unusually fictitious piece of fiction, as a novel might be whose author was conducting a far-flung thought-experiment. Such hyperfiction might have philosophical uses, like persuading us of the value, or warning us of the dangers, of trying to develop psychological traits we do not at present possess, but state-of-nature theory it is not.

The depth of factual obligation incurred by a state-of-nature theory depends on its aims. It will be greatest when its intentions are explanatory, to account for the existence of the target phenomenon, whether or not they are at the same time vindicatory or subversive. If the *explanandum* is

¹⁶ Williams (2002), p. 27 ff.

real, the explanation must appeal to real *explananda*. (Many combinations are possible. Hume's in *The Natural History of Religion* was explanatory and subversive. Williams' is explanatory and vindicatory, as was mine. Hume's state-of-nature doctrine about justice was certainly vindicatory; the extent to which it was also intended to be explanatory is a delicate interpretative question.¹⁷ That of Hobbes, with much greater certainty, was vindicatory only – or perhaps “commendatory” is a better word.)

To account for the existence of an institution it is not enough to point out its advantages, and say or imply that it has arisen because human beings came to perceive them; we need in addition to be able to see how its advantages could have become visible to people who hadn't yet got it. That condition can be a real barrier. The benefits of a good education, for instance, may be visible only to those who have already had one or are well on the way to it. In such a case, describing the benefits falls a long way short of explaining why the relevant good exists, or has been achieved. Hume knew the problem:¹⁸

But in order to form society, 'tis requisite not only that it be advantageous, but also that men be sensible of its advantages; and 'tis impossible, in their wild uncultivated state, that by study and reflexion alone, they should ever be able to attain this knowledge.¹⁹

And that is not all. Just because, although not yet enjoying a certain good, I am in a position to see its value to me, it does not follow that I am in a position to obtain it or even to take the smallest step toward it. We may, for instance, wonder how, if there ever were a Hobbesian state of nature, men managed to set up the first contract with the stability needed for it to be a contract at all. How, being used to a situation of constant self-seeking aggression, presumably larded with the deceit that such a situation would be full of in so far as people communicated with each other at all, did they summon up enough trust in their fellows to risk performing their own part of the agreement, or even to believe that anything worth calling an agreement had been arrived at? It is not merely better in tune with his text and his purposes, but altogether more sympathetic too, to hear Hobbes'

¹⁷ Hume did say that “... the suppos'd state of nature... never had, and never cou'd have, any reality.” See Hume, (1978) p. 493, which speaks against any straightforwardly explanatory intent. But there are contrary indications – see n. 18.

¹⁸ And in the case of Justice, which is his subject here, he also had an answer (to be found in the sentence immediately following the quoted passage): circumstances naturally arising within the family display the benefits of certain social arrangements, so human beings are not in the position of having to foresee these benefits without any prior experience of them. It is the presence in his text of thoughts like this that causes doubt as to whether Hume's project is vindicatory only, or explanatory as well.

¹⁹ Hume (1978) Bk. III Pt. II Sect. II, p. 486.

story not as explanatory but as a memorable way of recommending absolute monarchy – recommending it to us, without saying anything about whether it recommended itself to our forbears or, if it did, how they ever managed to follow the recommendation. In a particular case it may be obvious that these two conditions, call them motive and opportunity, are satisfiable, even obvious enough for an author permissibly to leave it unsaid. But that should not blind us to the fact that they do have to be satisfied, or to the fact that sometimes it isn't obvious at all.

Let us therefore turn to *vindictory* genealogies, and consider a schematic and wholly imaginary story. Once upon a time, there were beings who lived without much political organization at all. Then they realized that life would be nicer if they did A, so they agreed to do it, and once they had done it they saw that life would be nicer still if they did B as well, so in due course they did that, too. Then a few of them spotted that C would be a further improvement, and with a little effort they soon convinced everyone else. So they did C, and then they had a secular liberal democratic constitution, and they all lived happily ever after. Now provided only that all this is realistic in one respect, namely that what these beings prefer, what they regard as constitutive of welfare and would welcome in any social arrangements which promoted them, are the sort of things which produce the same reaction in us, this little just-so story can serve as a recommendation of secular liberal democracy, which it portrays as conferring the benefits of A, B, and C. For that modest purpose, nothing else about the story need be true. It need not even be plausible that the community would in practice have managed the transitions between the stages, so long as the “genealogist” doesn't claim to be telling us how secular liberal democracies have actually come about, or could be brought about – for which further strands of realism will be necessary.

Now some genealogists may like to avail themselves of this route, even though it involves admitting that the genealogical element in their procedure was figurative or rhetorical – just a technique for highlighting the ways in which a certain practice is beneficial. But I can hardly join them. I didn't just want to show that the use of the concept of knowledge is beneficial in certain specific ways, but in addition that it has the very shape it would have if designed with these benefits in view. These are two very different things. A tomato may bring us certain benefits which a nutritionist could specify; it is a far more controversial thing (and surely false?) to suggest that if a designer set out with just those benefits in view, and the power to execute their design, they would end up with a tomato. Vests have the advantage that when they get too old to wear you can use them as dusters, but there is

no reason why anyone designing something that could be used as a duster should come up with a vest.

