Morality as Misconception of Life:
A Defense of Bernard Williams' Critique of the Morality System

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***Abstract**: Bernard Williams called the core feature of modern morality "the morality system", and proposed a substantive critique of the system that made a strong impact on contemporary ethics. However, any critique of morality, including Williams', is confronted with the pervasive questions, "What morality is being criticized?" and "On what grounds is it being criticized?" So moral critics need to show that their critique is about our morality and that it is justified. The two questions are precisely the objections posed to Williams' critique, and the aim of this paper is to defend it.*

Williams argues that the morality system motivates us to conceptualize obligation and blame in a peculiar way, in which obligation is inescapable and blame only applies to truly voluntary actions, and shows that we can conceptualize them differently and naturalistically. The first objection to this critique, however, concerns the question of "What morality?": the morality system is merely an extreme morality that people with a moral sense do not adopt (The Scope Objection). I will respond to this objection by arguing that it misses the real target of Williams' critique, which is the commitment to voluntariness. Unlike the conception of obligation in the morality system that opponents consider extreme, the commitment is widely presupposed in modern morality. At this point, the second repeated objection comes to the fore, which concerns the question of "On what grounds?": the morality system's commitment to voluntariness is indispensable for a fair morality (The Point of Morality Objection). I will answer this objection by showing the Williamsian consideration against the commitment. The commitment that attempts to realize extreme fairness actually defeats the very workings of blame. I conclude that the problem with the morality system's commitment to voluntariness is a misconception of life: it misconstrues human motivation, the real workings of co-existence, and the required fairness.

Introduction

This paper aims to defend Bernard Williams' critique of the morality system and proposes positive arguments for this critique. Although his critique, which is one of

the severest attacks on modern morality, has had a wide impact on contemporary ethics, it also has some issues. Objections to it have been raised repeatedly, and because Williams' texts are rather elusive, his critique has not been fully explained.[1] It would, therefore, seem incumbent on those sympathetic to Williams to address these objections and clarify Williams' project. This study is one such attempt.

Williams called the core feature of modern morality "the morality system" and proposed a substantive critique of it that surpassed that of any other contemporary philosopher.[2] However, any critique of morality, including Williams', is confronted with pervasive questions. One is "*What morality* is being criticized?" and the other is "*On what grounds* is it being criticized?" This kind of suspicion of moral critics is natural, insofar as morality is at the heart of our values. As Nietzsche said, "One has taken the value of these 'values' for granted, as a fact, as beyond all questioning" (Nietzsche 1998, 5). Thus, moral critics need to show both that their critique is about *our* (common sense) morality and that the critique is *justified*. The above two questions are repeated objections to Williams that I address in this paper.

This study comprises three parts. In the first section, I summarize Williams' critique of the morality system as agreed upon by commentators. In the second section, I address the *scope objection* to Williams that his critique is directed only at extreme morality, arguing that commentators have mistakenly underestimated the target of Williams' critique. In the third section, I address the *point of morality objection* that the morality system is still justified because its nature is essential for any morality; I will argue that this is not the case and conclude that the morality system involves a misconception of life. How it misconceives life will be clarified throughout this paper.

1. Summary of Williams' Critique of the Morality System

[1] The interpretive studies of Williams (Jenkins 2006; Queloz 2022; Chappell and Smith 2023) have elucidated the point of Williams's critique, but they have tended to leave the repeated objections to Williams unanswered, which I think is a problem of the earlier research. By answering these objections, I will make the point and meaning of the critique clearer.

[2] Skorupski takes Williams' critique as representative of the critique of morality (Skorupski 1998).

While Williams' description and critique of the morality system [3] (hereafter abbreviated as MS) were scattered throughout many texts over a period of more than 20 years, commentators on Williams have converged on treating the final chapter of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (ELP)[4] as the main text in which Williams presented the most comprehensive and extensive discussion of MS. To understand the essence of Williams' critique, I summarize the chapter in this section. I will first extricate the important features of MS, and then show Williams' critique.

