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Bernard Williams and the Relativism of Distance: A Defence

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> *[W]hat 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).*[1]

I

Despite his largely deserved reputation as a dense and difficult writer, Bernard Williams displayed a knack for coining memorable and evocative phrases which in due course became broadly synonymous with his own distinct and original claims. "Agent regret", "moral luck", "one thought too many", "government house utilitarianism", "internal reasons", "basic legitimation demand", "vindicatory genealogy" – no matter how much such phrases have gone on to be adopted and employed in wider debates, they remain distinctively *Williamsian*. And to this list could easily be added another: "the relativism of distance". Mention this, and anybody familiar with Williams's work, and indeed with the wider literature in moral philosophy, will immediately recognise it as one of *his* ideas. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to label as canonical Williams's claim that "only when a society is sufficiently 'close' to ours, which is to say, roughly, only when it is a real option for us to adopt the ethical outlook of that society, is there any question of appraising its ethical outlook (as 'right', 'wrong', 'unjust', or whatever)".[2]

But if so, it is surprising to discover that this evocative phrase, and the distinctive ideas Williams attached to it, have garnered little sustained critical attention. Furthermore, what attention they *have* received has tended to be negative: commentators largely find the relativism of distance perplexing, theoretically flawed, implausible, or even incoherent.[3]

By contrast this paper offers a defence of Williams. It does so via two interlinked strategies. First, aiming to show that the relativism of distance cannot be understood as a freestanding item, but only makes sense when related to the substantive prior argument in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (ELP)[4], and yet which existing scholarship has so far failed adequately to do. Second, to show that commentary on this matter has been misguided insofar

as critics read Williams as offering a *metaphysical theory* about relativism.[5] As I hope to show, this is not what Williams was doing. Although there are undoubtedly metaphysical aspects to his position, and which must be appreciated if the relativism of distance is to make sense, nonetheless his goal was different. Once we have properly appreciated what that was, we will then be better placed to offer a defence from the criticisms that have been offered.

The paper proceeds as follows. Parts II and III offer a detailed reconstruction of the background argument of ELP, before turning to the relativism of distance. These sections are highly exegetical, for which I beg the reader's patience. Part of my contention is that Williams has been subtly yet importantly misread, and in part this is a function of the sheer detail and complexity of his position going underappreciated. To enable proper assessment, that detailed complexity must be brought out – and this cannot be done quickly. Once it is done, however, I turn to defend Williams. Parts IV and V engage the most serious charges, in particular as put forward by Miranda Fricker, but seek to show that her concerns can be allayed. I conclude by reflecting on what the plausibility of Williams's position further signifies, in particular its relation to his critique of "the morality system".

II

ELP is orientated around Socrates's Question, "how one should live" (ELP 1), unpacked by Williams as best meaning "how has one most reason to live?" (ELP 19). If the answer given to this is: ethically, this invites the spectre of an amoralist "who suggests that there is no reason to follow the requirements of morality" (ELP 22). Against this figure, many have hoped that philosophy might act as a *force*, able to provide answers that somehow compel the amoralist; that tells us what to say not just about her, but *to* her, and in a way that will be decisive. Williams, however, urges that this is to set the bar too high. Aside from the fact that a genuine amoralist will probably not sit around long enough to listen to the reasons given by a philosopher, there is the more important fact that we simply need less. We do not need to know what we would say to somebody outside the ethical, who probably won't listen anyway, but rather what we can say to, and about, those of us who *are* within the ethical, regarding the reasons we have for being, and staying, there. Here the hope for an "Archimedean point" arises: "a point of leverage in the idea of rational action" that "when we properly think about it, we shall find that we are committed to an ethical life, merely because we are rational agents". If such a point exists, then even the amoralist is committed to it, and insofar as they deny that they are, their amoralism is "irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken" (ELP 28–9).

Does an Archimedean point exist when it comes to the ethical? Williams takes the two leading contenders to be Aristotelian teleology about human nature, and working out from the idea of pure rational agency as exemplified by Kant. Although Williams is somewhat more sympathetic to the former, he concludes that neither can succeed (ELP Chs. 3–4). The idea of rational agency alone is insufficient, whilst at this point in our historical and self-reflective development, it is not possible to maintain that there is a single best form of human life, a necessary component of which is to live according to a specific conception of the ethical. This in turn opens up an important sceptical gap: from within our ethical lives it is a truism that far more matters than simply people's dispositions, and yet when viewed from the outside – from what Williams later termed "the ethnographic stance" – it appears irrefutable that the only thing that can constitute any form of human ethical life (given the absence of an Archimedean point) is people's dispositions.[6] Yet seen from the outside perspective, this "no longer sounds enough" (ELP 52).[7] We thus run up against one of the limits of philosophy adverted to in Williams's title: its inability to justify the ethical by means of rational reflection alone, given what we now know to be true.

A second limit of philosophy that Williams alleges is that it cannot deliver *ethical theory*, and that the desire to construct such a thing is itself fundamentally misguided. He understands ethical theories to be "philosophical undertakings [that] commit themselves to the view that philosophy can determine… how we should think in ethics" (ELP 74). In contrast to this, whilst Williams certainly does not wish to deny that philosophy can help us to think better about ethics, he firmly rejects the view that philosophy can non-trivially *determine* what we (ought to) think. On

Williams's account, philosophy's correct role is to embrace the need for reflection, but appreciate not only that this means starting from within ethical experience (thus abandoning the hope of somehow grounding an ethical theory outside the ethical), but realising that doing so requires a phenomenological approach focused upon "what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways in which we confront obligations and recognise responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame" (ELP 93). Whereas ethical theory for Williams is characterised by a form of critical reflection seeking "*justificatory reasons*" (ELP 112, emphasis in original), what he advocates for is the use of philosophy to engage in critical reflection that generates truthful understanding. The overall aim is "an outlook that embodies a skepticism about ethics, but a skepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics" (ELP 74).[8] For present purposes, the significance of this is that when we turn to the relativism of distance, it is highly unlikely that we will find Williams putting forward anything recognisable as an ethical theory, something which "can determine, either positively or negatively, how we should think" (ELP 74).

