



Minding the Gap: Bernard Williams and David Hume on Living an Ethical Life

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Abstract

Bernard Williams is frequently supposed to be an ethical Humean, due especially to his work on 'internal' reasons. In fact Williams's work after his famous article 'Internal and External Reasons' constitutes a profound shift away from Hume's ethical outlook. Whereas Hume offered a reconciling project whereby our ethical practices could be self-validating without reference to external justificatory foundations, Williams's later work was increasingly skeptical of any such possibility. I conclude by suggesting reasons for thinking Williams was correct, a finding which should be of concern for anybody engaged in the study of ethics.

Keywords

Bernard Williams – David Hume – foundations of ethics – History of Ethics – internal reasons – Ethical Living

Acknowledgements: This paper is dedicated to the memory of my teacher and friend Bob Hargrave, who passed away before this article could be published. Without Bob I would never have become a philosopher, though I certainly would have tried. As well as introducing me to the work of both Williams and Hume – a matter of no small measure in my intellectual formation – Bob taught me how to think. To anybody who knew him that should be obvious enough, in various ways, in what follows.

Particular and specific thanks must go to Hallvard Lillehammer, whose generosity, advice, and guidance were indispensable in developing the content and form of my arguments, and whose support was invaluable both intellectually and in securing publication. Istvan Hont and John Robertson have been unfailing intellectual guides, as well as consistent and generous mentors. James Arnold is my most long-standing philosophical interlocutor, and all my

I

In a recent study Lorenzo Greco has proposed that there exist important affinities between the ethical philosophies of Bernard Williams and David Hume.¹ In addition to the well-known fact that both Williams and Hume are committed to theories of 'internal reasons', Greco proposes a set of further 'Humean reflections' in Williams's ethical writings.² These include the development of an anti-theoretical ethics of sentiment yielding a form of virtue ethics scaled down from Aristotelian teleology; emphasis on the contingency of ethical existence; the need for rich conceptions of human nature; skepticism regarding impartial, putatively 'rational' ethical perspectives; and parallels between Williams's conception of shame and Hume's account of humility.

Greco's suggestion that we read Williams as a basically 'Humean' thinker is, however, difficult to reconcile with a remark Williams himself made, late in life, on precisely this matter: that 'I once had a great admiration for Hume. Now I think that he suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism'.³ This paper takes Williams's self-assessment as its starting point, showing that although the parallels Greco has drawn do exist, they mask profound differences. For Williams's ethical writings after his famous article on internal and external reasons in fact constitute a decisive shift *away* from Hume's fundamental ethical outlook. Whilst a full examination of Williams's and Hume's moral philosophies is clearly not possible here, the essential difference between them can nonetheless be established by focusing on their responses to the possibility of an amoralist, or ethical skeptic, who stands outside our ethical commitments and prompts the question of what reasons we can give – or perhaps better, have – for living an ethical life. In doing so we see not only that Williams's reflections were in the final instance profoundly

best ideas about Hume ultimately come from him. Nakul Krishna, Ed Hall and Dom O'Mahony all offered insightful, helpful and encouraging comments over the long period of this paper's gestation, for which I am extremely grateful.

1 Lorenzo Greco, 'Humean Reflections in the Ethics of Bernard Williams', *Utilitas* 19 (2007), pp 312–25.

2 See for example Garret Cullity and Berys Gaut, 'Introduction', in G. Cullity and B. Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 1–28; Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton, 'Towards *Fin de siècle* Ethics: Some Trends', in S. Darwall, A. Gibbard and P. Railton (eds.), *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 3–50; Stephen Darwall, 'Reasons, Motives and the Demands of Morality: An Introduction', in *Moral Discourse*, pp. 305–12.

3 Bernard Williams, 'Seminar with Bernard Williams', *Ethical Perspectives* 6 (1999), pp. 243–65, p. 256.

un-Humean, but generated consequences of significance to anybody presently engaged in the study of ethics.

II

We begin by considering Williams's early essay 'Egoism and Altruism'. Williams is here at his most Humean, staking a position explicitly designed to advance Hume's approach to ethics over Kant. His strategy is to combine conclusions considering two figures, the 'egoist' and the 'altruist'. Regarding the egoist – an individual 'who rejects, is uninterested in, or resists this aspect of moral considerations [i.e. altruism], and hence moral considerations; and is concerned solely with his own interests'⁴ – Williams is deeply skeptical of the prospects of arguing such a figure, on the unlikely assumption they would be prepared to listen, into morality.⁵ Williams finds no purely rational considerations which might induce the egoist to change, and suggests success is more likely via appeals to the benefits egoists gain in living a moral life. These will not take the form of rational argument, however, but of better-lived alternatives giving the egoist reasons to change his perspective on the world, and hence find egoism unsatisfactory.⁶

Yet Williams does not address himself solely to the egoist. To retroactively employ his own later distinction, he does not consider only what can be said *to* the egoist, but also what can be said *about* him – i.e. to those who are not egoists but already live within ethical life. Williams notes that the egoist is relatively unimpressive to those of us already living within morality because the 'territory' he retains is minimal and unattractive from our perspective. Ethical life contains diverse and important goods denied to the egoist, and for precisely that reason egoism is not appealing if one already lives within ethics. (Williams stresses that one should not be overly complacent or combative in pressing this point, however, because ethical life necessarily involves sacrifices that would be experienced as real costs to the egoist too.)⁷

4 Bernard Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism', in B. Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 250–65, p. 251. For expository purposes Williams here treats altruism as synonymous with morality.

5 Williams had not yet developed his later, famous distinction between 'ethics' and 'morality' – more on which below.

6 Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism', pp. 252–60.

