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Williams on Integrity, Ground Projects and Reasons to Be Moral

This paper addresses the question, “Why be moral?” from the standpoint of Bernard Williams’s moral and political philosophy. Schematically, Williams’s answer to this question was that ethical reasons, like all an agent’s practical reasons, must be grounded in those fundamental projects with which an agent is most deeply identified. As a corollary of this most general claim, it follows that to act from such ground projects is to act *from integrity*.¹ One of Williams’s concerns, in addressing this question, was whether or not a priori arguments can be given that the contents of anyone’s ground projects are shaped by rationally inescapable principles of morality. (For example, principles of the kind defended by Thomas Nagel in *The Possibility of Altruism* [Nagel 1970].) His answer was negative: there is no sound transcendental argument to the effect that the requirements of morality are constitutive of rational agency as such. That critique is based on Williams’s conception of practical reasons as all “internal” in a sense I will explain.

A further aim of this paper is to extend the consideration of Williams’s answer to our orienting question from its origin in a conception of practical reasons in general – as always “internal” – to his later political psychology. This late discussion presents his considered verdict on the nature of ground projects [Williams 2002, chapter 9]. It complements his earlier account of internal reasons and integrity and addresses a major line of concern about his whole argument strategy. This concern is one that must be addressed satisfactorily if his treatment of these themes is to be plausible.

The concern is this: for Williams’s critics, the key bridging concepts that take us from ethics to politics, those of a ground project and of an agent’s integrity, fall outside the scope of the moral completely. That is why, for them, his argument is puzzlingly weak. Williams himself added that whatever resonance his account of an agent’s integrity was supposed to have, it was not that of a principle

¹ Williams, as we shall see, connects this idea of integrity to that of identification with those ground projects from which an agent’s reasons stem: “[an agent] is identified with his actions as flowing from his projects and attitudes [H]is actions and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified”. [Williams, 1973, p. 100, pp. 116–117]

being refuted by a counterexample.² Yet his discussion of integrity produced a plethora of such counterexamples: of principled slaveholders and Nazis who exhibit the putative virtue of integrity. If such people can act from integrity, then the connection between integrity and acting in the light of moral reasons seems wholly contingent and external. For Williams's critics, absent a prior commitment to the shaping of the agent's deliberative field – that which she is prepared morally to so much as countenance – by a commitment to moral principle, appeal to an agent's ground projects arrives too late. Morality is not something, as Nagel put it, that an agent can “beg off”: its source can be known a priori and it is a constraint on the projects of all agents.

Interpreted in this way, Williams's argument is shoehorned into the contrast between altruism and egoism. With this context in place, ground projects play the role of putatively ethical commitments whose fulfillment may play a role in determining the agent's *own* conception of the good, but whose moral credentials are yet to be determined because they may turn out to be egoistic or immoral. Vicious actions may fulfill the ground projects of the principled Nazi and thus be “good for” her, but this is no help in explaining what it is to be moral. This one way trading of intuitions gives rise to a persistent sense that the two sides in this debate are talking past each other – did Williams really overlook such obvious counterexamples to his thesis?³ Williams has ignored the fact that practical agency is the ultimate “ground project” and the moral principles that constrain it are inescapable for all agents.⁴

In this paper, I extend consideration of Williams's arguments in ethics to the arguments of *Truth and Truthfulness* because only there does Williams connect the idea of an agent's ground project to the modern politics of identity [Williams 2002]. Examining this argument shows three things: first, that in spite of the criticisms that Williams's proposal received, it was one to which he remained committed. Secondly, this treatment of ground projects in the broader context

2 “I can hardly deny that I produced an integrity objection in the sense that I made an objection and it centred on the notion of integrity The objection did not, however, take the form of my trying to disprove a theory by counter-example, as much of the discussion has assumed. If the stories of George and Jim have a resonance, it is not the sound of a principle being denied by an intuition.” [Williams, 1995a, p. 211]

3 The critic continues: does not William himself note the importance of the pre-commitments to the outcome of ethical deliberation involved in what the agent is prepared to countenance? Equally, does he not also stress the category of that which the agent finds unthinkable? If the very same emphasis on the pre-structuring of the agent's deliberative field appears in Williams's work and his critics objections to it, then once again this discussion seems to have set off on the wrong foot.

4 This is the defining thesis of meta-ethical constitutivism [Nagel, 1970; Korsgaard, 2009].

of what it is to be truthful to oneself – and the political ramifications of that ideal – re-iterates his view that to act from integrity is not to act on an executive minor virtue that can be assessed independently of any assessment of an agent's ends in action. (A good example of the latter is the admirable trait of cleverness [Wallace 2001].) So a slaveholder and a Nazi cannot act from integrity given the badness of their ends in action (while they could pursue those ends while exhibiting cleverness).

Thirdly, and most importantly, this late discussion reinforces the point that to act from integrity is to act in the light of a ground project that calls for *acknowledgement* on the part of others. Acknowledgement has two dimensions: the first is that a person is harmed if the ground project with which he or she most deeply identifies fails to be acknowledged by others. The second is that such a project must be, first-personally, as much found as made. As a stable commitment to an identity there is a role to be played in the explanation of such projects by voluntary choice. For example, such a choice enters into whether or not a person structures their life around such identifications as a “home-maker” [Thomas, 2009a]. However, the element of commitment to an identity implies that such identifications cannot be adopted or abandoned *merely* at will. This final point reinforces my central claim: ground projects, as Williams conceived of them, presuppose an ideal of mutual recognition foreshadowed by his earlier discussion of the “proleptic mechanism” involved in blame. In the background to the entire discussion, then, is a conception of ethical community in which reasons are received and given.⁵