The final aspect of the argument in ELP to have in view is Williams's rejection of the possibility of ethical objectivity. Maintaining that a "fundamental difference lies between the ethical and the scientific" (ELP 135) Williams claims that when it comes to science, it is at least possible that a convergence of human views could be explained by how things are anyway, independent of us. This is because he upholds the possibility of the "absolute conception": a "conception of the world that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us" (ELP 139). That is, the possibility that there are aspects of external reality whose existence could be agreed upon regardless of the necessary perspectival possibilities and limitations exhibited by any competent knowers. The reason for this being, precisely, that there is a world that exists independent of us, and which some branches of science can aim to converge upon, adequately characterised in non-perspectival terms, thereby arriving at objective knowledge. By contrast, Williams denies that there is any coherent hope of objectivity as regards the ethical (although he importantly holds that there can still be ethical knowledge). His argument is extraordinarily dense on this score, but suffice to say that because the ethical irreducibly requires the use of thick concepts, and such concepts are themselves irreducibly dependent upon cultural formation, which does *not* (necessarily) reflect how things are anyway independent of us, Williams maintains that there is no hope that ethical knowledge can attain the status of objectivity through the possibility of convergence (in the way that science might).[9] Indeed, even if convergence *were* to occur amongst all humans on ethical matters, such convergence by itself would be insufficient to entail objectivity, say if it were created by global homogenisation of cultures due to e.g. the rise of market capitalism, or as Williams memorably suggests, thanks to coercive imposition of permitted forms of social organisation orchestrated by Martian invaders.

III

The reconstruction of key arguments in ELP will become important when we consider the best ways to understand the relativism of distance. Let us now turn to that aspect of Williams's position. This can be understood as developed in two parts: setting out the problem, and the proposed solution.

First, the problem. Williams suggests that we begin by postulating "two beliefs or outlooks" that "conflict and are genuinely exclusive". The possibility to consider in turn is whether we can "find a sense in which each may still be acceptable in its place" (ELP 157), i.e. a form of relativism. Importantly, however, just because two forms of culture or ways of life really do exclude one another (i.e. now restricting beliefs and outlooks to the ethical), relativism does *not* instantly arise as an option. This is because:

> Someone who has certain dispositions and expectations as a member of one culture will often be unwilling, when confronted with an alternative way of life, to do what is done in the other culture. Moreover, it is part of what makes his responses ethical responses that they are deeply internalized enough for his reaction, in some cases, to be not merely unwillingness but rejection (ELP 158).

This point is crucial for Williams (as we shall see), and is best understood as a psychological claim about the phenomenology of moral experience. In essence, that part of what it means to be engaged in the ethical is for one's beliefs to aspire in the direction of the universal. As he puts it particularly clearly in his earlier *Morality*, "there are inherent features of morality that tend to make it difficult to regard a morality as applying only to a group" because "the element of universalisation which is present in any morality…progressively comes to range over persons as such".[10] As a result, merely being confronted with an incompatible ethical outlook does not divert one's own ethical outlook, or show it to be inappropriate. Hence "instant relativism is excluded" (ELP 158).

A second form of relativism that can be ruled out is a relational relativism which contends that ethical conceptions have an inherent logical relativity confined to a given society.[11] In Williams's terms, it is always either too early or too late for that. Too early, if considering a "hypertraditional" society (ELP 158) which has yet to become aware of the possibility of alternatives (hence for whom the notion of ethical conceptions being relative is yet to even arise, and so cannot be embedded in their logic). Too late, if confronting a situation in which other alternatives are already known: this requires reflective use of ethical concepts that go beyond one's existing rules and practices, and hence cannot be relativised *only* to one's own society.

This initially appears to rule out relativism in ethics *tout court*. Given that members of one ethical culture can and must react when confronted with another, and must do so by using their existing notions, this indicates that the ethical thought of a culture can always extend beyond its own boundaries (i.e. it is quite able to consider what to think, and maybe even do, about *them*). As Williams is keen to point out, this is a claim about the content of ethical thought, not about whether or not such thought is itself objective. Even if it turns out to be true (as Williams contends throughout ELP) that ethical thought is not objective, relativism about the truth of ethical claims does not automatically follow. This is because each ethical outlook "may still be making claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just that part of it which is its 'own' world" (ELP 159).

This, however, is where the problem arises. If we accept that nonobjectivity is the case in ethics, awareness of this fact must itself become part of our ethical reflection. Whilst nonobjectivity does not directly imply relativism, nonetheless "if you are *conscious*" of it "should that not properly affect the way in which you see the application or extent of your ethical outlook?" (ELP 159, emphasis in original). It is certainly the case that mere consciousness of nonobjectivity cannot (and should not) switch off our ethical reactions when confronted with another, differing, group. (To think that it can or should is the view Williams previously labelled "vulgar relativism", which incoherently attempts to derive a universal nonrelative principle of toleration from a starting assertion of the inherent relativity of ethics.[12]) Nonetheless, once we "become conscious of ethical variation and the kinds of explanation it may receive, it is incredible that this consciousness should just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought itself" (ELP 159). This matters, because there now seems to be a tension between ethical phenomena as presented to us in our unreflective experience, and those same phenomena when reflected upon consciously. This can helpfully be brought out through the idea of the ethnographic stance introduced above. When engaged in immediate use of our moral concepts, if confronted with a group whose outlook we disagree with, it is entirely natural and proper to want to assert (at least initially, pending further information) that we are right and they are wrong ("affirming our values and rejecting theirs", ELP 160). Yet if stepping back into a disengaged perspective, adopting an ethnographic stance according to which we attempt to examine our values from the outside (as for example a visiting anthropologist from another culture might), simply affirming that we are right and they are wrong appears hopelessly inadequate.[13] After all, one thing we now know and cannot ignore is that if we had been born in their culture, we would think as they do. There is an inherent and undeniable contingency to ethical views. Once this is acknowledged, the universalist tendency of ethical phenomenology appears undercut by ethical reflection – and we are left with a problem about what to say in light of this, insofar as we are precisely engaged *in* ethical reflection, and cannot simply stop there. The "gap" between the inside and outside views noted above, with its sceptical threat, appears once more.