Obligation: Practical and inescapable

Williams' discussion of MS is first devoted to "the special notion of obligation it uses" (ELP 193). According to Williams, MS' special notion of *moral obligation* tends to have distinctive features. First, moral obligation is a kind of *practical conclusion*: "an obligation applies to someone with respect to an action" (ELP 194). Thus, a moral obligation is a specific action that an agent must perform. This feature is naturally related to some principles of morality, such as the "*ought* implies *can*" principle, that the obligation that an agent morally ought to do "must be within the agent's power" (ELP 194–5). In addition, the fact that a moral obligation is a practical conclusion relates to the point that moral obligations cannot conflict with each other, since an agent cannot perform several obligatory actions simultaneously; what one must do is only the *actual* obligation.

Second, moral obligation is *inescapable*: it is an action that cannot be dismissed without blame. This is expressed in various moral principles. For example, W. D. Ross tends to adopt the principle that one cannot override one's moral obligation unless one is under a more "general" obligation, which Williams calls the "obligation-out, obligation-in principle" (ELP 201). According to this principle, for instance, if you see an old person in need of help, you can cancel your promise to visit your friend, because the helping is an "actual" obligation. The important point is that the principle requires a general obligation to override a less general obligation, so moral obligation itself is still an action that one must do, regardless of one's desire. Moral obligations are, in this sense, inescapable.

[3] Williams often refers to it simply as "morality," although in everyday terminology we use "morality" to refer to the broad normative understanding (Griffin 2015, 93–4). I will use "the morality system" instead of "morality" to avoid any possible confusion.

[4] Quotations from *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Williams 1985/2011) are given with the abbreviation (ELP) and page numbers.

Blame: Focused on voluntariness

In addition to the notion of obligation, there is MS' special notion of *blame* that is related to the former. According to Williams, blame, typically a response to a failure to fulfill an obligation, is "the characteristic reaction" of MS (ELP 197). The most striking feature of blame in MS is its *focus on voluntariness*; only truly voluntary actions are blameworthy. This focus on voluntariness is conspicuous in modern moral philosophy's obsessive discussion of *free will*. Modern philosophers, in contrast to the ancients, have tended to claim that moral responsibility and the practice of blame are only tenable if there is an agent's free will—a freely chosen will to act. This idea is motivated by the focus on voluntariness, as free will is conceived as the true voluntariness. Indeed, many philosophers have tried to reconcile the focus on voluntariness and free will with a naturalistic picture of human action, in which one's actions are causally determined.[5]

The important point here is that MS drives philosophers to *purify* voluntariness, as it is a crucial condition in the practice of blame (ELP 216). They are motivated to scrutinize an agent's voluntariness; they have argued that true voluntariness or free will is analyzed as the ability to have acted otherwise. This is the principle of *alternate possibilities* that most moral philosophers share in the discussion of free will (Van Inwagen 1975, 188; Frankfurt 1988, 1).[6] Indeed, it is a moral platitude that, if one could not have done otherwise, one cannot be blameworthy.[7] In summary, MS motivates philosophers to purify voluntariness, and the most typical way of the purification is shown in the principle of alternate possibilities.

Williams' critique: Naturalistic understanding of morality

[5] In this paper, following Williams, the word "naturalistic" is generally used to mean the minimalist understanding of human behavior, in which various human actions are maximally explained by general factors such as desire. In the theory of action, naturalism refers specifically to the scientific and causal view of human action. In ethics, naturalism is related to the understanding of ethical motivation in terms of pre-ethical primitive motivation. For this minimalist interpretation of naturalism, see Williams 1995d and Williams 2000.

[6] Although Williams does not mention this principle directly in ELP, he does mention it in his later paper on the free will debate and MS (Williams 1995a, 5). The relationship between this widely held principle and MS is discussed in more detail in later sections.