7 Williams, 'Egoism and Altruism', pp. 259–60.

Regarding altruism – ‘a general disposition to regard the interests of others, merely as such, as making some claims on one, and, in particular, as implying the limiting of one’s own projects’⁸ – Williams seeks to establish the possibility of ‘non-I desires’, i.e. desires which do not ultimately refer back to the desiring agent. Mere non-I desires fall short of altruism, however: they can be directed at non-agents (the environment, works of art), and even when directed at other agents are not necessarily accompanied by sympathy and other relevant emotions experienced by the genuine altruist. Noting this, Williams claims that whilst there is no logical reason to move from ‘I-desires’ to ‘non-I desires’, the distance between ‘non-I desires’ and genuine altruism is much smaller and easier to imagine being overcome – though again not via force of rational argument alone. Although much might be questioned about Williams’s claims, the point is that he offers this conclusion, along with the inability to argue the egoist into morality, as encouraging ‘the view that both in moral theory and also in moral psychology’ the crucial step is not one of Kantian rational universalization but the ‘Humean step ... from the self to someone else’.⁹

At this early stage, then, Williams *did* advance a broadly Humean set of reflections. But this did not last, and to begin seeing why we must note two features of this early treatment. First, Williams does not register the amoralist as a profound philosophical threat. The prospect of some figure standing outside ethics does not raise destabilising concerns for those actually living within it. Secondly, Williams does not seriously doubt that the egoist is worse off than those living within ethical life. These two considerations are connected: not only is the amoralist presented merely as a device for furthering a particular philosophical viewpoint, he is not registered as a threat because it is taken as obvious that amorality is not attractive to those living within ethics, and thus cannot make trouble for the enterprise of ethics itself. In coming to question precisely these assumptions, however, Williams put clear distance between himself and Hume.

III

In the essay ‘Internal and External Reasons’ Williams builds up what he calls a ‘sub-Humean’ model of deliberative reasoning, primitively formulated either as ‘A has a reason to Φ iff A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his Φ -ing’ or ‘...some desire, the satisfaction of which A believes will

8 Williams, ‘Egoism and Altruism’, p. 250.

9 Williams, ‘Egoism and Altruism’, p. 265.

be served by his Φ -ing'. This model is too simple, and Williams extends it to generate a more plausible account of deliberative reasoning under the heading of 'internal' reasons, i.e. which display 'a relativity of [a] reason statement to the agent's subjective motivational set, which I call the agent's S '. Ultimately for Williams a person can be said to have an internal reason for action only if there is something in their actual existing S motivating them to act. Lacking some such item in their S , it cannot be said that an agent has a reason to act.¹⁰

Williams casts doubt on another putative sort of reason, which he labels 'external'. An 'external' reason would have to make a claim on an agent, giving them a reason to act, without necessarily referring to any item in their S . The appeal of external reasons to many theorists is that they promise to represent a demand upon the agent which they must conform to regardless of contingent, rationally arbitrary sets of desires, and which thus offers the possibility of objectively grounded reasons for action which can themselves be generated by rational reflection alone. Williams is notoriously skeptical of the existence of external reasons: in particular, there is a major problem in explaining how an external reason could come to motivate when *ex hypothesi* the agent is supposed to start from a position where no 'internal' reasons generate motivation.¹¹ Williams is clear that although he is dubious regarding the structure of Hume's famous argument that reason is and ought only ever to be the slave of the passions,¹² with regards to the question of motivation 'there does seem great force in Hume's basic point, and it is very plausible to suppose that all external reason arguments are false'.¹³ Hume's 'basic point' is that all motivation must refer to some prior existing passion of the agent, i.e. an item in their S , whilst the 'great force' is that if so, morality is a product of contingent individual passions and not of the operations of reason, strongly pushing one in the direction of a 'subjectivist' ethical theory.¹⁴

¹⁰ Bernard Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', in B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–13, pp. 101–2.

¹¹ Williams expresses further skepticism regarding external reasons in Bernard Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', in B. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35–45; Bernard Williams, 'Values, Reasons and the Theory of Persuasion, in A.W. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, pp. 109–18.

¹² In fact Williams is probably mistaken to be hostile to Hume on this point. See Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 264–6.

¹³ Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', p. 109.

¹⁴ For doubts regarding the doctrine of internal reasons see John McDowell, 'Might There Be External Reasons?', in J.E.J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

For Williams there are only 'internal' reasons, and in a basic sense this is a 'Humean' position. But it is not enough to render Williams an ethical Humean. We see this by turning to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, focusing on a core contention of that work, divided into two parts intimately connected:

1. there is no objective foundation for ethical life.
2. the reasons we have for living an ethical life cannot come from 'without', but only from 'within'.

This claim is complex and time must be spent understanding what Williams meant. Beginning with what he titled Socrates' Question – 'How should one live?' – Williams asks what we might say to an amoralist who refuses to recognise the claims of any ethical life. More specifically, what might a justification of ethical life consist in, if it were intended both to convince the amoralist and to act as a 'force' compelling him into ethical life? Three questions must be put to any justification: 'To whom is it addressed? From where? Against what?'¹⁵

Regarding 'against what?' Williams invites us to consider somebody he labels a 'moral skeptic'. This skeptic, however, is not a skeptic about knowledge. What he doubts is not whether there is 'ethical knowledge' (he insists this is beside the point), but whether there is a *justification* for ethical life. In his more insidious forms, the skeptic may resolve to renounce the use of moral language except to deceive, living his life outside ethics as far as possible, perhaps taking advantage of the ethical structures that permit a surrounding community to go on existing, and living parasitically off of them.

One may now expect 'to whom?' to meld into 'against what?', but Williams introduces the differentiation we employed above. There are answers given to the moral skeptic, and answers *about* him but intended for those already living within ethical life: not for the outsider who probably won't listen anyway, but 'to reassure, strengthen, and give insight to those who will'.¹⁶ Here the question of whether a justification of ethical life can act as a force comes to the fore. In particular, there is the possibility that a justification from within ethical life

1995); Derek Parfit, 'Reasons and Motivation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 71 (1997), pp. 99–146; Hallvard Lillehammer, 'The Doctrine of Internal Reasons', *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34 (2000), pp. 507–16; Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Padstow, Cornwall: Routledge, 1993 [1985]), p. 23.

¹⁶ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 26.

may be a sufficient force to keep some individuals within, and yet simultaneously be wholly impotent with regards to bringing outsiders inside.

Finally, 'from what?' This Williams takes to be the most important of the three questions: 'what is the minimum [a person within the ethical life] is assumed to have? If he is trying to justify the ethical life from the ground up, what is the ground?' This comes to the same as asking if there is an Archimedean Point, 'some position outside all our knowledge and belief from which we could validate them'. What would that look like with regards to ethical life? It would need to find 'a point of leverage in the idea of rational action', and when fully developed it would have to entail that we are somehow 'committed to an ethical life, merely because we are rational agents', 'something to which even the amoralist or the skeptic is committed but which, properly thought through, will show us that he is irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken'.¹⁷

For Williams if there is no objective foundation for ethical life, justifications for it must come from within. Here the connection to the internal and external reasons argument is important. If Williams is right that there are only internal reasons, then there cannot be objective foundations for ethical life: such foundations would have to be external, but if really external they could give only external reasons and not get a grip on our motivations. Accordingly, there only internal reasons, and only internal foundations.