With the problem now stated, we can turn to Williams's proposed solution. To begin, he suggests that rather than asking whether we *must* think in a relativistic way, we ask instead "how much room we can coherently find for thinking like this, and how far it provides a more adequate response to reflection", i.e. where the trouble has

stemmed from. To do so, he rejects the binary option of thinking that the ethical judgements of one group must apply either *only* to that group (the standard relativist view), or to *everybody* (its standard opponent). Instead, we should appreciate that the options are more varied and subtle, in particular by understanding our ethical "reactions more realistically in terms of the practices and sentiments that help to shape our life". It is crucial here that some disagreements and divergences simply matter more than others. "Above all, it matters whether the contrast of our outlook with another is one that makes a difference, whether a question has to be resolved about what life is going to be lived by one group or the other" (ELP 160). In other words, it is not the mere fact of whether two ethical outlooks conflict that is of primary importance, but whether anything *turns* on that conflict; whether such conflict itself has ethical consequences. And what Williams contends is that there are classes of cases where although there is genuine conflict of ethical outlooks, insofar as nothing turns on that conflict, a relativistic attitude is appropriate, or at least acceptable: that here we can find space for a certain relativist way of thinking. Or to repurpose his earlier turn of phrase, this is where the "truth in relativism" is located, i.e. that there was always *something* correct to be recovered from relativist ideas, even if prior accounts got that wrong in various ways.[14] Williams captures the idea of conflicts without consequence as being those which are "distant" from us. Hence, the relativism of distance.

It is at *this* point that Williams's famous distinction between "real" and "notional" confrontations is introduced. This matters, because whereas commentators typically see the real-notional distinction as *generating* the relativism of distance (understood as a sort of philosophical theory), we should see instead that for Williams it functions more as a way of identifying what the appropriate posture to take is with regard to ethical conflict, i.e. whether a relativist stance is the best response in a given situation.[15] We shall return to this point in various ways below when defending Williams from criticism, but first it is important to properly unpack the real-notional distinction.

A real confrontation occurs when there are two divergent outlooks, and there is a group of people for whom either outlook is a real option. By real option, Williams means either that an outlook *already is* the one a group possesses, or that they could "go over to it". That they could "go over to it" means that "they could live inside it in their actual historical circumstances and retain their hold on reality, not engage in extensive self-deception, and so on". The extent to which it is possible to "go over" to another outlook is largely determined by social factors: if these remain constant, it may prevent going over to another outlook; their changing might enable it (ELP 160). Importantly, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that a person think an option is a real option for it to be one. Not necessary, because they may simply not have understood what the alternative has to offer. Not sufficient, because they might be in the grip of a fantasy, misinformed, or mistaken (this could be a personal issue, but also the result of e.g. a political situation, or the effects of a cult). By contrast, a notional confrontation can be understood as some people knowing about two incompatible ethical outlooks, but where at least one of them is not a real option, as just explicated. Hence Williams gives "the life of a Bronze Age chief or medieval samurai" as paradigm instances of ethical outlooks that can only ever be in notional confrontation with our own. Such lives simply cannot be lived now, and even a small group of dedicated enthusiasts could not re-create such lives, because modernity has happened and cannot be undone; that ethical life depends on ethical-social conditions that cannot simply be willed into existence.

Unpacking Williams in detail will bear fruit later when we consider how he can be defended from criticism, given that the real-notional distinction is the primary source of complaint. But for now, let us consider the intended payoff. The relativism of distance says that it is only in real confrontation that the language of appraisal is properly applied; "in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made" (ELP 161). What is at stake here? First, it enables us to make sense of the "ethical suspension of judgement" that seems to be the correct response in certain situations where ethical outlooks conflict, but not so in all (ELP 162).

Consider: it seems unproblematic to feel no need to pass moral judgement on the behaviour of long dead samurai; it seems very different if one hears about a group of "samurai" who have started attacking people on the Tokyo subway (especially if one lives in Japan, and even more so in Tokyo).[16] What accounts for this difference, Williams contends, is precisely the real-notional distinction. Whilst we feel no need to condemn the appalling moral behaviours of long dead samurai, and feel unperturbed even when the expert historian assures us that the way they behaved was deemed entirely correct by the prevailing outlook in feudal Japan, that will certainly not be the case

when it comes to the "samurai". Indeed, if modern Japanese began assuring us that the revival of "samurai honour" (e.g. butchering random innocents to test out the sharpness of swords[17]) is now an approved part of their contemporary moral outlook, this would hardly make the situation better, or even leave it unchanged, but manifestly make it *worse*. In this regard, the relativism of distance helps to *explain* a feature of our moral phenomenology which would otherwise not be accounted for (and standardly isn't): that we are comfortable with unresolved disagreement between moral outlooks in some cases (where confrontation is merely notional, and makes no difference), but not others (where it is real, and does). In doing so, it also poses a challenge to objectivist accounts, which are faced with the prospect of either explaining how suspension of moral judgement can ever be permitted if moral judgements are properly considered timeless and universal, or insisting that such suspension is *never* permitted, and that we should condemn medieval samurai just as fervently as we would murderous fantasists on the subway.