It might seem important, in characterizing such a community, to explain at length Williams's distinction between the ethical and the moral. Unfortunately, for reasons of scope I cannot give this distinction the full discussion it merits. I will note only that Williams's critique of the Morality System both informs, and is informed by, his conception of practical reasons as internal [Skorupski, 2007]. I will examine that connection in the opening section of this paper. I will, for the most part, treat the question of why one ought to be moral as why one ought to

⁵ Arthur Ripstein notes, of this conception of a modern society, that “the very possibility of persons conceiving of themselves as free and equal, and having the appropriate concepts so to regard themselves is a *historical achievement*” [Ripstein, 2010, p. 683, emphasis added]. For a discussion of this point in connection with Williams's late turn to political philosophy see Thomas [2015]. The point itself, and Williams's uneasy relationship to it, is a reminder that Williams's late work was completed under the shadow of chronic ill health, that it is sometimes not all of a piece, and that it is hard to reconcile the republican strands in his political philosophy with his foundational account of human rights in the context of his political realism.

be committed to the ethical in the least demanding sense that Williams characterized as:

the capacity shown, in some form or other, by humans in all cultures to live under rules and values and to shape their behavior in some degree to social expectations, in ways that are not under surveillance and not directly controlled by threats and rewards. [Williams 2002, p. 24]

One has a reason to be moral in this sense if doing so stems from one's fundamental ground projects. To act in the light of such projects is to act from integrity; this is not, however, to be understood as an exercise in mere self-assertion as reasonable ground projects demand acknowledgement from others.

1 Williams's Psychologism about Practical Reasons

There is a fundamental connection, in Williams's work, between what seems to be a "local" critique of some of the ideas of the Modern Western ethical tradition in the guise of the Morality System and a very general thesis about the nature of practical reasons in general. Unfortunately, Williams's thesis that all practical reasons ascriptions are "internal" has been subject to as much misunderstanding as any thesis he ever advanced. Even sophisticated moral philosophers persist in treating the view as a defense of a Humean instrumentalism about reasons combined with the implausible claim that all moral motivation is grounded on (unmotivated) desires. (This latter thesis is better described as Hobbesian rather than Humean.)

More sympathetic interpreters, however, such as Stephen Finlay (and the current author) trace Williams's thesis back to his interest in an Aristotelian conception of action explanation in general and Davidson's re-working of these Aristotelian ideas in particular [Davidson 1980; Thomas 2002, 2006; Finlay 2009]. As Finlay neatly encapsulates the view:

[T]o believe that R is for you a reason for action *just is* to believe that R is a certain kind of explanation for action, an explanation of why you would act if you were to deliberate soundly. [Finlay 2009, pp. 1–2, emphasis added]

This expresses Williams's opposition to what he calls a "de-psychologised" conception of action explanation represented paradigmatically by the "external rea-

sons theorist.” The external reasons theorist severs this connection between justification and even potential explanation.

Only this conception of reasons ascriptions as internal, Williams argued, captures *what it is* for a reason to be practical: reasons explanations must say something distinctive about the particular agent and explain why she acted as she did. How does this very abstract thesis about the explanation of rational agency bear on the very specific claims that Williams makes about the Morality System?

John Skorupski has argued that the connection emerges when one takes seriously Williams’s claim that Kant was the “limiting case” of an internal reasons theorist: it is integral to our modern conception of morality that reasons be endorsable from the first-personal perspective of the agent. This is the idea that, as Skorupski puts it, “agents cannot be said to have reasons for acting which they are unable to recognise *as* reasons (even when they know the relevant facts)” [Skorupski 2007, p. 73]. If there is to be a threat to the Morality System, it cannot emerge from that thesis as both Williams and Kant share it.

The way in which the internal reasons thesis combined with this idea that reasons have to be endorsed from the perspective of the agent gives rise to a challenge to our moral outlook – at least as the Morality System represents it – emerges when it is combined with two other theses. The first is that of the *universality* of moral reasons. The second is a psychologically realistic account of actual agents and the variation in their psychological capacities. Skorupski gives the following example of a person, Tom, who lacks the capacity to feel gratitude:

Imagine that Tom simply has no sense of gratitude.... 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 recognise prudential reasons to observe the social conventions he’s been told about, 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. [Skorupski 2007, p. 88]

Given Tom’s incapacity, does he lack the relevant reason? If a reason is to play its explanatory role for a particular agent, then we must understand him or her as possessing the capacity to recognise it as a reason: our attitude to examples like Tom, Skorupski suggests, is indeed ambivalent.

But a commitment to the universality of moral reasons, plus the thesis that to blame a person requires that they be at fault for overlooking a reason available to them such that they could have done otherwise had they acknowledged it,

rules out this ambivalence. Hence the tension in our ordinary commitments – as we have historically inherited them.

Williams's conclusion is that we need to be more truthful about how our practices of praise and blame actually work. There is no such thing as a reasons ascription that can bear an "external" interpretation, but there are "optimistic internal reasons statements" that we direct at people in order to *make it true* that they have the very reasons on the basis of which we seek to blame them. Williams fully accepts the connection between his "cognitive internalism," as Skorupski calls it, and the grounding of blame on a reason potentially available to an agent:

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 a reason for him to do it*, and this certainly intends more than the thought that we had a reason to want him to do it. [Williams 1995b, p. 16]

However, Williams immediately continues:

But this may well be untrue: it was not in fact a reason for him, or not enough of a reason. Under this fiction, a continuous attempt is made to recruit people into a deliberative community that shares ethical reasons ... by means of this fiction people may well indeed be recruited into that community or kept within it. But the device can do this only because it is understood not as a device, but as connected with justification and with reasons that an agent might have had; and it can be understood in this way only because, much of the time, it is connected with those things. [Williams 1995b, p. 16]

It is not my brief here to assess, specifically, this aspect of Williams's critique of the Morality System.⁶ Its bearing on my discussion is that Williams explains this "proleptic mechanism" for expanding the scope of blame (while not recovering its full universality) by invoking a reflexive motivation, on the part of most ethical agents, to "desire to be respected by people whom, in turn, one respects" [Williams, 1989, p. 7]. It is important to add that, for Williams, blame only works in the way it actually does if it is not privileged in the way the Morality System insists, but depends on other ethical dispositions. Furthermore, it is as subject as the internal reasons constraint – which it mirrors – to the constraint that, as a matter of contingent fact, people either have this "ethically important disposition" or they do not [Williams, 1989, p. 7].