Williams identifies two types of philosophical venture which attempt to avoid this conclusion by supplying an 'Archimedean Point', providing reasons for living an ethical life from 'outside'. They are exemplified by Kant and Aristotle, and Williams considers each a failure. But he does not think they fail for the same reasons, and is deeply hostile to Kant's project in a way he is not to Aristotle's. I will not here consider Williams's rejection of a justificatory foundation for ethics at the intersection between rational agency and the commitments of practical reason, though something will briefly later be said about Kant.¹⁸ Instead I concentrate on Williams's belief that an Aristotelian picture of human nature, with a *telos* culminating in *eudaimonia*, cannot supply an Archimedean Point.

Williams notes it is frequently claimed that ancient approaches to ethics are 'egoistical' because they focus upon the interests agents have in living a moral life, say by securing harmony of the soul or achieving a flourishing state of wellbeing.¹⁹ Yet from the perspective of some modern moral

¹⁷ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 28–9.

¹⁸ For Williams's rejection of the Kantian project: Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapters 4 and 10.

¹⁹ This is further discussed in Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 4.

theories, which posit self-regarding motivations to be strictly incompatible with the demands of morality, this 'egoism' renders ancient approaches illegitimate. This clash of perspectives helps gets to the heart of things. The Aristotelian account encouraged us to 'think about ethical and other goods *from* an ethical point of view that I have already acquired and that is part of what I am'. Looked at from the inside, ethical goods already have ethical significance because they are ethical goods from that perspective. But looked at from the outside 'this point of view belongs to someone in whom the ethical dispositions he has acquired lie deeper than other wants and preferences'.²⁰ Noting this, Williams draws a crucial conclusion, the consequences of which we are centrally concerned with. Adopting the inside and outside perspectives, we can consider in alternative ways the roles our dispositions play in constituting our ethical thought. From the 'inside' perspective it simply 'is not true ... that the only things of value are people's dispositions; still less that only the agent's dispositions have value'. When living an ethical life, a whole range of things have value to us: the wellbeing of our friends, family and loved-ones, or the demands of justice, or the conservation of the environment, or works of art, and so on. From 'inside', ethical life is plainly not egoistic. Yet taking up the 'outside' perspective, asking "what has to exist in the world for that ethical point of view to exist?" The answer can only be "people's dispositions." There is a sense in which they are the ultimate supports of ethical value.²¹ Severe conflict threatens between the inside and outside perspectives: if an agent attempts to adopt the outside perspective he may find it impossible – abstracting away entirely from his own actually possessed dispositions – to find anything of value in anything at all, including his own dispositions. Ethical vertigo threatens if there is no validating foundation for our values.

The Aristotelian picture was not threatened by such conflict. Natural teleology and the promise of *eudaimonia* tied things together so that each man 'could come to understand that the dispositions that gave him his ethical view of the world were a correct or full development of human potentiality. This was so absolutely, in the sense ... that the best possible theory of humanity and its place in the world would yield this result'.²² But the Aristotelian picture avoids the conflict between the inside and outside perspectives at the cost of being untenable: 'Aristotle saw a certain kind of ethical, cultural and indeed political life as a harmonious culmination of human potentialities,

²⁰ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 51, emphasis in original.

²¹ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 51.

²² Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 52.

recoverable from an absolute understanding of nature. We have no reason to believe in that'.²³

For Williams this generated dramatic consequences:

Once we lose the [Aristotelian] belief, however, a gap opens between the agent's perspective and the outside view. We understand – and, most important, the agent can come to understand – that the agent's perspective is only one of many equally compatible with human nature, all open to various conflicts within themselves and with other cultural aims. With that gap opened, the claim I expressed by saying that agents' dispositions are the 'ultimate supports' of ethical value takes on a more skeptical tone. It no longer sounds enough.

I believe that the claim is true, and that in its general outline the description of the ethical self we have recovered from the ancient writers is correct. At the same time, we must admit that the Aristotelian assumptions which fitted together the agent's perspective and the outside view have collapsed. No one has yet found a good way of doing without those assumptions.²⁴

Unfortunately, whilst Williams was clear on the importance of the gap he was perhaps too vague regarding its exact nature. At least three plausible interpretations present themselves:

- A. Given that there are multiple viable life-plans (including multiple viable ethical perspectives) that one could adopt, what makes the choice of any life-plan correct? There is no longer any reason to have faith that any particular life-plan will lead to happiness, so the choice may begin to seem arbitrary.
- B. Given that there is apparently no reason to expect happiness to follow as a result of the particular life-plan one has, why should one think an ethical life in particular has (special) value, or has more value than some other life outside ethics?
- C. Given that there is no unitary *telos*, how is one to decide between conflicting ethical and/or non-ethical requirements? A teleological system can promise a single currency by which to measure the options, but we

²³ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 52. See also Bernard Williams, 'Making Sense of Humanity', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 79–89; 'Evolution, Ethics and the Representation Problem', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 100–10.

²⁴ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 52–3.

now have no reason to think there is any such currency. Substantive decisions may begin to appear arbitrary.

We shall see next that Hume addressed himself to precisely these concerns raised by Williams's gap. He directly addressed A. and B., and also had a response to C. (though it is more oblique) – and did so by exploring possibilities within what Williams described as leaving the door open 'to a psychology that might go some way in the Aristotelian direction'.²⁵ But Hume's final stance is not Williams's.