But even those who can and do regard their story as no more than a story may be tempted to let their ambitions snowball, and so may their readers on their behalf. The first, imaginary narrative may do more than merely recommend secular liberal democracy as offering certain specific benefits. It may imply, depending upon its detail, that the search for just these benefits, if successfully pursued, would lead to just that political system. It does not suggest that there is no other way of getting there, so it does not necessarily suggest that that is how we actually got there (assuming that we have), nor does it even necessarily suggest that we could get there, or could have got there, like that. But it may do so. And it inevitably will be taken to do so if the beings it describes are pretty much like us in their needs and capacities, and the steps it describes them as taking are ones that we think it would be quite easy for human beings to bring off, especially so long as we have no other story in our repertoire in which the agents land up in the same place by a different route.

Once we start thinking of the story in these terms, however, we will no longer quite be treating it as a commendatory fiction, but will be well on the way to treating it as an hypothesis to explain the existence of secular liberal democracies. (Or possibly as a plan for bringing them about – although the fact that our story, the particular one of my example, began from a condition of near-zero political organization, whereas we don't, may pose a problem for this application of it.) When we are dealing with a real piece of writing in the state-of-nature tradition it may well be unclear, even indeterminate, what selection of these purposes the author had in mind.

Be that as it may, avowedly imaginary histories may be capable of some limited effectiveness of a vindictory kind. But the distinction between state-of-nature theory and genealogy is not one between the imaginary and the real; nor is it one between doing very early history on barely any evidence and later history on rather more; it is more like that between starting from what we know about human beings and their situation quite generally, and starting from what history tells us about them at a particular time and place. One can see why the second and third of these distinctions should have been run together: it is an attractive device to couch one's presumed knowledge of human beings in general in terms of a prehistorical scene. One can see how the first and second could merge in the mind: the state-of-nature theorist seems to offer no evidence, and so can appear just to be making up a story, which indeed in a sense he is. One can also see why the distinction does not feel razor sharp. An emboldened state-of-nature theorist who knows

that humans aren't quite like this now but is convinced that in their early state they must have been is pushing towards an assertion about a particular time (within a few hundred thousand years anyway) and place (somewhere in Africa, most probably); whereas genealogy may sometimes involve very little history and start at a pretty indeterminate place and date – as did Nietzsche. We saw Hume (in *The Natural History of Religion*) freely mingling materials from different points on this spectrum.

In the interests of clarity it must be said that all this leaves the expression “state-of-nature theory” uncomfortably stretched across two very disparate procedures: one involving perfectly genuine, even if largely conjectural, assertions about human prehistory, the other turning essentially on claims about more or less contemporary human psychology. Only those who believe that the human condition has a constant component will see much relationship between them, and then only when restricted to features of human life that are agreed to belong to this unchanging core. Otherwise the two methods will appear to be miles apart, both in their starting points and in what they can legitimately deliver.

5. GENEALOGIES AS REVELATORY OF FUNCTION

Williams remarks at one point that some genealogies detect function in a phenomenon where we might not have suspected it.²⁰ (What is justice for? – what is the concept of knowledge for?) If that is true, then some functional phenomena must be good at covering their functional tracks, so to speak. And in that case we might hope that a genealogy will show us how they do it. How does the function disappear from view – or keep out of sight in the first place? What then keeps it well enough hidden for us to feel that the genealogist has told us something surprising?

It would be ridiculous to suppose that there is any general answer to that question. There may be cases (of the subversive sort, presumably) in which an element of self-deception is an essential part of the story: the practice in question couldn't perform its function if the participants realized that that was why they went in for it. We may hold a certain belief in order to make life more bearable; but it wouldn't do us that service unless we believed that we believe it because it is true, or because we have good evidence for it. There may on the other hand be cases in which the (perfectly reputable) reason why we do something has just slipped out of sight from

²⁰ Williams (2002), p. 31.

sheer familiarity; bringing that reason back to consciousness needn't impede our performance at all – it might in fact help us improve our efficiency. But Williams thinks that function may go into hiding in another, particularly interesting and important way: it may be that some originally functional phenomena do, in a certain sense, actually cease to be functional. In some cases, paradoxical as it sounds, they *must* outgrow their functionality to be capable of performing their function. And he thinks that in these cases the genealogical method is our best hope of adequate understanding what has happened; philosophers who try to stick with the functional account get matters badly wrong, and themselves into insoluble difficulties – whereas philosophers who ignore, suppress, or just don't believe in the functional background leave too much unexplained, and too much that is central to the topic unsaid. With genealogy we need neither overstress function, nor overlook it.