⁶ For contrasting discussions of Williams's critique of the Morality System see Charles Taylor [1995] and Robert B. Louden [2007].

Given what Williams takes to be the most general truth about reasons there can, literally, be nothing that makes an external reasons ascription true. If blame is connected to such reasons in the way that the Morality System insists, then blame cannot be all that it seems to be. But *something* survives Williams's critical account in order to meet his test of stability under reflection: a conception of blame, in a more ramified set of connections with other ethical dispositions and emotions, and a truthful recognition of putatively external reasons as optimistic internal reasons statements. A realistic, unmoralised, account of human psychology leaves us with a conception of the ethical community as constituted by those who want to relate to others on a basis of mutual respect. We can truthfully live with each other on those terms and dispense with the fictions of the Morality System.

Similarly, Williams's later account of ground projects involves a generalization of an analogous reflexive structure to that involved in respect to those virtues that surround our practices of truth telling. But this more developed account starts even further back in Williams's account of "steading the mind" and the constitutive involvement of a community in stabilizing the very disposition of belief such that the content entertained in an agent's mind can be, determinately, either a belief or a desire [Williams 2002, pp. 82–83]. This is a very ambitious argument that begins from Williams's famous claim that belief cannot be subject to the will, via an account of "steading the mind" in the context of a community, to the way in which different conceptions of community support different conceptions of what it is to be truthful about oneself. However, Williams opts for *one* of these ideals of truthful self-expression as the correct one. His later account of ground projects features in his defense of this ideal [Williams 2002, chapter 9]. I will set out this argument in more detail in section four, below.

The starting point for any assessment of Williams's complex and mutually supporting set of arguments is this: in order for something to count as a reason for a particular agent, it must be potentially explanatory of that specific agent's actions as a result of sound deliberation from his or her initial subjective motivational set. Williams's moral psychology sees a certain kind of structuring identification – a ground project in Sartre's sense – as playing a distinctive functional role in any such set. As Pamela Hieronymi puts it: To appreciate that role we need to examine another aspect of Williams's ethical philosophy as a whole: his critique of act utilitarianism. Williams's constraints on the answer to the question, "Why be moral?" are substantive, not formal, and determine that the answer must fall within the class of what Scheffler calls "moderate moralities" [Scheffler 1993, p. 6].

Now we can see how Williams' internalism underwrites his integrity objection [U]tilitarianism neglects the extent to which the agent's actions and decisions have to be seen as flowing from the projects and attitudes with which he is most clearly identified And yet utilitarianism tells the agents to treat his own projects and attitudes in an impartial way, to view them as if they belonged to someone else The agent can neither act nor deliberate from a truly impersonal standpoint, as "anyone"⁷ [Hieronymi, n.d., pp. 4–5].

So I will now examine Williams's critique of act utilitarianism in more detail to show why his constraints on the answer to the question, "Why be moral?" are substantive, not formal. They determine that the answer to the question must fall within the class of what Scheffler calls "moderate moralities" [Scheffler, 1993, p. 4].

2 Integrity and the Rational Authority of Morality

It may seem to take some exegetical work to reconstruct the connection between ground projects and action from integrity, given that Williams' discussion of the latter idea occurs in a specific and apparently quite limited context: his critique of act utilitarianism. However, the appearance that Williams's point is merely local to that discussion is misleading:

[T]he reason why utilitarianism cannot understand integrity is that it cannot coherently describe the relations between a man's projects and his actions. [Williams 1973, p. 100]

So the objection is the specific application of a more general thesis. I will suggest a phenomenological argument, implicit in Williams's discussion, which underwrites the claim that this argument has this wider significance.

In an important recent book Paul Hurley has given grounds for taking Williams's objection to act utilitarianism to have such significance for normative ethics [Hurley 2009]. In the guise of an objection to act utilitarianism, the point of Williams's argument is to highlight a fault line between the consequentialist's theory of value and theory of rightness, and between the latter and our intuitive idea of the rational authority of moral reasons. However, in the course of developing that argument Williams draws on a more general thesis: that to be

⁷ As Hieronymi notes here, this connects with Williams's thesis that practical reasoning is essentially first personal; this thesis was defended in Williams [1985] but later retracted – but Williams did not say why! For a different rationale for the thesis than Williams's own see Thomas [forthcoming].

identified with the ground project of Utilitarian morality is to be identified with a project with no distinctive content of its own. I will expand upon both points.

Hurley has argued that interpreters have misunderstood the nub of Williams's critique of utilitarianism. Standardly understood, it is a well-worn objection to act consequentialism that it tells us that, under certain circumstances, morality can be very demanding for an agent. One could, indeed, view the integrity objection through this lens: loss of integrity would feature as one more, admittedly heavy, cost to the agent. Unfortunately, however, the objection thus understood is not very plausible. It is, after all, not difficult to imagine circumstances in which the morally right action simply *is* very costly to an agent. Further, the act utilitarian can respond that one ought not to shoot the messenger: if act utilitarianism brings the message that *morality* can be very demanding, then that is a problem about the content of morality – and a practical problem for us. It is not, *per se*, a problem for act utilitarianism.