IV

The most important contrast between Williams and Hume is located in the conclusion to the latter's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Nonetheless, it is illuminating to briefly consider earlier treatments in both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the essay 'The Sceptic'. Hume's most detailed discussion of morality is located in Books II and III of the *Treatise*, comprising a complex subjectivist account rooted in individual passions resting upon a neo-Epicurean psychology of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance forwarded by the operations of 'sympathy', building to the construction of a common point of view from which fully fledged ethical judgements are made.²⁶ In Hume's final analysis virtue is whatever is useful or agreeable to self or others, vice the opposite. This is true for both kinds of virtue in Hume's famous distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial', the former being useful and/or agreeable in all instances, the latter only in general due to their dependence on pre-existing social conventions.²⁷

Hume operates from wholly 'within' ethical life, offering no attempt to supply an external validating foundation. In Rachel Cohon's phrase, his second-order commitments are 'anti-realist but truth-cognitive'.²⁸ Moral distinctions are founded entirely in the internal psychological reactions of human agents, not given by some external mind-independent reality. But Hume can simultaneously accommodate the truth-aptness of moral distinctions and utterances:

²⁵ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 52.

²⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1739–40] 2007), p. 367, p. 373, p. 377.

²⁷ Hume, *Treatise*, p. 370.

²⁸ Rachel Cohon, *Hume's Morality: Feeling and Fabrication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 100–1.

it is true that virtue is what is useful or agreeable to self or others, and one can be correct or mistaken in judgements and pronouncements regarding particular cases. There is, however, no external foundation for ethics on Hume's picture above and beyond the sentimental reactions of ethical agents.

Hume's corresponding first-order picture falls under the broad heading of 'virtue ethics'. Vice and virtue depend upon qualities of underlying character, and it is via a 'progress of sentiments' we develop our characters over time. But Hume offers no corresponding account of *eudaimonia*, no picture of ethical life guaranteeing the flourishing of ethical agents.²⁹ We pursue the virtues and celebrate them in others because of the agreeableness or utility derived from them by self or others. The *Treatise* supplies no sense (and certainly no guarantee) that she who possesses the virtues will necessarily live the pleasurable – and much less, the happy – life. Yet in declining any Aristotelian *telos* of *eudaimonia*, Williams's gap threatens. If all we have are sentimental dispositions and sympathetic reactions grounded in pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance, why live ethically? Put crudely: if at root virtue is all about pleasure, why not just seek pleasure however one can, perhaps by selectively operating outside ethical life when convenient or advantageous?

Hume chooses to sidestep these questions in the *Treatise*. Although he tantalisingly suggests that his ethical system 'may help us form a just notion of the *happiness*, as well as the *dignity* of virtue, and may interest every principle in our nature in the embracing and cherishing that noble quality', nonetheless he 'forebear[s] insisting on this subject. Such reflections require a work apart, very different from the genius of the present'.³⁰ Introducing his famous distinction between the 'anatomist' and the 'painter', Hume claims that his project in the *Treatise* is primarily to be the former, perhaps giving occasional advice to the latter. Here Hume was in significant measure attempting to deflect the criticism levelled by Francis Hutcheson, that he showed 'insufficient warmth in the cause of virtue', whilst also offering a sharp rejoinder to the older philosopher: Hutcheson might wish to be a moral painter, but his paintings would be defective unless guided by Hume's superior anatomy.³¹ But by claiming that he was an anatomist and not a painter, Hume conspicuously declined to engage with the outstanding question: what reasons we can have for living an ethical life. Such non-engagement, however, was only temporary. In two subsequent

29 Cohon, *Hume's Morality*, pp. 161–2.

30 Hume, *Treatise*, p. 395.

31 James Moore, 'The Moralist and the Metaphysician', *Fortnight* 308 (1992), pp. 12–14; 'Hume and Hutcheson', in M.A. Stewart and J.P. Wright (eds.), *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 23–57, pp. 35–9.

'works apart' Hume addressed precisely this question: first in the essay 'The Sceptic', then at the close of the second *Enquiry*.

The brevity of 'The Sceptic' belies a great complexity of argument. Hume considers human happiness, virtue, the role of philosophy and the connections between all three, addressing himself to an imagined audience demanding not just advice on securing goals revealed as good by common reflection, but 'to be instructed how we shall chuse our ends', i.e. what is of ultimate value.³² To begin, Hume states a position continuous with the *Treatise*: that value depends on the structure of a perceiving mind, and is not located independently in the world. 'The inference upon the whole is, that it is not from the value or worth of the object...that we can determine...enjoyment, but merely from the passion in...pursuit. Objects have absolutely no worth or value in themselves. They derive their worth merely from the passion. If that be strong, and steady, and successful, the person is happy'.³³ To discover what makes a person happy, we must ask what passions contribute to this end.

Hume next presents what appears to be a most *unskeptical* conclusion:

[T]he happiest disposition of mind is the *virtuous*; or, in other words, that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steals the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasures of society and conversation, than those of the senses.³⁴

If virtue relates to what is useful and agreeable to self and others, possessing the virtues will in general be closely correlated to happiness for their possessors. But Hume immediately casts further doubt upon the connections between virtue and happiness. Since happiness depends on our passions, were we able to alter these at will we could guarantee happiness. But 'the fabric and constitution of our mind no more depends on our choice, than that of our body'. Since we cannot alter the internal constitution of our mind, 'Such are effectually excluded from all pretensions to philosophy, and the *medicine of the mind*, so much boasted'. The power of reflection to alter one's passions is extremely small, 'the empire of philosophy extends over a few; and with regard to these too, her authority is very weak and limited'. Hume draws the

³² David Hume, 'The Sceptic', in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 159–80, p. 161.

³³ Hume, 'The Sceptic', p. 166.

³⁴ Hume, 'The Sceptic', p. 168, emphasis in original.

skeptical conclusion: 'Men may well be sensible of the value of virtue, and may desire to attain it; but it is not always certain, that they will be successful in their wishes'.³⁵

This has a further upshot: philosophy cannot act as a force to compel an amoralist outside ethical life to enter into it. Imagining somebody 'born of so perverse a frame of mind, of so callous and insensible a disposition, as to have no relish for virtue and humanity, no sympathy with his fellow-creatures, no desire of esteem and applause' Hume claims such a person 'must be allowed entirely incurable, nor is there any remedy in philosophy' to change him.³⁶ Likewise, somebody living within ethical life may form a conviction and a resolution to continue living that life, but 'The misfortune is, that this conviction and this resolution never can have place, unless a man be, before-hand, tolerably virtuous'.³⁷ To these already skeptical conclusions Hume adds more. Firstly, possession of the virtues may, in some unfortunate cases, lead to *unhappiness*: the man of great integrity may be wracked by melancholy at the evils of the world, whilst the uncaught criminal with no conscience leads a happy existence. General correlation of virtue and happiness does not guarantee co-incidence. Furthermore, philosophy itself distracts from the successful pursuit of happiness because excessive reflection makes it more unobtainable.³⁸