Importantly, it further matters that on Williams's view modernity is characterised by having only real confrontations between ethical outlooks located in the present, due to the highly interconnected nature of contemporary societies. Thus, not only does the relativism of distance only cover certain cases of ethical confrontation, it does *not* apply when dealing with conflicting societal outlooks in the here and now. By contrast, the relativism of distance naturally applies to the (more distant) past, precisely because nothing turns on such confrontations – and hence is where we most commonly encounter it. But it *could* apply to other situations, say if we somehow learnt about intelligent extra-terrestrials near Alpha Centauri who have an incompatible ethical outlook to ours, but whom technological limitations ensure that we will never actually meet. What this means is that the relativism of distance is for Williams a highly circumscribed position. Its job is to find space for the "truth in relativism", that sometimes we *do* think it fine to withhold judgements regarding ethical outlooks that conflict with ours – i.e. those we consider sufficiently distant from us (samurai, unreachable aliens) such that nothing turns on whether or not our ethical judgements get going vis-à-vis them. But relativism does *not* extend to conflict between ethical outlooks where the consequences are perceived to matter, because it is a baseline fact (Williams contends) about human moral psychology that we cannot be indifferent in such cases, and where he further holds that under conditions of modernity all conflicting contemporaneous ethical outlooks are of this nature. The way to determine whether or not a relativist attitude is appropriate is to truthfully enquire as to whether a given conflict in ethical outlooks is real or notional. The real-notional distinction thus does not *generate* the relativism of distance, understood as an independent doctrine, but is used to indicate and account for when it is (and is not) appropriate to *adopt a relativist stance*, depending on the "distance" that turns out to be in play. In turn, adopting such a stance "provides a more adequate response to ethical reflection" – i.e. the reflection we started with, which generated the problem of our moral phenomenology sitting uncomfortably with reflective self-consciousness about the nature of the ethical. Being cognisant of the relativism of distance cannot entirely resolve this tension – it cannot close the sceptical gap opened by reflection – but it at least allows reflective ethical agents to make better sense of the consequences of ethical reflection itself, whilst helping to explain a particular feature of our moral experience (that there is *some* truth in relativism). This is its proper role and purpose in Williams's philosophy.

IV

Exegesis of Williams's position now complete, we are in a better position to take stock of the relativism of distance, and to assess in turn to what extent it is vulnerable to criticisms. I propose that Williams can be cleared of all charges. First, however, it is helpful to step back in the light of the above and appreciate the somewhat idiosyncratic structure of Williams's claims.

As should now be clear, one cannot get to the relativism of distance simply by invoking a contrast between real and notional confrontations. In the first place, this is because Williams's position is not structured like that: the real-notional distinction does not generate the relativism of distance, understood as some kind of ethical theory, but rather helps us to explain and understand when a kind of relativist stance is appropriately adopted as part of a

reflective outlook. Second, we have seen that in Williams's own case the relativism of distance makes it onto the agenda only after he has first deployed numerous dense and complex arguments. It is in response to *these* that the relativism of distance is ultimately proposed, not simply with reference to the real-notional distinction taken in isolation. As a result, it may be the case that those who disagree sufficiently with Williams on these other points may resist conceding that the relativism of distance can indeed properly make it onto the agenda. If that is the case, then no amount of talk about real-notional distinctions will change things, and it will not so much be that the relativism of distance is rejected, as that it is denied as having any relevance.[18] Nonetheless, Williams's challenge will remain: that we need to account for the feature of our ethical experience according to which we are comfortable with unresolved moral disagreement in some cases, but not in others (and to which he proposes the relativism of distance as an answer). This datum of our moral psychology must be faced up to and accounted for, whether or not one agrees with Williams's proposal for how to do so, and a good explanation (or debunking) of it, consistent with one's proposed metaphysics, must duly be provided.

With the ground thus appropriately cleared, we can now turn to criticisms which challenge the relativism of distance directly. These have most clearly been offered by Miranda Fricker, with various of her complaints echoed by Simon Blackburn and Matthieu Queloz. Nonetheless, I propose that the relativism of distance can emerge unscathed. Fricker's critique of Williams consists of two broad parts, the first of which focuses on the coherence of the real-notional distinction, the second putting pressure on the idea of going over from one ethical outlook to another.[19] These however are closely related, insofar as both turn on what I propose to be subtle but important misreadings.

Fricker wishes to put pressure on Williams's claim that all "synchronic" confrontations between ethical outlooks, i.e. those in the here and now, must be "real", whilst "diachronic" confrontations, i.e. with those in the past, may be "notional". She criticises Williams from both directions. On the one hand, she wants to claim that "synchronic" confrontations can be notional. On the other, that *contra*-Williams it is not (necessarily) "inappropriate" to pass moral judgements on the past, and furthermore that it is manifestly more appropriate to pass judgement on some epochs compared to others (but which Williams's position cannot coherently account for). Alleging these faults, she claims that the real-notional distinction "cannot serve" Williams's aim to find room for a relativist outlook in some cases (e.g. the historical), whilst ruling it out in others (e.g. when ethical outlooks conflict in the present), hence impugning the coherence of Williams's overall position.[20]

Let us first take Fricker's contention that synchronic notional confrontations are indeed possible. She alleges that it is "thoroughly unconvincing" to claim there are no notional confrontations between moral outlooks in the present, because she is able to think of "a number of moral cultures, up and running in the world at this time, where I am pretty certain that a group of people like me could not authentically live them out around here as a moral subculture", on the basis that the "social and moral-psychological leap from there to here is too great". As an example, she rhetorically asks: "might a cohort of Western liberals reconstruct the moral outlook of a Yemeni village? It would be reality TV minus the TV – which is not reality".[21] Echoing Fricker's charge, Simon Blackburn has more recently complained against Williams that "I do not think it is an option for us in the west to 'adopt' the way of life of a Somali herdsman, but neither do I think this silences our moral repulsion at the ubiquity of FGM in that society".[22]