Hurley, however, argues that this is a misunderstanding: the real issue is not that act utilitarianism is too demanding, but that it makes no demands at all. The reason for this is that, *qua* species of the genus of consequentialist moral theories, this kind of normative theory is concerned solely with a constitutive account of the nature of rightness. The nature of rightness is explained in terms of the intrinsic values of outcomes. It says nothing at all about a separate relation, namely, about the relation between rightness and our intuitive notion of a reason. As Hurley aptly puts it, act utilitarianism “jettisons ordinary morality but leaves ordinary reason in place” [Hurley 2009, p. 183].

It simply takes the folk psychological conception of a moral reason for action for granted and fails to notice that the content that it gives to its substantive theory of rightness severs the connection between rightness and reasons. So far from issuing extreme demands, the theory (*qua* theory of rightness) issues none at all; it would only do so were it entitled to assume a connection between rightness and reasons. But it has no such entitlement: in fact, given the plausibility of Williams's project-based account of reasons for an agent, the theory gives us excellent advice as to how to *avoid* being alienated from the content of morality as the act utilitarian understands it:

The real difficulty is not that rational agents are alienated *by* consequentialist morality from their plans, projects, and commitments, but that rational agents are alienated *from* such a consequentialist morality by the good reasons each has to honor her commitments and pursue her plans and projects. [Hurley 2009, p.21]

Consequentialism does not produce alienation from the content of morality, but the reverse. By the practical authority of moral reasons Hurley is appealing to no

more here than the minimal idea that agents can have sufficient or decisive reason to do what they ought to do [Hurley, 2009, p. 11–12].

If reasons are internal in Williams's sense, then that places him within the general family of "practical objectivity" theories that incorporate this minimal understanding of the authority of reasons (this is the "cognitive internalism" that Skorupski correctly attributes to him). So if internal reasons are grounded in an agent's ground projects, then act utilitarianism is powerless to alienate the agent from them. This focus on the distinct relations between the values of outcomes and rightness, and the relation between rightness and reasons, immediately explains the connection between these ideas and integrity: the act utilitarian tells an agent to perform the right action even if the agent has no reason at all to perform the recommended action. The act utilitarian requires acting rightly even if all the agent's internal reasons, based on her ground projects, give her most reason to do what is, by act utilitarian lights, the wrong action. That seems, in a very straightforward sense, a violation of an agent's integrity.

I am not concerned directly, here, with the assessment of this intriguing general argument against act utilitarianism, but with the deeper connection it makes between the internal reasons thesis and the nature of ground projects. As Hurley points out, in the standard understanding of the problem of moral demandingness both act utilitarians and their critics presuppose the rational authority of moral reasons. However, the very same act utilitarian account both *presupposes* that there are non-impersonal reasons and that agents have reasons to act on them. (That is what generates the initial paradox that agents have sufficient reasons to do wrong and insufficient reasons to do right.) But further reflection reveals how act utilitarianism, in its standard formulation, is self-stultifying – an even more serious problem.

That which produces this paradox is the claim that act utilitarianism must both exclusively represent the claims of the moral point of view *and* be rationally inescapable for an agent. Therefore, as an impersonal theory, the view cannot tolerate any non-impersonal reasons in its formulation. But Williams demonstrates that the theory rests essentially on non-impersonal reasons for its formulation such that, were it to acknowledge this truth, act utilitarianism would be merely one standpoint amongst other standpoints that the agent rationally could adopt. That latter concession is fatal to the theory; as Hurley's argument develops, it leads at least beyond consequentialism to hybrid theory and from there to a contractualism based on second-personal normativity. My interest here is in the first step of this argument: how act utilitarianism depends essentially in its formulation on non-impersonal reasons that it cannot acknowledge on pain of undermining its own claim to exclusive rational authority.

The crux of Hurley's reconstruction of the argument runs as follows: imagine an agent who takes upon herself the empirical equivalent of the normative task of Hare's World Agent: she represents the perspective of all other agents and their own interests, values and projects and ranks outcomes according to the maximal satisfaction of an act utilitarian standard.⁸ [Hare 1981] There are no reasons in this picture as it is not a normative picture; the problem emerges when this conception is understood as potentially reason-giving with regard to ordinary agents. Under what conditions could we understand this empirical ranking as converted into a normative one? How could we understand the normative perspective of the World Agent?

Williams argues we can understand it only on one condition: that the agent who thus takes act utilitarianism as her ground project must be an exceptional agent – an agent whose position cannot be generalized to that of all others. If, however, she must be an exceptional agent then her standpoint loses its claim to be the exclusive standpoint in which the rational point of view and the moral point of view are unified. The standpoint of the World Agent is, then, a rationally *optional* standpoint and at that point the theory is in trouble. If it acknowledges that it rests on non-impersonal reasons, then it loses its claim to exclusive rational authority; if it fails to acknowledge that it is so grounded, then it denies an independently plausible phenomenological point about ground projects as part of its general severing of the relation between rightness and reasons.

What is the explanation of this necessarily exceptional status? Why is the standpoint of our putative utilitarian agent, for whom act utilitarianism is her ground project, one that cannot generalize to all other agents? The explanation Hurley recovers from Williams is that we *can* envisage an agent adopting act utilitarianism as her ground project. The problem blocking the generalization of this concession, however, is that this “higher order” ground project has no distinctive content of its own. The phrase “higher order” grants it neither any special content nor any special rational authority. Instead, it is one ground project amongst all other such projects.