In 'The Sceptic' Hume works with the same materials Williams later employed, and finds the same gap between the inside and outside perspectives. Although virtue and happiness generally coincide, this is not guaranteed. The correct response to this finding is to disengage from philosophy (which offers no succour anyway) and cease adopting the outside perspective, getting on with an unexamined life inside ethics. But 'The Sceptic' is not the only way to build with such materials. The closing passages of the *Enquiry* see Hume reaching altogether less skeptical conclusions, seeking to make good on the suggestion of the *Treatise* that virtue 'may interest every principle in our nature in the embracing and cherishing that noble quality'. Before examining that account in detail, however, we should note two important consequences of this difference. First, that given the fact Hume in the *Enquiry* seeks to make good on the earlier suggestion of the *Treatise*, this indicates that 'The Sceptic' is not – as has sometimes been thought³⁹ – a work *in propria persona*, but like

35 Hume, 'The Sceptic', pp. 168–9, emphasis in original.

36 Hume, 'The Sceptic', p. 169–70.

37 Hume, 'The Sceptic', p. 171.

38 Hume, 'The Sceptic', p. 180.

39 See for example Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); M.A. Stewart, 'The Stoic Legacy in the Early

its sister essays 'The Platonist', 'The Epicurean' and 'The Stoic', articulates a view not (entirely) Hume's own.⁴⁰ Second, and of particular importance for this paper, 'The Sceptic' demonstrates that Hume was entirely aware of the position Williams would later settle upon – but chose not to adopt it himself.

V

It is not necessary to consider the bulk of Hume's account in the *Enquiry*. It reproduces the argument of Book III of the *Treatise* in more condensed form, finding again that virtue is what is useful or agreeable to self or others. Instead I focus on Hume's treatment of the 'sensible knave', and which closes the main body of the text. Whilst the knave has attracted a good deal of attention, most have focused narrowly upon Hume's theory of justice, though sometimes more broadly on the claim that knaves cannot be argued into this aspect of morality.⁴¹ What is typically missed is that the restriction of the knave to acts of injustice is itself of significance, and that Hume's response comes in two parts, only one of which is addressed to the knave. The other is for those already living within ethical life.

Hume closes the *Enquiry* by considering the 'obligation' we have to virtue, 'and to inquire whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare, will not best find his account in the practice of every moral duty'.⁴² Hume believes his own theory could not be more 'advantageous to society'. Instead of promoting 'useless austerities and rigours, suffering and self-denial', virtue has the sole purpose of making its 'votaries and all mankind, during

'Scottish Enlightenment', in M.J. Osler (ed.), *Atoms, Pneuma and Tranquility: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 273–96; James Harris, 'Hume's Four Essays on Happiness and their Place in the Move from Morals to Politics', in E. Mazza and E. Ronchetti (eds.), *New Essays on David Hume* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007), pp. 223–36; 'The Epicurean in Hume', in N. Leddy and A.S. Lifschitz, *Epicurus in the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 161–81.

⁴⁰ Of course there is also the possibility that Hume changed his mind, and then back again, between writing the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. However, *in lieu* of historical evidence we will not be able to say for sure one way or the other. What we can say, however, is that 'The Sceptic' does not constitute Hume's settled mature view, as found in the second *Enquiry*.

⁴¹ For a discussion of this matter, and a corrective to common misreadings of Hume, see Jason Baldwin, 'Hume's Knave and the Interests of Justice', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004), pp. 277–96.

⁴² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. T.L. Beauchamp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1751] 1998), p. 79.

every instant of their existence, if possible, cheerful and happy'.⁴³ Virtues, immediately agreeable to possessors, are desirable from even the self-interested view of each agent. But the same is also alleged regarding the 'companionable virtues of good manners and wit, decency and genteelness', i.e. virtues useful or agreeable to others.⁴⁴ We reap pleasure and happiness from being found companionable, having the virtues which bringing pleasure to others as well as ourselves.

Accordingly, whatever 'contradiction may vulgarly be supposed between the selfish and the social sentiments' this is a false dichotomy.⁴⁵ Acting virtuously is the surest way to secure happiness insofar as happiness is secured by sharing in the useful and agreeable practices benefitting not just ourselves but those we commune with. Secondly, it is a profound mistake to assume virtue to be something we submit to only because compelled to by circumstance; that the amoralist is what we would all wish to be if we could get away with it. Hume believes this is entirely wrong; it is a deep truth about human nature that our best interests are served by living the ethical lives we actually find ourselves with.

We come now to the infamous 'sensible knave' who violates the rules of justice when he expects to get away with it, accepting that 'honesty is the best policy, may be a good general rule; but is liable to many exceptions: And he, it may, perhaps, be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions'.⁴⁶ The sensible knave, though clearly a species of amoralist, is a much more limited character than we might expect – certainly more limited than in 'The Sceptic', whose amoralist questioned the claims of any virtues whatsoever. The knave of the *Enquiry* is a knave specifically about justice. This is significant, because although Hume abandons the earlier terminology of 'artificial' and 'natural' virtues in the *Enquiry*, the philosophical theory is continuous with the *Treatise*. For Hume, comprehending justice as a virtue makes sense only within established frameworks of conventions regulating possession, subsequently internalised by the majority of participating agents to the point where their conventionality is transcended and does not figure in continued enactment and observation, either phenomenologically or dispositionally.

For Hume, the knave can only be a knave about justice. This is because justice provides opportunities for taking advantage of underlying conventions

43 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 79.

44 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 80, emphasis in original.

45 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 81, emphasis in original.

46 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 82, emphasis in original.

whilst engaging in personal defection, e.g. furthering personal gain by violating rules for the governing of possessions when one expects not to be caught. Natural virtues, by contrast, have their reward built into performance without room for self-interested defection. Any right-thinking person with a well-ordered sense of happiness can see for themselves that possessing the natural virtues forwards their own self-interest. This means that we do not – at least, as philosophers – need to go around giving people reasons to live an ethical life. People already have such reasons by living one, and if they do not we should not feel ourselves the losers for it, at least insofar as they leave us unmolested. And insofar as they do not, philosophy won't provide an adequate response.