[7] Moreover, theorists committed to MS often purify voluntariness in terms of agents' history; they often "raise questions about their freedom to choose a different character" (ELP 216). Alternate possibilities are needed not only at the moment of action, but also at the moment of acquiring the character that causes the action.

The features of MS appear to generate stringent consequences. Most obviously, the inescapability of obligation induces that one cannot escape moral obligations unless one has a general obligation as a pardoner, and this leads to the primacy of obligation in practical moral thinking about what one should do. Accordingly, some moralists would argue that you have a moral obligation to yourself: you have an obligation to put yourself to better use, rather than wasting resources on morally neutral things. They would say that you are guilty of enjoying the opera rather than donating to famine relief. As Williams remarks, if practical and inescapable obligation structures ethical thought, "there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether" (ELP 202).

There is a common understanding in the literature that Williams' critique of these features of MS is that we do not need to conceptualize obligation or blame as stringently as MS.[8]

> In order to see around the intimidating structure that morality has made out of the idea of obligation, we need an account of what obligations are when they are rightly seen as merely one kind of ethical consideration among others. This account will help to lead us away from morality's special notion of moral obligation, and eventually out of the morality system altogether. (ELP 202)

Instead of MS' conception of obligation and blame, we can have a more naturalistic understanding of morality—what Williams calls "everyday" notion of obligation and blame (ELP 201, 214)—which does not commit the features of MS.

What is the everyday conception of morality? The basic idea is that obligation and blame are merely institutions "to secure reliability" (ELP 206). To show this, Williams provides a naturalistic explanation of how obligation works as a means of securing mutual reliability. According to Williams, obligation is nothing more than the institution by which we prioritize ethically important actions in our deliberations (ELP 205). Because of the existence of obligations, we can generally rely on each other as agents who prioritize obligatory actions in their deliberations. Obligation typically includes the positive obligation of helping others in an emergency, the negative obligation of not harming others' basic interests, and the general obligation to keep promises (ELP 206–8). The observance of obligations in this sense is insured by certain psychological maneuvers, such as the encouragement of ethical motivations, and the instilling of ethical dispositions, which often enable

[8] See Jenkins 2006, 71; Louden 2007; Chappell and Smith 2023; Queloz 2022.

the feeling of practical necessity that one "must" do the obligatory action (ELP 206, 210).

This naturalistic understanding of obligation helps us escape the stringent moral life motivated by MS. In the naturalistic understanding, obligation is *only one way* to ensure reliability (ELP 208). For example, a person who has been hurt by racism and is therefore committed to the anti-racism movement may, on her way to visit her friend, witness an anti-racist demonstration and consider it necessary to join the demonstration. Suppose that she does not believe that one is obliged to participate. Here, there is no general moral obligation to attend, but we can understand that attending is so ethically important to her that it outweighs the moral obligation to keep her promise, since the explanation for her action is ethically reliable. In this naturalistic understanding of obligation, an agent is not dominated by inescapable obligations.

Not only obligation. Williams also offers a naturalistic account of blame, according to which blame is a means of correcting agents to ensure coexistence. By blaming an agent who has acted unethically, a community instills a disposition to act ethically (ELP 215). To work well as a modification of agents, this practice of blame must be not only intimidating but fair; we need a certain requirement of voluntariness, such that one has really acted, one knows what one was doing, and one intended the action (ELP 215–6). As in legal cases of punishment, we do have certain conditions for attributing responsibility to ensure fairness without committing ourselves to the metaphysical scrutiny of alternate possibilities.

Again, this naturalistic account of blame helps us escape from MS. As we have seen, MS motivates us to purify voluntariness to the extent that moralists seek to establish true voluntariness by securing alternate possibilities of actions. They assume that true voluntariness or free will is in tension with the naturalistic picture of human action; actions are not truly voluntary if they are causally determined by antecedent facts. However, once we have a naturalistic understanding of blame, we do not need to purify voluntariness as MS does. When we blame someone, we do not need to metaphysically examine alternate possibilities for their actions. What we need for the practice of blame to ensure coexistence is a reasonable degree of voluntariness, but never to the degree of voluntariness that MS requires.