Just as first order projects are transparent to the values that ground them, so the act utilitarian's higher order project of seeking compossibly to realize all the lower order projects of all agents (including her own) is transparent to those very same grounding values. Certainly the act utilitarian can stipulate that her exceptional ground project encompasses all others within its scope, but that is not to claim that being “higher order” captures any special rational authority (except

⁸ Hurley does not introduce the analogy with Hare's World Agent, but I take it his discussion suggests a view of this kind [Hurley, 2009, pp.70–71].

stipulatively). Comprehensive scope does not generate an automatic entitlement to such authority. Other agents are in a different position: they are free to adopt the act utilitarian's ground project and for them it could generate reasons, but that is because it is merely one optional project amongst all other projects and is, therefore, an explicit disavowal of such special authority.

Hence the dilemma: either the act utilitarian, in the light of the constitutive connection between ground projects and reasons, breaks the connection between rightness and reasons, or she does not. If she breaks it, she violates an agent's integrity by giving her no reason to do right, or good reason to do wrong. If she does not break it, she must abandon the claim that act utilitarianism shows that the moral and the rational points of view are identical and inescapable for all agents.

Thus the reason the specific discussion of the failures of act utilitarianism generalizes beyond this context is that Williams's critique of the act utilitarian draws on a general truth in moral psychology: that to be committed to a ground project is to be open to a range of values and reasons that structure an agent's deliberative field. It is the phenomenological claim that the life of virtue has no distinctive content of its own; it is a quasi-perceptual sensitivity to the values that are relevant to that ground project [Thomas 2005, 2006]. It is this phenomenological point that grounds the crucial claim that the "higher order" ground project of the envisaged utilitarian agent is essentially parasitic on the content of the ground projects of non-utilitarian agents. We can envisage an act utilitarian agent from whom the normative perspective of the World Agent is her ground project, so that for her the connection between rightness and reasons has been guaranteed; but if this ground project has no content of its own, then if we imagine it generalized to all agents then we are playing the "shell game." At some point we have to discharge the obligation to explain the content of the utilitarian ground project. When we do, its claim exclusively to represent a rationally mandatory standpoint that unites the rational and the moral is undermined. We cannot all be act utilitarians all of the time; this is true even if some of us can be act utilitarians some of the time.

The bearing of this point on the central question with which this paper is concerned, "Why be moral?" is that any answer to that question can only be raised, and answered, in the light of the substantive content of an agent's ground projects. Scheffler concludes, in his own "reconciliationist" project of formulating a hybrid theory, that the connection between rightness and reasons can be preserved only in what he called a "moderate morality" [Scheffler 1993; 1994]. That is the whole point of phrasing the question of whether a life good for the agent and a moral life are potentially convergent: there is no answer to that question that is independent of the substantive content of an agent's projects.

Given that reasons are internal, and that ground projects underpin our ordinary notion of acting for a reason in the light of a social identification, plus the constraint of psychological realism, Williams is eliminating competing positions one by one. The answer to the question, “Why be moral?” cannot involve a priori constraints on practical agency as such: in that sense it has no *formal* answer. Furthermore, in so far as the question has only a substantive answer, those answers are also constrained to fall within the class of “moderate moralities.” It also seems we are in a position to say even more: that within that class we are constrained to consider those moderate moralities consonant with a background conception of ethical community that involves relations of mutual respect.⁹ If even conceptualizing our ethical lives in that way represents a certain kind of historical achievement, can Williams’s later discussion of political psychology determine the class of permissible answers to our initial question even further by turning from mutual respect to mutual acknowledgement?

3 From Moral Psychology to Political Psychology

I have outlined Williams’s general strategy, but I have not yet allayed the concern that it fails to address the crucial issue. It seems that we need, case by case, to examine the substantive content of an agent’s projects to see whether or not they ground a moral life satisfying to the agent. But is this eudaimonistic perspective sufficient to determine the content of *moral* projects? In order to address this point I think it is helpful to discuss Williams’s final statement of his moral psychology.

The subject matter has changed, by the time of *Truth and Truthfulness*, to whether or not a genealogy of the concept of knowledge can lead us to identify virtues, norms, and values that are constitutively bound up with the “belief-assertion-communication system” [Williams 2002, p. 84; Thomas 2008]. Williams’s answer is “yes,” in an ambitious argument that tries to identify the schematic content of this system, based on interpretational arguments taken over from Donald Davidson, while also arguing that this schema has to be filled in via the contingent history of actual epistemic practices.

In order to highlight that his two key terms are terms of art, Williams capitalizes the words “Accuracy” and “Sincerity” as part of his general account of truth

⁹ My own view, which I will not develop at any length here, is that what I have called Williams’s “phenomenological” argument pushes his view towards a form of moral realism – although this is not a conclusion that Williams would have welcomed. That Williams’s resistance to realism partly depends on his epistemological foundationalism is argued in Thomas [2006/2010].

telling as involving these twin schematic dispositions on the part of people within the “system” of knowledge *to take care* and *not to lie* or otherwise mislead. It is not my aim here to assess the plausibility of Williams’s characterization of these schematic epistemic virtues, but to focus on the way in which they shape Williams’s final discussion of the idea of a ground project.¹⁰

Williams thought that, historically, different conceptions of Sincerity and Authenticity had played an important – sometimes fateful – role in shaping political expression of the social conditions to which these conceptions could be reconciled. Examining this argument in some detail reinforces the point that, for Williams, ground projects are not egoistic in content. This is brought out very clearly when the context of the discussion is the transition to the political expression of the ground project of being truthful about oneself.

In a suggestive discussion of the two contrasting accounts of Sincerity found in Rousseau and Diderot, Williams takes them to be two “elaborations” of his genealogy of Sincerity into two competing accounts of personal *authenticity* that explain “what it takes to be a truthful person” [Williams 2002, p. 173]. It is clear from his discussion that they mark two polar opposites – two ways of being wrong – but there is a correct account of the politics of self-knowledge recoverable from the insights of each view by a process of triangulation.