How damaging are these complaints? Responding to Fricker, we need to ask: who said anything about a group of people "like her" living out the moral outlook of e.g. Somali herdsmen *around here*? Likewise, who suggested that the issue was whether Western liberals could *reconstruct* the moral outlook of Yemeni villagers? Trying to do these things "around here" – e.g. in a developed Western city, with a university employing bourgeois intellectuals – would indeed be impossible, and only attempted by the deluded. But there is another possibility: *going over there* and trying to join them, who manifestly *are* living that way. This of course would not be easy. For a start, it's pretty unlikely that they would accept some strange Westerner joining their village. But imagine that they did. And imagine that the Westerner had first spent years immersing themselves in Arabic history and literature, in the intricacies of the Quran, in optimal ways to raise goats and defer to village elders in the approved local styles, and had genuinely decided that moving to live with these Yemenis was the only way that they could authentically practice what they now most sincerely believed.[23] Of course, this is spectacularly *unlikely* to be something anybody ever actually does. And it will also

be deeply puzzling to bourgeois liberal intellectuals like Fricker and Blackburn (and myself) why anybody would *want* to do this. But attempting to do it is not *impossible*, and furthermore it *could* be undertaken by somebody who was not in the grip of a fantasy, or seriously mistaken about the facts of the social world (ours or theirs). It therefore is a real option – just one that people like us, in the West, are spectacularly unlikely to ever try and take up.

This matters, because its being a real option is generated by the fact that there are precisely people out there *living like that right now*, who at least in theory we could try to join. Yet when we find out that e.g. Somali herdsmen are conducting FGM on girls who are alive right now, then this triggers our moral rejection of the practice, given that such rejection is an intrinsic part of what it means to have liberal egalitarian views in the contemporary West (the point made by Williams, noted above). After all, Somalia just isn't that far away. We could literally meet those girls if we took a flight of a few hours, and then drove a few more. They aren't, if we are honest about it, all that distant from us. Furthermore, we know full well *that they might want to come here one day*, and bring their FGM practices with them (indeed, some already have). Manifestly, a great deal therefore turns on this conflict of ethical outlooks: it *matters*. A relativist stance is therefore not the appropriate kind to take. This we can confirm by looking more closely, and realising that the undesirability and extreme difficulty (for us) of adopting their ethical outlook might well mask its status as a real option, but that it nonetheless *is* a real option in Williams's sense.[24] (By contrast, for it to be merely notional it would have to be something more like an impossibility, in the way that travelling back in time to the Bronze Age, or taking a spaceship to Alpha Centauri, are.) Hence (to now reply to Blackburn) why our repulsion to FGM is indeed in no way rightly viewed as a candidate for being silenced when we learn of the Somali herdsmen – i.e. precisely because this was a real confrontation after all. In turn, Williams's position on the real-notional distinction emerges intact, as does his advocacy of the relativism of distance.

V

Let us now turn to Fricker's second line of criticism, orientated around her objections to Williams's claims about the inappropriateness of judging historically distant moral outlooks. I take her position to consist of the following. First, that we ought to press the question "why shouldn't we appraise notionally confronted past cultures?", and where Williams is understood as claiming that we *shouldn't*.[25] Against this, Fricker wants to say that we *are* often perfectly entitled to appraise past historical moral outlooks, even if our confrontation with them is only notional. Furthermore, she takes Williams as identifying the wrong basis upon which to decide whether or not appraisal is in order. As she reads him, he is committed to the claim that one may only appropriately appraise a moral outlook if one has access to "the possibility of reconstructing and actually living by a given outlook in one's own time", but which she sees as far too demanding to be plausible.[26] After all, if we were only permitted to engage in appraisal of other moral outlooks when we could actually live in them as real options, then we would be debarred not only from passing judgement over Bronze Age chiefs and medieval samurai, but also over (for example) the Victorians. This is because, Fricker suggests, it is surely no more possible for us, now, to go over to the moral outlook of the Victorians (celebrating imperial rule of India; emphasising the importance of social class and rank; denying women the vote; shaming them for showing their ankles, etc.) than it is to adopt the outlook of Bronze Age warlords. But if it's being possible to go over to another outlook is a prerequisite for our being able to appraise it, then it would appear that we are not entitled to appraise *any* past moral outlook – no matter how far away from us it is in history. This has the bizarre implication that we are just as distant from the Victorians as we are from the Bronze Age, and hence must adopt the same relativist stance to both. But not only is that clearly *not* how we typically think and act – as reflected in the fact that we feel it much more appropriate to criticise our recent predecessors, the Victorians, whilst being comparatively apathetic about the people of the Bronze Age – it is also not what *Williams himself* wants to claim. Whereas the relativism of distance was supposed to generate a sense of *varying* distances between different kinds of moral outlooks, insisting on the possibility of going over to those outlooks in order to be able to appraise them generates the result that all historical outlooks are equally distant from us – and hence pulls in the opposite direction to that which

Williams invoked the idea of "going over" to other moral outlooks for in the first place. This, according to Fricker, renders his position incoherent. "Once again, his real/notional contrast is not doing the job he wants it to do. Real confrontation is far too strong a condition for appropriate moral appraisal".[27]

But is this right? I suggest not, one important reason being that I take Fricker to have misinterpreted Williams in his use of the language of "appropriate". (In fairness his presentation is highly ambiguous, and if I am right that Fricker has misread him, Williams must carry a significant portion of the blame due to presenting his ideas in such a cryptic manner.) As we have seen, and as Fricker also notes, Williams states that:

> A relativist view of a given type of outlook can be understood as saying that for such outlooks it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal - good, bad, right, wrong, and so on - can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made (EPL 161).