In summary, as long as we understand obligation and blame as institutions for securing coexistence, we do not need to assume that obligation is inescapable, nor to purify voluntariness as alternative possibilities. The drive of MS to conceptualize

obligation and blame in a peculiar way is therefore misguided and naturalistically untenable.

2. The Scope Objection to Williams

In this section, I introduce a repeated objection to Williams that the specific MS he criticizes is just an extremely strict form of morality and is different from common sense morality or ordinary moral theories. In short, it is unclear whether Williams' critique covers real morality. I refer to this objection as the *scope objection* and address it accordingly by proposing my interpretation of Williams.

The scope objections

MS seems demanding. This demands that moral obligations are inescapable. Williams also argues that this demanding conception of morality is "not an invention of philosophers" but "the outlook of almost all of us" (ELP 194). So it would seem that, according to Williams, MS demonstrates the essential stringency of modern morality.

However, philosophers have repeatedly objected to Williams because his view of morality seems farfetched. Their objections focus on the MS' notion of obligation. There is no convergence of moral *theories*, they point out, on the inescapability of moral obligations, let alone the fact that pre-theoretical moral *intuitions* always require moral obligations to be inescapable. In short, they argue that the morality Williams criticizes is just a strawman; he simply invents an extremely strict morality and criticizes it for being strict. The complaint is that Williams' critique can, at best, be "a verbal matter—a dispute about how to use the word 'moral" (Clark 2015, 56). Let us call this objection the *scope objection* because it argues that the scope of Williams' critique of MS is too narrow to be a substantive critique of morality.

At the most local level, opponents argue that MS is even more stringent than Kantian morality, although Williams himself claims that "the purest, deepest and most thorough account of morality is Kant" (ELP 194). Kantian philosophers, such as Robert Louden, claim that Kantian morality is not as stringent as MS (Louden 2007, 114–6). Kantian morality can allow for Williams' everyday conceptions of obligations that are overridable because Kant allows for "imperfect obligations" that are overridable.

On a more general level, opponents argue that MS is far more stringent than ordinary moral theory (Darwall 1987, 79–80). Unlike an extreme moral theory,

ordinary moral theories "must be careful not to claim that moral obligations exist beyond what can reasonably be expected of human beings" (Darwall 1987, 80). According to Darwall, Williams' claim that moral obligations are inescapable is too strict to be a statement of an ordinary moral theory. Rather, the claim seems to be based on the confusion between *all things considered* moral obligations, which are inescapable, and *prima facie* obligations, which are overridable. *Prima facie* obligations can be overridden by ethical considerations other than general obligations, such as supererogation (Darwall 1987, 81; Kamm 1985, 119–20). Thus, unambitious moral theories do not require that all moral obligations to be *all things considered* moral obligations, and they do not presuppose the "obligation-out, obligation-in principle". [9] Instead, they limit their scope to avoid being too demanding. Unambitious morality may provide exceptions to moral obligations: if an obligation is trivial, such as a casual promise, it can be overridden by non-obligatory considerations.

Furthermore, there is the objection that even if MS can be a kind of moral theory, it cannot be a moral culture or pre-theoretical moral common sense (Darwall 1987, 81; Leiter 2022, 22–23). Brian Leiter disagrees with Williams, arguing that "it is a pure philosopher's fantasy to think that real people in the moral culture at large find themselves overwhelmed by this burdensome sense of moral obligation" (Leiter 2022, 22). Except for certain moralists, persons with moral common sense do not restrict their lives by accepting the principle that moral obligations are inescapable. People of moral common sense do not feel as obliged by moral obligations as MS requires, but they are well committed to morality and the authority of moral obligations (Clark 2015, 55–6).