Williams claims that Rousseau’s account of community is deeply monological in its account of truthfulness to self and *hence* truthfulness to others (in that order of explanation). Given that he believes he has direct knowledge of himself from immediate acquaintance, “le sentiment de l’existence,” the mystery for Rousseau is what blocks his truthful presentation to others such that he is so persistently and frustratingly misunderstood¹¹ [Rousseau 1959, p. 1047]. The answer, for him, has to lie in extrinsic social conditions – when, that is, it is not simply a case of individual malice towards him.

So Rousseau further concludes that we need, collectively, to remove the social conditions of material inequality and hence dominance: we thereby remove the obstacles to mutual sincerity. Given that, for Rousseau, living with each other in conditions of spontaneous openness is the highest virtue, we need to live in a kind of political community where the blockages to this spontaneous openness have been removed.¹² This puts us in a position to institute a Rousseauian con-

¹⁰ I assess these arguments elsewhere in Thomas [2008].

¹¹ “Why is it so difficult to bring about a concord between what one is for oneself and what one is for others?” [Starobinski, 1971/1988].

¹² Williams quotes Starobinski on Rousseau’s ideal for authentic inter-personal relations: “paradise was the reciprocal transparency of consciousnesses, a total and confident communication between them” [Starobinski, 1971/1988, p. 32 quoted by Williams, 2002, p. 174].

tract that involves no bargain, or trade, hence no cost to the agent: after signing the contract you are as free as you were before. We can see this as grounded in the deeper fact that “each, by giving himself to all, gives himself to no one”.¹³ [Rousseau, 1997, I.6.8] Primarily, we need to remove the obstacles to this openness; to remove the social causes of inflamed amour-propre that Williams revealingly describes as “competitive self-assertion.”¹⁴ Hence a republic that is restricted in size, where people are above all citizens at the expense of their private ends, renounce luxury, embrace frugality, and avoid all status inequalities that arise from the twin facts of material inter-dependence and inequality. From a liberal perspective, the problem is that the cost of this spontaneous openness is very high: this society is extensively coercive and the attractions of this modern day Sparta are elusive from our own perspective.

I turn now to Diderot who, by contrast, represents for Williams the claim that sociality enters into the stability of the dispositions that render the mind steady. This has the consequence that society is not merely the mutual collision of monologic truth-tellers as Rousseau envisages it. On Williams’s reading of *Rameau’s Nephew*, that work is concerned to present a character who is committed to Rousseauian transparency in his self-presentation, with the flaw that the self thus presented is not stable over time and thereby frustrates the goal of explaining what it is to be a truthful person. Diderot’s performance model undoes itself: there is “uninhibited spontaneity,” but with no grounding in a stable self. The protagonist improvises the self that his audience, in some specific context, requires him to be. (Perhaps the best analogy for this character is that of the conversational “shape shifter”.)¹⁵ So one virtue, spontaneous openness, does not secure another: mutual trust. It fails to do so as there is no stable character in whom one can trust. But the problem, as Williams sees it, actually runs deeper:

On Diderot’s view, as I understand him, it is a universal truth, not just a special feature of modernity, that human beings have an inconstant mental constitution that needs to be steadied by society and interaction with other people. [Williams 2002, p. 191]

¹³ As Philip Pettit notes, crucial here is the thought that no law legislated by the General Will can be unjust because “no man can be unjust towards himself” [Rousseau, 1997, II.6.7 quoted in Pettit, 2012, p. 15].

¹⁴ Taylor emphasizes Rousseau’s claim that in this competition all lose: given a condition of dependence, “maître et esclave se dépravent mutuellement” [*Emile*, Paris, Garnier, 1964, Bk 2, p. 70, quoted in Taylor 1995].

¹⁵ There is a latter presentation of the same theme, of comparable brilliance to that of Diderot, in Melville’s *The Confidence Man* [Melville, 1857/1991].

Williams's argument is that we cannot rest with the idea that Rameau's nephew is spontaneously authentic, but just for a moment; for a speaker of that kind whose character seems improvised and episodic, we ought to question "what kind of thing is in his mind" [Williams 2002, p. 191, emphasis added]. Episodic beliefs that change, not in response to evidence, but because of re-configurations of the agent's psychology, may come to strike us as not beliefs at all. This may not be the case with the deliverances of basic capacities of mind such as memory or perception. But for more complex interpretative or evaluative beliefs, these must be embedded in a social practice of situated avowal in order to be candidates for *belief* at all.

Paradoxically, Williams argues Diderot's insight allows for a more robust individualism than that envisaged by Rousseau. That is because of its recognition of "[the] social dimension [of] the construction of beliefs, attitudes and desires" which are "the materials of idiosyncrasy, and the lesson is that *we need each other in order to be anybody*" [Williams 2002, p. 200, emphasis added].¹⁶ So we can now triangulate between the flawed views of Rousseau and Diderot: sociality enters into individuality and indeed makes it possible in a community characterized by various levels of inter-personal trust. Our fundamental relation to each other is dialogic and not monologic. This claim is grounded on fundamental facts in the philosophy of mind about knowledge, self-knowledge, and the stability of the dispositions that underpin belief.