However, a great deal turns on how we understand Williams's use of "inappropriate". There are, I suggest, at least two ways in which this phrase can be taken. The first we might think of in roughly imperative terms: that "inappropriate" is more or less synonymous with a command to not do something; that it functions like saying "that is not to be done". We are quite familiar with this usage: it is how we often use the word "inappropriate" when trying to discipline children, or when referring to a colleague whose behaviour in the office is stepping over the line. But there is another, weaker, usage of the word, which is more evaluatively neutral, and where it is more synonymous with "that's not the optimal or most fitting thing to do right now, given the options". Hence, we might refer to it as "inappropriate" to turn up to a long hike with friends wearing plastic sandals, or to give a tearful solo standing ovation at the end of a nursery school nativity play. It is not that doing these things are strictly *wrong*, or that we want to definitively say that they should not be done, it is just that they are not the most fitting options in the relevant situations.

In practice, of course, the borderline between these two usages will often be fuzzy. Nonetheless, there is a real distinction here. The question for present purposes is: which kind of usage is Williams best understood as intending his language of appropriateness to appeal to? Fricker reads Williams in the imperative sense, hence her use of phrases such as that according to Williams "*we cannot* appropriately praise the Bronze Age chief or medieval samurai"; that "he…claims we *cannot judge* Teutonic Knights, Bronze age chiefs, mediaeval samurai, and of course, the ancient Greeks"; and her asking "why *shouldn't* we *allow* our moral sensibilities to range over even the most distant and different moral cultures?"[28] And indeed, if Williams is interpreted in this way, then her complaints as noted above do seem to follow: if he is somehow telling us that we are *not allowed*, or at least *ought not*, to pass moral judgement on the past, then Fricker is surely right to complain that we both can, and sometimes do – and indeed, why shouldn't we? Certainly, the real-notional distinction cannot generate any such ban.

But is this the best way to read Williams? Although Fricker's interpretation is in many ways the most natural given that we typically use the imperative form of "inappropriate" more than its weaker, more evaluatively neutral, alternative, I suggest that Williams is better understood as using "inappropriate" rather idiosyncratically, i.e. as applying in the second sense that I have tried to identify. Consider after all his formulation, already noted, when he states that "this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, *and no judgements are made*" (my emphasis). The point being that he does not say that judgements *cannot* be made, or that they *should not* be. It is rather that they *aren't*. This is brought out more clearly in his later paper "Human Rights and Relativism":

> Must I think of myself as visiting in judgement all the reaches of history? Of course, one can imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur, disapproving of its injustices, but exactly what grip does this get on one's ethical or political thought?[29]

As well as the posthumously published "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory":

> It is not that these judgements are, exactly, meaningless – one can imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur if one wants to – but they are useless and do not help one to understand anything.[30]

In other words, one *can* engage in appraisal of past moral outlooks, if one wishes. The pertinent question, however, is: but what's the point? If there *isn't* a point, then one should feel no compunction about disengaging; about being apathetic towards that past moral outlook (the relativism of distance kicks in). Furthermore, if moral appraisal gets in the way of truthful and nuanced historical understanding (and as Williams points out, it often will), then that is another reason to disengage – and indeed why not disengaging can rightly be seen as inappropriate.

Interpreting Williams this way diffuses Fricker's objections. Let us take her example of the Victorians. Strictly speaking, on Williams's view one *can* appraise the moral outlook of the Victorians: if one likes, one can play Kant at the cabinet of Disraeli. The question to ask is: but what's the point? If the answer is that one wishes to condemn Disraeli's stance on the corn laws, then the rest of us are liable to think that, actually, there *isn't* much point in doing that. Somebody can carry on condemning Disraeli, say for representing an objectionable moral outlook on the "undeserving poor", if they really want to, but the rest of us will think it precisely an inappropriate use of their time and energy, and not join in (rather how one *can* give a tearful standing ovation at the end of the nativity play, but the rest of us are liable to think that it isn't the time and place for that, and not join in).

However, there are reasons for morally appraising the Victorians that have rather a lot more going for them, that have more of a point. For example, it surely matters that we are only relatively recent descendants of the Victorians – that not so long ago we used to be like them (*were* them). Accordingly, knowledge of what they recently did, back then but still around here, can rightly seem troubling. If we are in favour of (say) women's equality and suffrage, then we will be liable to find it disturbing that until not so long ago a predecessor society of ours denied precisely these things. Accordingly, there are situations in which it might seem entirely appropriate – have a point – to engage in moral condemnation of Victorian gender values, e.g. as a way of affirming the contrasting values we now uphold, not just as bare assertions, but as reflective commitments rightly perturbed by the knowledge that relatively recently people rather like us didn't have these values, and if we're not careful, we might lose them. Indeed, this is all amplified by the fact that whilst on certain issues genuine ethical conflict with Victorian outlooks can indeed only ever be notional, and adopting an authentic Victorian ethical outlook is not a real option, that does not prevent some people (call them the reactionaries) advocating for the restoration and revival of *Victorian values*. Certainly, these people cannot sanely hope that we could once again become Victorians. But they can – and do – propose things like rolling back equal rights for women, restoring traditional gender roles, idolising the history of the British Empire, and so on.[31] Insofar as the reactionaries claim that we should be more like the Victorians, those who oppose them have a good reason to feel perturbed by Victorian values, and feel that there *is* a point in condemning a Victorian moral outlook; that doing so is in various contexts appropriate, perhaps even required.

Compare this to the Bronze Age. That was so long ago that we do not feel proximate to that outlook in any troubling sense. Likewise, not even the most reactionary of current actors suggests that we try and be like *them*, revive *their* values.[32] One can of course play Kant at the temple of Ramesses II, if one likes, but what is the point in that, what further issues arise which do have a point? If the answer is 'none', this means the relativism of distance *can* differentiate between different historical cases. Whilst comfortably adopting it as our stance towards the Bronze Age, there are good reasons why we are less prepared to (fully) take it up with regards to the Victorians: they are quite simply *less distant* from us, in ways that matter. Hence Williams's position does not fallaciously (and incoherently) imply that all historical outlooks are equally distant, but in fact helps to explain why we appraise them differently, depending on the distance. In turn, we can also see that Fricker errs in interpreting Williams as committed to understanding real confrontations between ethical outlooks as what she calls "a very strongly practical ideal", according to which we are only permitted to appraise past moral outlooks if we could go over to them.[33] Reading Williams this way generates her conclusion that real confrontation is too strong a condition for appropriate moral appraisal. But as I hope to have shown, this is a misreading of Williams both with regards real confrontations and what is meant by appropriate. The relativism of distance emerges unscathed.