So what can we say to the sensible knave, and what can we say about him? Hume admits there is little he can say to the knave: 'I must confess, that, if a man think, that this reasoning much requires an answer, it will be difficult to find any, which will to him appear satisfactory and convincing'. The answer of 'The Sceptic' is repeated: ethical reasons only gain traction for those already living within ethical life. Hume thus breaks with moral philosophers in the Platonic tradition who believe outsiders can be argued into ethics, and the break is made precisely because he does not think it possible to supply external justificatory foundations for ethical life.⁴⁷ Here there is clear affinity with the early Williams of 'Egoism and Altruism', as well as agreement with Williams's later skepticism regarding the possibility of external justificatory foundations for ethics.

But this precludes a more fundamental difference, for Hume has something to say to those of us considering the knave who are already within ethical life. We might worry that the knave represents not just a social nuisance, but a deep philosophical problem: should we not all wish to be sensible knaves about justice if we could get away with it? If so, what reasons have we to remain within (that part of) ethical life? The gap once more appears to open – but Hume has already begun to close it by claiming we have good reasons pertaining to happiness to live within most areas of ethical life. Only the special case of justice presents a problem, and Hume believes that despite appearances it is no different.

First, we must not over-estimate the knave's sensibleness. Despite his 'pretended cunning and abilities' he is often 'betrayed by his own maxims'. It is extremely difficult to get away with violating the rules of justice repeatedly, and one who gets into such habits will take greater risks until he 'give[s] into the snare' and is promptly discovered before suffering 'a total loss of reputation, and the forfeiture of all future trust and confidence in mankind'.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁷ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, pp. 208–9; Baldwin, 'Hume's Knave', p. 296.

⁴⁸ Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 82.

knave may be an intimidating proposition on paper. In reality he is far less impressive.

But suppose a knave were repeatedly successful, and hence allegedly sensible. Ought we to be troubled by him as something more than a social nuisance, as a profound philosophical challenge? Hume thinks not, and his reply is firmly directed to those already within ethical life: that 'in all ingenuous natures, the antipathy to treachery and roguery is too strong to be counterbalanced by any views of profit or pecuniary advantage. Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances very requisite to happiness, and will be cherished and cultivated by every honest man, who feels the importance of them'.⁴⁹ Virtue is its own reward because it goes hand in hand with psychological harmony and reflective self-satisfaction. Even (and perhaps especially) in the case of justice, there are personal benefits of happiness and self-satisfaction arising from self-contended self-approving characters. Even 'common observation and reflection' show that it is knaves who are the 'greatest dupes', having foolishly 'sacrificed the invaluable enjoyment of character, with themselves at least, for the acquisition of worthless toys and gewgaws':

How little is requisite to supply the necessities of nature? And in a view to pleasure, what comparison between the unbought satisfaction of conversation, society, study, even health and the common beauties of nature, but above all the peaceful reflection on one's own conduct; what comparison, I say, between these and the feverish, empty amusements of luxury and expense? These natural pleasures, indeed, are really without price; both because they are below all price in their attainment, and above it in their enjoyment.⁵⁰

This conclusion marks a significant break with the 'The Sceptic', amounting to a way of thinking about the gap between the inside and outside perspectives which presents it as an illusion: that the inside perspective is all we ever had and all we ever needed. What reasons have we to live within ethics? Our own happiness and psychological wellbeing coincide with doing so. Certainly, it will not follow that all who live an ethical life will necessarily be happy. Bad fortune can certainly ensure otherwise, and the brute truth that not all virtues harmonise means some virtuous agents are afflicted with a melancholy blighting their happiness. But for Hume this is just a fact of life, not something to be

49 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 82.

50 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 82, emphasis in original.

overly perturbed by – at least, not more so than regarding the other tragedies and travails of human existence. When we get clear about what is at stake, what we are *not* threatened by is the prospect of some figure, the amoralist, better securing happiness than we do. A roughly Aristotelian picture of the point of living virtuously emerges, but scaled-down and without external justificatory foundations in a natural telos of eudaimonia. The image Hume leaves us with in the work he described as ‘incomparably’ his ‘best’ is that thinking there could or must be some outside reason for living an ethical life is a mistake we can and should leave behind.⁵¹ It is thus not so much that Williams’s gap can be closed, as that it never really existed.⁵²

VI

But is this enough? There are reasons for suspecting not, which bring us to final points of departure between Hume and Williams. The first starts from the observation that the Humean position fails to convince many who are presented with it, not least Williams himself. Some are certainly taken by the suggestion that belief in a gap is a mistake to be overcome: Simon Blackburn is a recent prominent Humean who argues compellingly for such a position, and whose ‘quasi-realism’ project is a systematic attempt to account for ethical practice and language from wholly within ethical life, claiming that the ‘outside’ perspective is a mistaken and ultimately redundant attempt to do what can be done from within.⁵³ Yet many remain unconvinced. Blackburn has numerous opponents even amongst ‘sentimentalist’ and ‘expressivist’ philosophers, whilst the charge that Hume provides only a moral psychology and corresponding sociology, not a satisfactory account of the fundamental demands of ethics, has long dogged his work. Those committed to a Humean position must provide some explanation as to why others, even within a broadly ‘anti-real’ or ‘sentimentalist’ tradition, fail to find his solution compelling. Such a theory of error is not inconceivable. It would presumably centre on explaining the effects of a well-inalculcated morality amongst properly brought-up

⁵¹ David Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, p. xxxvi.

⁵² Hume was not the first eighteenth-century philosopher to suggest such a solution. Joseph Butler sketched a similar view in his Fifteen Sermons. See Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, ed. T.A. Roberts, (London: S.P.C.K, 1970), sermons 3 and 11 especially.

⁵³ Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, especially chapters 7 and 8; Simon Blackburn, ‘Making Ends Meet’, *Philosophical Books* 27 (1986), pp. 193–203.

individuals being so deeply embedded that despite (or precisely because) of coming from deep within, ethical commitments feel as though they must come from without. But such a theory of error is required if the Humean solution is to be acceptable, and it will also have to explain why some find the Humean solution more compelling than others.