Williams believed that a critical engagement with Rousseau and Diderot takes us directly to an argument for a liberal politics. Such a politics is a working out of the relationship between freedom from domination and an individual life worth living.¹⁷ Rousseau was primarily concerned with freedom from domina-

16 Perhaps we should add "anybody in particular" given that, in his careful and complementary analysis of Rousseau's political psychology, Charles Taylor notes that, in a community of virtue bound together by "perfectly balanced reciprocity", for Rousseau it follows that "caring about esteem ... is compatible with freedom and social unity, because the society is one in which all the virtues will be esteemed equally and for the same [right] reasons." "Paradoxically," Taylor continues, "the bad other dependence goes along with separation and isolation; the good kind, which Rousseau doesn't call other-dependence at all, involves the unity of a common project, even a 'common self'" [Taylor 1995, pp. 48–49 quoting *Du contrat social*, p. 244]. Williams's comment is that the aspiration to "coincide with myself only if I coincide with others" is a "desperate assertion ... mere fantasy, a triumph of the wish" [Williams 2002, p. 200].

17 In a key range of cases that Williams describes, an individual's commitment to truthfulness stands in an antagonistic relation to a political culture "which destroys and pollutes the truth" [Williams, 2002, p. 127]. This takes a particular form in the special development, within modern societies, of the institutions of modern science and the vocation of a scientist who values truthfulness for its own sake. It matters to Williams that the scientist faces a recalcitrant reality that is

tion, but failed to secure the right kind of political community; Diderot recognizes that sociality is the underpinning of individuality so he sets us on the right track for a politics for a modern, commercial, society. Such a society involves both the values of individuality and the basis for a stable social order grounded on generalized impersonal trust and mutual assurance. A secure individualism is grounded in the social conditions for social cooperation.¹⁸

Interestingly for current purposes, Williams then extends his basic argument in a novel direction: this truth about the politics of knowledge helps to explain a distinctively modern phenomenon, namely, the politics of recognition. Modern authenticity depends on an “individualized” identity that is, as Charles Taylor puts it, “particular to me, and that I *discover* in myself” [Taylor 1995b, p. 227 emphasis added]. A refusal to recognize an identity is a form of personal or cultural impoverishment. Identities, in this politically relevant sense, have to reflect a combination of finding and making. This is Williams’s only explicit discussion of the political dimension of his idea of a “ground project.”

Williams argues that, first-personally, we need to be identified with them by an act of commitment, but concedes that even that word seems too voluntaristic. The role of such social identifications is that they have to be, from the first-personal perspective, as much found as made. That has a direct consequence for how we present ourselves to others: as calling for “acknowledgement.” We need to be mutually recognized as being in the position to make claims upon each other that can be reciprocated. Our relation to each other in this endeavor is active and not passive. Williams describes the core of his liberal political psychology as follows:

In the social or political case, where the presence of other people is vital, sincerity helps to construct or to create truth. Drawn to bind myself to the others’ shared values, to make my own beliefs and feelings steadier [to make them, at the limit, for the first time into beliefs], I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess: I become what I have sincerely declared to them, or perhaps I become my interpretation of their interpretation of

not the will of another agent; “that is a key to the sense of freedom that it can offer” [Williams, 2002, p. 145]. To be free, in such a case, is to be free from arbitrary domination by the will of another, but also to be free of deceit: the virtues of truth are set against the difficulty of discovery of truths that are both independent of the will of the inquirer, but also free from interference by other inquirers.

18 To invoke Rousseau once again, it is social cooperation of the kind that he identifies in his famous parable of whether or not a group of individuals should hunt for stag (requiring mutual trust and a degree of risk, but with a higher payoff) or hunt for stag (requiring no trust, no risk, but with a lower payoff wholly within the individual’s control [Rousseau, 1997, II.9]. Williams’s answer, throughout *Truth and Truthfulness*, is that the “assertion-belief-communication” system rests on mutual assurance – in Rousseau’s terms, a Stag Hunt.

what I have sincerely declared to them. The sense that I am contributing to this, that it is a project, fills out the idea that acknowledgement is more than a mere factual discovery, while at the same time the sense that there is a discovery involved is related to the need to resist fantasy in making sense of my beliefs and allegiances in this way. [Williams 2002, p. 204]

Being sincere with each other is not, as Rousseau envisaged, the transparent expression of a truth about oneself that is already established, but is partially constituted by the stable underwriting of the disposition of belief that depends on our social nature. (Nor is this the inauthenticity of seeking to be only *what one is in the eyes of others* – an inverse of Rousseauian mirroring.) Claims about truthfulness, the epistemic virtues surrounding propositional truth, lead to surprising claims in the philosophy of mind. Those theses, in turn, support a view about the nature of political community where an essential role is played by mutual recognition and the very sociality that makes individuality possible. The schematic political psychology of *Truth and Truthfulness* envisages a genealogical argument from the nature of the knowing subject to two political conditions: that we live a life where we are not arbitrarily dominated by other agents and where the conditions that remove domination leave room for individual lives worth living.

Williams clearly envisages, in this late discussion, ground projects as figuring in the explanation of the worthwhileness of a life. *Truth and Truthfulness* contains what you might call a chastened account of their importance: he thinks they are rife with the capacity for self-delusion and error and always risk “ethical and social disaster” [Williams 2002, p. 205]. But they remain a part of his view and I also take it to be important that this late discussion takes them to be projects that call for acknowledgement; they are not a form of egoistic self-assertion. At this point it might seem as if we have gone full circle: Williams’s “cognitive internalism” about reasons, the connection between blame and moral reasons, and this very ambitious transcendental argument in *Truth and Truthfulness* seem to offer a secure grounding for a morality of reciprocal recognition. In fact, Williams is making common cause with a conception of normativity as second-personal normativity, a (sophisticated) approach to contractualism. That is, indeed, how Paul Hurley interprets him [Hurley 2009].