Finally, we should consider the recent criticism put forward by Queloz. Agreeing with Fricker, Queloz complains that.

> Williams's varying characterizations of what gives rise to the relativism of distance – in terms of whether confrontations are real or notional, whether the outlooks one confronts are historical or contemporary, and whether they are real options for oneself – seem to pull in different directions, and make it hard to pin down what the decisive feature is that supposedly makes room for relativism.[34]

Accordingly, he suggests that.

> The central contrast, which determines where and to what extent there is room for a kind of relativistic stance, is the contrast between disagreements we are under more practical pressure to resolve and disagreements we are under less practical pressure to resolve. That contrast may correlate strongly with whether a confrontation is real or notional and whether it involves contemporary or historical outlooks; but these correlated properties are not what rationally grounds the relativism of distance.[35]

From this, he aims to conclude that.

> It is perfectly conceivable for there to be occasions on which real confrontations with contemporary outlooks put us under no pressure whatsoever to resolve a practical question. Conversely, it is equally conceivable for notional confrontations with past outlooks to put us under real pressure to resolve a practical question (when questions arise over what to do about the nasty views of ancestors, founders, or benefactors, for example). What fundamentally creates an opening for the relativism of distance is not the fact that a confrontation is notional or reaches across time, but the lack of practical pressure to resolve a practical question. [36]

Yet as should now be clear, this is based on a subtle but important misreading of Williams (indeed, the same one given by Fricker). First, *Williams himself* does not intend the real-notional distinction to "ground" the relativism of distance. Its job is to help us to know when a relativist outlook is the appropriate stance to take, depending on whether anything turns on a conflict between given outlooks. In other words, the preferred position Queloz advocates *is Williams's*. Second, however, Queloz is on shaky terrain in claiming that some real confrontations put us under no pressure to resolve a practical question, whilst merely notional confrontations can have practical upshots. Regarding the former, he says that it is "perfectly conceivable". But is it? Surely, if we become aware of an extant ethical outlook in conflict with our own, at the very least we need to decide what we are going to do, now that we are aware of its existence. Certainly, in many cases the answer might be: nothing, just carry on as before. But choosing to carry on as before is a practical choice, a response to a practical question, even if the pressure to answer it is only very minimal (at least for now – but what if things change?). It is perhaps telling that Queloz provides no examples to support his claim here. I would suggest that he try. My prediction is that he comes up empty-handed. Regarding the latter, consider the following: *because of whom* is pressure arising as regards what to do about the nasty views of ancestors, founders, benefactors etc.? Is it the dead historical figures themselves, or is it the noisy student protestors outside the window, the activists on social media? If this really were a notional confrontation, the question about what to do about the views of the dead wouldn't even arise; there would be no practical questions regarding what to do about statues, monuments, memorials, names, images, syllabi, etc. And if such questions did arise, we would be amenable to settling them by e.g. tossing a coin. But we aren't, because such confrontations are real (not with the dead, but between the living).

VI

This essay has sought to defend the relativism of distance from criticism, hoping to show not only that it is coherent, but that it is plausible that Williams is correct in what he claims. If so, he significantly contributed to our understanding of the human condition, offering a major philosophical breakthrough by correctly identifying what the truth in relativism both is, and is not.[37]

Much more could be said on this matter, for example whether Fricker is right to accuse Williams of introducing an "ad hoc" measure when exempting social justice from the relativism of distance[38], or if this was an astute observation that because it is a universal principle for human beings that might does not make right, assessments of justice (or as he later preferred to frame it, legitimacy) may appropriately be undertaken across and between epochs.[39] But let us conclude with two observations tying the relativism of distance to Williams's wider claims.

First, a correct understanding of the relativism of distance sheds light on Williams's famous but cryptic remark that "ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems" (ELP 135). Insofar as the ethnographic stance generates tensions for reflective ethical self-awareness – between our moral concepts that aspire to be universal, and our knowledge that we hold these only contingently – then the result is precisely that ethical thought cannot be everything it seems. Comprehending the relativism of distance can help ameliorate this situation, as well as clarifying what is at stake, but it cannot dispel it, only confirm that all is indeed not as it seems.

Second, we can understand the relativism of distance as connected, in at least one important way, to Williams's (in)famous critique of "the morality system". A detailed examination of this is far beyond the present scope, but we can nonetheless say the following. A central aspect of the morality system, as Williams sees it, is the aspiration to put morality somehow beyond luck; to make it a function of the purely voluntary, and where each of us is responsible only for what we freely choose. Yet the relativism of distance stands as a direct obstacle to the morality system: which epoch we are born in, and hence which moral outlook we come to see the world through, is irreducibly and inevitably contingent, a product of luck. In turn, it is important to recognise that Williams is not only saying that we ought to adopt the relativism of distance as part of our reflective outlook, he is also suggesting that when we get clear on the issues, we should realise that we *already are* committed to the relativism of distance, a fact about us that reflection should itself make room for, to the appropriate degree. But this allows us to illuminatingly adapt one of his other famous remarks, that the morality system "is not an invention of philosophers. It is the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us" (ELP 174). The relativism of distance is likewise not an invention of philosophers, but what it gives us reason to think is that the morality system can in fact *only* be, precisely, *part*, of the outlook of almost all of us. For those engaged in ethical reflection, the tools of resistance are already at hand.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Williams, 1995: 186.