The first problem is capable of being overcome, at least in principle. The second is more challenging and is suggested by Williams's remark that Hume suffered from a 'somewhat terminal degree of optimism'. Specifically, we should be suspicious of whether Hume's attempt to limit the knave to matters of justice can really be accepted: whether his knave is too idealised a philosophical construct to be the troubling proposition. The knave Hume describes is a narrow materialist who seeks to exploit conventions of justice for personal gain; a species of thief, con man, money cheat or similar. But is pecuniary or material knavery really what we find problematic, both on a day-to-day basis and at a more reflective level? More plausible candidates for successful knavery in a recognisable, everyday sense include all-too-familiar figures: the ruthless businessman, the serial womaniser, the manipulative departmental colleague, the cynical exploiter of office politics, the hypocritical socialite, and so on. Individuals who get ahead by taking a more casual attitude to certain of the virtues than others around them, but whose happiness never seems diminished and whose misdeeds rarely, if ever, catch up with them.

This sort of knave will not be affected by Hume's arguments for psychological harmony and self-satisfaction, because she appears to have those things not just in spite of, but sometimes precisely because of, successful knavery. Moving to a more reflective level we can see that there is good reason to be doubtful of Hume's attempt to limit the knave to cases of injustice. Contrary to Hume, knavery appears quite compatible with 'natural' virtues not dependent upon background conventions providing opportunities for undetected defection. The sorts of 'everyday' knaves listed above are immediately recognisable precisely because they are not simply or only knaves about justice. But this also makes them more troubling, and forces open Williams's gap: not only can knavery not be restricted in the way Hume hoped, but if reflective self-approval and psychological harmony are available to 'everyday' knaves as much as to the rest of us (even putting aside the pertinent thought that perhaps most of us are everyday knaves some of the time), the prospect of appealing to a scaled-down non-eudaimonistic ethics of virtue in an attempt to dismiss the gap as an illusion seems unlikely to succeed. In any case, it is clear that insofar as Williams does not endorse Hume's conception of the natural and artificial virtues – suggested by his remark that 'I do not believe many of [Hume's]

explanations' – then he cannot endorse Hume's strategy for restricting the ethical skeptic and attempting to dismiss the gap as illusion.⁵⁴

A further, highly illuminating contrast can be brought out in recalling one of Hume's primary intentions in writing the *Enquiry*. At the outset he characterizes those who deny the 'reality of moral distinctions' as mere 'disingenuous disputants'; that it is not 'conceivable, that any human creature could ever seriously believe, that all characters and actions were alike entitled to the affection and regard of every one'.⁵⁵ The target was the ethical scepticism of Thomas Hobbes and Bernard Mandeville. These theorists claimed that because moral distinctions pertain to the private passions of particular speakers, they were at best expressions of personal like and dislike, at worst attempts at manipulation and domination. Either way, ordinary morality was debunked by revealing its fundamentally subjective and ultimately arbitrary nature and basis. Hume resisted this line of reductive scepticism, attempting to show that even though morality was an outgrowth of human passion no debunking consequences followed. The *Enquiry* restated the explanatory mechanism of the *Treatise*, but aimed to show that, operating entirely from inside, the operation of human passion alone was quite capable of maintaining the 'reality of moral distinctions', providing the 'obligation' to virtue, and in turn the meaning and worth of human ethical existence.

Hume's vision, not least in its entirely secular nature, is certainly scaled down from history's more ambitious attempts to invest human ethical existence with meaning. But nonetheless Hume's 'optimism' differs fundamentally from Williams's later outlook. For Williams, Hume was a part, albeit a slightly unusual part, of a Western tradition of ethics holding that 'the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations.' It was precisely the hope that 'at some level of the world's constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns', a hope expressed by Hume in his response to the knave, of which Williams was profoundly sceptical. He favoured outlooks such as those of Sophocles and Thucydides, representing 'human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself not well adjusted to ethical aspirations'.⁵⁶

54 Bernard Williams, 'Reply to Simon Blackburn', *Philosophical Books* 27 (1986), pp. 203–8, p. 206.

55 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 3.

56 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 164.

Directly connected to Williams's scepticism regarding the overall trajectory of post-Socratic ethical thought, there is a final distinct and compelling reason for resisting any identification between his outlook and Hume's. For Williams the gap between the inside and outside perspectives located a central problem confronting philosophical thinking about ethics. Yet within the remit of 'ethics' western thought was unhealthily embroiled with something narrower and deeply pernicious: 'the morality system'. It is difficult to summarise exactly what the morality system consisted of for Williams. But it pertained to a rigid systematisation of ethical life into a narrow form preoccupied with duty and obligation, excluding other areas of human value – the artistic, the non-duty orientated, the tragic, that deeply embedded in luck and contingency – and purported to subsume these beneath the iron rule of morality, denigrating their value as inherently inferior to the all-trumping commands of obligation.⁵⁷ The morality system trades on a series of philosophical falsehoods and misconceptions, which in turn generate practices which are unhealthy for ethical agents and which license attitudes and behaviours masking that unhealthiness whilst providing cover for impulses such as cruelty, malice and the infliction of pain.⁵⁸ In particular the morality system employs a metaphysically false concept of agency whereby an individual is identified with a shadowy figure 'behind' choices and actions, who is held responsible for these (despite concomitant metaphysical absurdity), and which serves as a locus for punishment and cruelty, and in turn frequent self-loathing and self-hatred cloaked under the justification of a philosophically suspicious, and perhaps outright incoherent, concept of 'moral responsibility'.⁵⁹

In advancing these concerns Williams was in affinity with the critique of morality put forward by Nietzsche – and here an important contrast with Hume arises. Hume's understanding of the virtues is somewhat complacent in offering any critique of existing practices; he rarely engages in what Nietzsche

57 For discussions of Williams's conception of the morality system see Charles Taylor, 'A Most Peculiar Institution', in *World, Mind and Ethics*, pp. 132–55; Robert B. Louden, 'The Critique of the Morality System', in Alan Thomas (ed.), *Bernard Williams*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 104–34.

58 See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, chapter 10, and also Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck', in B. Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20–39.

