Introduction

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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 it 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. Louden. 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] Louden 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 Louden'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, Louden simply concedes that Williams was right to criticize this aspect of Kant's views, but also to note that this is an instance of incommensurablity between historical outlooks. Williams' arguments and those of Kant do not engage with each other, Louden 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.