[2] To borrow Adrian Moore's helpful summary for now (Moore, 2006: 220).

[3] Miguens, 2024; Rovane, 2009; Tasioulas, 1998; Fricker, 2013; Fricker, 2010; Fricker, 2020; Ng, 2019; Blackburn, 2019: 33–34. For an important exception see Rini, 2019: 181–184.

[4] Williams, 2006. Importantly, although Williams first offered a version of his ideas in Williams, 1981, *pace* Fricker this is not yet his fully developed position, although it certainly contains an important part of it. Revealingly, it is not until ELP that Williams introduces the phrase "relativism of distance", and which (as we shall see below) necessarily involves claims about moral psychology, and the products of ethical reflection, both of which are absent from the earlier statement. It is only in ELP that Williams's position as a whole emerges, hence I focus attention upon that.

[5] For readings of Williams as making a primarily metaphysical intervention, see Rovane, 2009: 45–46; Tasioulas, 1998: 380–382; Ng, 2019: 151, 156, 161.

[6] Williams, 1986: 203; Williams, 2021: 278.

[7] For discussion see Sagar, 2014; Smyth, 2019; Russell, 2019.

[8] For further discussion see Cueni and Queloz, 2021.

[9] Williams additionally rules out ethical objectivity generated by an Archimedean point (because none exists); the possibility of objective knowledge in ethics analogous to perspectival knowledge e.g. with regards to colour; and the hope that because human beings need to share a social world, their needs and motivations might issue in determinate and specific contours of ethical organisation in terms of a single best theory of human nature and how to live (a possibility for ethical objectivity that Williams grants as intelligible, but overwhelmingly unlikely).

[10] Williams, 1993: 23.

[11] Williams has in mind Harman, 1975.

[12] Williams, 1993: 26.

[13] On the use of the ethnographic stance, and the importance of engaged versus disengaged perspectives, see Queloz, 2024; Queloz, 2025: chapter 2.

[14] Williams, 1981.

[15] In fairness, Williams invites misunderstanding due to his extremely difficult presentational sequencing. It is not surprising that he has been misread.

[16] More specifically: if pressed regarding the brutal behaviour of individual samurai in the past, we could of course freely accept and affirm that we think that what they did as individuals *was wrong* (i.e. by the lights of our own moral outlook). It is just that if we are reliably informed that all Japanese in that period thought that what they did *was not wrong*, we are not obliged to take the further step of declaring that the outlook of medieval Japan, as a whole, was wrong. Vis-à-vis their outlook, no felt need for condemnation may kick in, because nothing turns on the conflict between theirs and ours: the relativism of distance comes into effect. Hence Williams's insistence that the relativism of distance applies only to moral outlooks, taken more or less as a whole, and not to the characters or acts of specific individuals (ELP 162–3).

[17] To borrow Mary Midgley's (1981) famous phrase.

[18] Hence for example whilst Tasioulas (1998) presents his criticism of Williams as a rejection of the relativism of distance, this is not strictly speaking what he is doing. Following John McDowell, Tasioulas contends that ethical objectivity is possible if we understand ethical knowledge in a way analogous to knowledge of secondary properties, rejecting Williams's binary distinction between the scientific and the ethical based on the idea of the absolute conception. If Tasioulas is correct about this, then it may turn out that the relativism of distance is not so much rejected or refuted, as that it simply cannot get going, and likewise there will be no impetus to even consider it. But it is for precisely that reason *not* in the first instance a disagreement about the relativism of distance (which can only come later), but about metaphysics. Thus, I do not seek to adjudicate upon it here, at least beyond noting the surely pertinent point, famously made against McDowell, that colour judgements appear to exhibit cultural relativity – and hence inviting the relativism of distance, after all.

[19] Fricker, 2010: 156, repeated in less detail in Fricker, 2013: 804; Fricker, 2020: 928–930. Ng, 2019 endorses Fricker's criticisms, and finds the relativism of distance implausible based on complaints about the real-notional distinction, suggesting it ought to be replaced by a thesis in moral psychology which she (somewhat confusingly) calls the "irrelativism of distance". Yet as should now be clear, this is a misreading of Williams, who himself incorporates and makes central precisely the kinds of moral psychological factors that Ng wants to emphasise as compatible with the real-notional distinction.

[20] Fricker, 2010: 157.

[21] Fricker, 2010: 156.

[22] Blackburn, 2019: 33.

[23] Of course they might be *wrong* about this, and they might very well fail, but that's not the point.

[24] If it were replied that one can vary the example by considering people who *cannot* come "over here" – e.g. largely uncontacted indigenous tribes in the Amazon basin – we do well to remember Williams's point that "Today all confrontations between cultures must be real confrontations, and the existence of exotic traditional societies presents quite different,

and difficult, issues of whether the rest of the world can or should use power to preserve them, like endangered species; anthropological and other field workers find themselves in the role of game wardens" (ELP 163).

[25] Fricker, 2010: 161.

[26] Fricker, 2010: 158.

[27] Fricker, 2010: 159.

[28] Fricker, 2010: 155, 159, emphasis added.

[29] Williams, 2005a: 66.

[30] Williams, 2005b: 10.

[31] As case studies, consider the recent rise of so-called "tradwives", the Conservative former MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, and the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb.

[32] Even an ultra-reactionary such as the online agitator who goes by the persona "Bronze Age Pervert" does not seriously advocate for the revival of actual Bronze Age values, but for a juvenile modern caricature of pillaging, war, oppression and beautifully muscular men.

[33] Fricker, 2010: 156.

[34] Queloz, 2025: 97.

[35] Queloz, 2025, 9VI7–8.

[36] Queloz, 2025, 98.

[37] Meaning that one will thus side with Williams against Rovane, 2009.

[38] Fricker, 2010: 160.

[39] Williams, 2005a: 69–72.

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