59 See Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, chapter 3; 'How Free Does the Will Need to Be?', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 3–21; 'Voluntary Acts and Responsible Agents', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 22–34; 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, pp. 65–76; 'Moral Responsibility and Political Freedom', in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, pp. 119–25.

called 'the revaluation of values'.⁶⁰ Even regarding what he denigrated as 'monkish virtues' – ascetic self-denial and the infliction of mental suffering, typically growing out of religious enthusiasm – Hume did not much consider where such practices came from, or what function they fulfilled for individuals engaging in them.⁶¹ Nor did he take the monkish virtues to be much more than freak ethical practices, aberrations from the ordinary functioning of ethics which would die out as religious fanaticism calmed with the decline of enthusiastic faith. The contrast with Nietzsche could not be starker. For Nietzsche, the monkish virtues characterised our deepest moral lives, although this was frequently hidden from view. Unmasked, morality emerged as riddled with hidden hatreds, resentment, ascetically stunted masochism, self-laceration and dishonesty orientated around the infliction of cruelty and the attempt to assert power over others.

Such Nietzschean concerns drive Williams's conception of the 'morality system', and in that alone he distances himself considerably from Hume. Indeed, although Peter Kail has recently urged that there is more commonality between Hume and Nietzsche than typically realized, this in fact reinforces the present point. Kail is right to draw attention to similarities in the two thinkers' attempts to provide naturalistic explanations which may 'destabilize' certain human practices. But Hume's ethical thought maintains a crucial distance from Nietzsche's. Whilst Hume's *Natural History of Religion* shares structural features with Nietzsche's later 'genealogy' critique of morality, the point is that Hume did *not* think morality vulnerable to the same critique as religion. Human ethical practice could not be destabilized the way religion could, because living within ethics is a necessary part of fully realized human nature for Hume. Whereas we would actively be better off living without religion, this is not true, not even a coherent possibility, with regard to ethics – something Hume's response to the knave in part hopes to show.⁶²

But to refocus on the more specific concerns of this paper, we should note that for Williams the existence of the morality system in modern western life and thought is 'not an invention of philosophers [but is] the outlook, or, incoherently part of the outlook, of almost all of us'. It follows for Williams that the materials Hume can bring to bear on the question of why we should live an

60 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. trans. M. Clark and A.J. Swensen, (Indianapolis: Hackett, [1887] 1998), pp. 2–5.

61 Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 73.

62 Peter Kail, 'Understanding Hume's Natural History of Religion, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007), pp. 190–211; 'Nietzsche and Hume: Naturalism and Explanation', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (2009), pp. 5–22.

ethical life will be bound-up with the practices of the morality system we find ourselves already living within.⁶³ But if it posits anything, the morality system posits some external ground of justifying reasons from which it issues the duties and obligations used to narrow our ethical lives.⁶⁴ The Humean solution *ex hypothesi* starts with such materials, and is condemned to incorporating the inside/outside perspective from the outset, which then opens the gap which generates the challenge for supplying reasons to live an ethical life which can seem like enough.⁶⁵ For Williams's, the pre-existence of the morality system ensures Hume's failure.

Insofar as one concurs with Williams regarding the existence of the morality system, it will seem that Hume may be able to narrow the gap, or help us worry about it less, but unlikely that he or his successors can dispel it as illusion. Indeed if that is right, it may help explain why the Humean solution continues to be found unacceptable by so many. Although the two philosophers asked many of the same questions, and worked with sometimes strikingly similar materials and patterns of argument, they reached importantly differing positions on what we can say about an amoralist, what that means for the reasons we can have for living an ethical life, and the consequences for our self-comprehensions, let alone justifications, of what it means to live ethically. Williams was at his most Humean *before* the work which succeeded his putatively 'Humean' stance in 'Internal and External Reasons'. The later Williams – of the 'morality system' driven by overtly Nietzschean concerns – repudiated Hume's 'terminally optimistic' outlook.

63 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 174.

64 It might here be queried whether Kant's moral philosophy – supposedly the highest embodiment of the morality system – does in fact suppose such external justificatory grounds. After all, for Kant the reasons we have for adhering to morality are in some sense clearly internal insofar as the autonomous agent's reason legislates them to herself. Although this is true, the point about Kant's moral law is that it applies universally to all rational agents regardless of their particular inclinations or circumstances, and is thus precisely a *categorical* demand. The agent's will must be brought into line with universal principles, which are themselves fundamental precisely because the same laws apply to all rational beings equally. It is this external universality which gives moral principles their full moral status, and provides the justificatory grounds for moral law, even if such law still has to be self-legislated by the rational agent.

65 It is no accident that Simon Blackburn is doubtful of Williams's contentions regarding the morality system, for denying the tenability of Williams's indictment improves the prospects of Blackburn's Humean reconciling project. See Blackburn, *Ruling Passions*, pp. 20, 232–3, and Blackburn's review of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, and Williams's reply, which provide general confirmation for the specific arguments advanced in this essay: Blackburn, 'Making Ends Meet'; Williams, 'Reply to Simon Blackburn'.

This, finally, raises a large question about progress in the study of ethics, as well as a smaller but connected question regarding whether Williams's work represents such a thing, at the very least vis-à-vis the philosophy of Hume. In a sense Williams improves on Hume, if indeed his arguments take us towards seeing the limits of philosophy with regard to ethics. But this is a bitter sort of progress, giving over significant territory to skepticism about the justifications we can supply for what we do and value. Indeed, the taste only becomes bitterer when we recall some rudiments of the history of philosophy. It is well known that the sentimentalist ethics of Hume, and also Adam Smith, were taught and initially subscribed to by Kant, who only late in life decided they provided an insufficient ground for justification of ethical practices.⁶⁶ Williams famously rejected outright the moral philosophy of Kant, seeing it as the supreme and most powerful manifestation of the morality system. But we have seen that he also provides reasons for finding Hume's moral philosophy inadequate. Accordingly, Williams does not offer us the option of going *back* to Hume, even if we agree in finding Kant unacceptable. If anything, Williams's later philosophical writings generate reasons to think that neither Hume, nor Kant, nor indeed anybody else, is able to adequately address precisely the problem that Hume and Kant were confronting: how to secure and make justificatory sense of normative practices without normative foundations, which are so conspicuously lacking in a world without God. Accordingly, understanding why Williams is fundamentally not the heir to Hume should be of considerable interest – that is to say, concern – to anybody who takes seriously the question of what reasons we can have for living an ethical life.

66 Michael Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 112.