What it means for a functional practice to outgrow its function, and why it might need to do so, is well illustrated by Williams' own example: the virtue of truthfulness came to be valued because its widespread adoption conferred benefits connected with, and arising out of, the distribution of reliably accurate information. Such information is essential to guide individual projects, and to co-ordinate group-action, so everyone feels the benefits to a greater or lesser degree. But this establishes the value of truthfulness only in a rather general sense, one that leaves room for plenty of cases in which it will confer no benefit at all, or certainly no net benefit, on the person who tells the truth. To tell the truth may land you in trouble with the law, give vital information to a rival or an enemy – or to a potential customer, and bang go your chances of selling that second-hand car. If the truth is complex, telling it can be bothersome – the bother may far outweigh the advantage to the informant. The costs of finding out what the truth is may be high, and the benefits fall not to the inquirer but to those he informs, sometimes not even to them – a hard-won truth may turn out to be useless. On many an occasion it may well be in the individual's interest to lie, or to shirk the effort of making sure that their belief is true. To say at this point, as some do, that such dereliction of truthfulness reduces confidence in the practice of truth-telling and so saps its benefits for everyone, this individual included, looks lame when we think how much inaccuracy and insincerity goes on all the time without the confident exchange of information suffering any noticeable decline. No individual, thinking in terms of the costs and benefits of telling the truth on some particular occasion, and finding the former outweighing the latter, could be expected to reverse that decision on such insubstantial grounds as the resulting damage to

truth-telling in general. What is needed is that they should not think in such credit-and-debit terms at all, but assign value (call it “intrinsic value” if you like) to truthfulness *per se*, and societies will accordingly put considerable effort into bringing up citizens who have a strong *prima facie* disposition to be truthful.

Truthfulness isn’t an isolated case. We can easily think of other examples – here, for instance, is a variation on a Hobbesian theme. For the purpose of security against the descent into the “war of every man against every man” and the threat to our lives that that would entail, a number of us form ourselves into a state-like society under the control of an absolute monarch who guarantees the peace, and the punishment of anyone who breaks it. As an enthusiastic subject I enlist in the forces that the sovereign needs to command in order to pose a threat both dire and credible enough to back this guarantee. Then a rebellion breaks out and I am ordered into action to put it down, whereupon it becomes vitally important that I should have acquired a loyalty to the sovereign that is not simply a matter of my enthusiasm for the function for which he was enthroned. The idea was that he would keep the peace and obviate the danger of early and violent death, but early and violent death is exactly what I and my comrades are now facing, in his service. So it seems that our best bet would be to walk away from the battlefield, leaving the monarch incompetent to do that very thing for which the monarchy was created. Its very function, in other words, requires that there be subjects whose loyalty to it is not just a matter of their belief that it fulfils that function. It cannot fulfill its function unless there are many who will stick with it although well aware that at this moment it is not fulfilling its function, and will not do so for the clearly foreseeable future. A prime concern of the sovereign and of all who support the political arrangements must be to ensure that most of the citizens are of this loyal disposition. How this has actually been done, by a mixture of threats, promises, and early upbringing in codes of citizenship and honour, doubtless has as long and detailed a history as the one to which Williams introduces us in the case of the virtues of truthfulness.

We can now appreciate the claims Williams makes on behalf of the genealogical method. Some thinkers, rightly impressed by the functional aspect of some practice or institution, try to understand it in functional terms alone. They can then never really explain how it achieves the stability to be effective – it seems too vulnerable to such commonplace enemies as the free rider (as with truthfulness), or any serious reflection on its efficiency (as with loyalty). Rightly impressed by their failure, or wrongly impressed by the apparent sanctity of whatever is under investigation, other

thinkers eschew function altogether and reach for deontological or absolutist answers. The first group miss the intrinsic value of the practice, the second miss the instrumental; and both miss the connection between them. The genealogical method alone can separate the two phases, or two aspects, connect them again, and give both their due.

To claim that *only* the genealogical method can do this sounds rash. After all, how many alternatives have we tried? But it sounds less rash if we put it the other way round, saying that any method that can do this will count as genealogical. Not just less rash, but quite likely true – for any procedure that first presents what I might call the “functional prototype,” then the apparently nonfunctional “finished product,” and then links the two, will in so doing have shown how the functional motivations can lead to the veiling of the function. And that sounds like genealogy, on most people’s reckoning.

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A Guide to Further Reading on Bernard Williams

There is a small, but growing, secondary literature on Williams. Students who want to take their study of Williams further will find a good starting point in the dictionary entry by Garrett Cullity:

Garrett Cullity, "Bernard Williams," in Stuart Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century British Philosophers* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), vol. 2, pp. 1132–1138.

Supplemented by the online encyclopedia entry by Tim Chappell:

Chappell, Timothy (Spring 2006 Edition) "Bernard Williams," Zalta, Edward N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/williams-bernard/>

There is a valuable general survey of the whole of Williams' work in:

Mark Jenkins, *Bernard Williams (Philosophy Now)* (Acumen/McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

The multiauthor volume of essays published as a Festschrift for Williams contains several important essays about his work:

Altham, J. E. J. and Harrison, T. R. (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

A volume of the *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (2003) recently published the proceedings of a conference devoted to Williams' work and includes papers by Thomas Scanlon, Allan Gibbard, and Charles Taylor. An invaluable scholarly resource is the complete bibliography of Williams' own work now available in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, pp. 215–227.

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