My own view is that this conclusion would be too quick. Williams thinks our own political history has contained damaging mistakes about the particular ideal of truthfulness and its social pre-conditions; as I have indicated, he thinks that those mistakes can be corrected and one account can be selected as the truth on this issue. This conclusion is, however, fully compatible with his earlier discussion of the implications of his internal reasons thesis. That view, too, in-

voked a mechanism by which we seek mutually to stabilise each other's responses, but as I noted above it appealed to only one aspect of the morality of mutual recognition – the desire for mutual respect. In that sense the later discussion in *Truth and Truthfulness* further articulates this schematic account for a wider range of interlocking dispositions: any ideal of truthfulness of self that we can reflectively endorse forces us to embrace the existence of the more complex mechanism of mutual reliance and the constitutive role of community in “stabilising the mind.”

I take it, however, that the transition from Williams's discussion of the proleptic mechanism of blame and its necessary fictions, even when expanded into the latter account of the community stabilisation of epistemic virtue, continues to draw on a reflexive truthfulness about these fictions. Williams thought that we had glossed over the working of the proleptic mechanism because the Morality System forces upon us the fiction that those we blame always had external reasons to act as they did such as to deserve blame. Recognise the fiction, however, and the device no longer functions as it is supposed to (just as, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, the stabilisation of the virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy requires them to be valued for their own sake or they will not discharge their function).

The two accounts now diverge: Williams's genealogy of Sincerity and Accuracy is compatible with a reflective understanding of them as more than mere devices, but and as bound up with two kinds of value valued for their own sake and a surrounding set of dispositions and emotions. The reflective account of the proleptic mechanism involved in blame, however, is stable under reflection only if, acknowledging the constraint of psychological realism, we have to abandon our presupposition that moral reasons are universal. What both accounts share, early and late, is that they are examples of Williams's wider methodological commitment to a naturalistic psychology for morality that does not presuppose any ethical ideas. The clearest expression of this goal is in *Shame and Necessity*, where Williams asks us to rethink the goals of moral psychology:

This is not merely the idea that there must be a psychology of ethics The idea is rather that the functions of the mind, above all with regard to action, are defined in categories that get their significance from ethics. That is an idea that is certainly lacking in Homer and the tragedians. It was left to later Greek thought to invent it, and it has scarcely gone away from us since. [Williams 2008, p. 42]

It is this constraint that continues to make Williams, within the broad school of “mutual recognition” theorists, an outlier more indebted to Nietzsche than to any other of his historical forebears. It also seems to me to make him an uncomfortable bedfellow for proponents of a Fichte-inspired ideal of second-personal normativity, but a further consideration of that point awaits another occasion. At the

least it reinforces the point that the very idea of a contractualist account of morality is an internally complex one. It contains strands more hospitable to the very idea of internal reasons and those that are less accommodating [Freeman 1990; Wallace 1990; Thomas 2006/2010, chapter four].

Overall, then, how conclusive is Williams's discussion? We have conclusive reason to endorse the claim that any acceptable moral view will fall within the class of moderate moralities and we can rule out any a priori transcendental argument that tries to prove that morality is an inescapable ground project for any agent. In addition we can add the claim that any such ground project will seek acknowledgement from others just as, from within the moral properly understood freed from the distortion of the Morality System, moral reasons are exchanged between those who desire the respect of each other on a basis of mutuality.

The continuing causes for concern for Williams's critics are these: first, who gets to set the terms of acknowledgement?¹⁹ Can the agent be selective in those from who she seeks acknowledgement? It is no help if the principled Nazi seeks, on her own terms, only acknowledgement from other Nazis. Point taken, but this simply raises the issue about content dependence again: the answer to our question requires a case-by-case consideration of substantive answers.

Secondly, with the necessary, a priori, and hence universal foundation for morality undermined, plus a constraint of psychological realism, what now guarantees the universality of moral reasons within such networks of mutual respect as those involved in Williams's proleptic mechanism? I submit that, if the perfect coincidence of a community of mutual respect and an evaluative community of mutual acknowledgement is no longer guaranteed by reason, then their relationship is, indeed, open to further determination.²⁰ Williams has identified constraints on the answer to the question, "Why be moral?" that are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for an ethically adequate answer. But if Williams leaves us with a question, but not an answer, then it could hardly be otherwise. There are determinate truths to be had about the social and political conditions of any such answer and, as I have demonstrated, Williams establishes what they are in his discussion of the modern politics of identity. But the actual answer to

19 I am grateful to Brad Cokelet, Katerina Deligorgi and David Owen for separately raising this concern in different ways.

20 This is, in fact, the major choice point in contemporary contractualism between Scanlon's view, which presupposes an independently valuable idea of an ethical community bound by relations of mutual acknowledgement, and Darwall's reasons based view. I discuss this in 'Second Personal Reasons and Agent-Relativity: A Response to Mark LeBar' [Thomas, 2009b].

the question of “why be moral?” cannot be legislated for by philosophical reflection alone.

Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed Williams’s answer to the question, “Why be moral?” by placing some of the fundamental concepts of his ethical outlook – the internality of reasons, the idea of a ground project, and the idea of action from integrity – in the context of his later political psychology. One, negative, aim is to address the worry that Williams’s account of the place of ethical constraints in the life of an individual licenses egoism or, indeed, the expression “with integrity” of unethical motivations (such as those of the principled Nazi). There are prior, presuppositional, constraints in Williams’s account, but it is not the set of a priori moral principles that the constitutivist argues constrain all expressions of practical agency. These constraints determine the answer to the question at different degrees of generality. Finally, any answer to the question for us – and, as usual in Williams’s philosophy, identifying who “we” are is the crucial issue – is constrained by mutual acknowledgement and mutual respect, in the context of a modern ethical community where “modern” records the fact that a community of that kind is an historical achievement. I have argued that it is within the context of a community of this kind that candidate answers to the question, all within the range of moderate moralities, will be assessed not by philosophy but rather, as Alasdair MacIntyre once remarked, by reflective living [Thomas 2006/2010, p. 253].²¹

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