Preliminary response: Distinguishing the nature of the morality system from its products

In brief, the scope objection claims that MS is a far-fetched morality, which is different from ordinary morality. Let us uncritically assume that they are correct in that moral theories are not necessarily committed to the inescapability of moral obligation. Nevertheless, I argue that opponents are wrong in assuming that this claim resolves Williams' critique.

[9] Although I do not explore this issue in detail in this paper, MS's conception of obligation seems to differ from that of utilitarianism. Williams argues that utilitarians are usually pre-theoretically committed to MS (ELP 198, 204). According to Williams, utilitarians internalize MS in practice, even though it may conflict with their utilitarianism in theory. Williams concludes that utilitarianism is a "marginal" form of MS (ELP 198).

The basic idea of my response is that Williams' critique is not so much directed at the stringent features that MS suggests, but at the underlying nature of MS. Williams contends: "The important thing about morality is its *spirit*, its *underlying aims*, and *the general picture of ethical life* it implies" (ELP 193; my emphasis). While the "obligation-out, obligation-in principle", or the inescapability of obligations may be the demanding productions of MS, they are not the necessary components of MS. Those features are just not the primary target of Williams' critique.

Ample textual support exists for this interpretation. Williams keeps noting that it is "the *pressure* within the morality system" or "(t)he *pressure* of the demand within the morality system" that requires the inescapability of moral obligations (ELP 194, 201; my emphasis). Also, his careful use of the words in the sentences such as "Morality *encourages* the idea, only an obligation can beat an obligation" (ELP 200; my emphasis) or "It (MS) starkly *emphasizes* a series of contrasts" (ELP 216; my emphasis), supports my reading. The inescapability of obligation is only one of the possible consequences that the MS *encourages* and not the nature of the MS itself. As Williams notes, MS "is not one determinate set of ethical thoughts. It embraces a range of ethical outlooks" (ELP 193).

Response: The nature of the morality system

To properly consider the validity of Williams' discussion, we must identify the underlying *nature* of MS rather than being blinded by its stringent products. What is this? While it is a problem with Williams' presentation of the critique that Williams is not entirely clear about the nature of MS, which is a major cause of the opponents' misunderstanding of the scope of his critique, we can reconstruct the nature by reading Williams' paper on which the discussion of ELP is based.

When we consider what drives us to conceptualize obligation as a practical conclusion, we can see that the MS' notion of *blame* is at work. Consider the feature of MS' obligation that "(a)n obligation applies to someone with respect to an action—it is an obligation to do something—and *the action must be in the agent's power*" (ELP 194; my emphasis). This feature is produced by the thought that one is blameworthy for failing to comply with an obligation and, at the same time, one is blameworthy only for what one is *able* to do. The "obligation-out, obligation-in principle", according to which a more general obligation is required to cancel an obligation, is also motivated by the notion of blame: blame for failing to fulfill an obligation is excusable if one is *unable* to fulfill two obligations, but only the more

general obligation.[10] As these considerations show, the underlying basis of the MS' stringent property of obligation is its notion of blame.[11] In an earlier paper on moral obligation, Williams states the point clearly:

> The important point is that we do not first have a determinate notion of moral obligation (in the wider sense) to which the notions of blame and related reactions are added. The class of moral obligations, in the wider sense, just *is* the class of *oughts* about an agent's actions to which blame and similar reactions are added. (Williams 1981b, 121)

Here the notion of moral obligation "in the wider sense" is precisely the MS' notion of obligation, in which moral obligation is understood as a practical *ought* (Williams 1981b, 118–21). Williams thus clearly claims that the MS' notion of obligation is constituted by the notion of blame.

As seen in the first section, the MS' notion of blame asserts that one is only blamable for what one could have voluntarily done, and that the voluntariness thus given should be philosophically scrutinized as, typically, free will or alternate possibilities. Indeed, this strong focus of voluntariness in blameworthiness motivates features of MS such as the "*ought* implies *can*" principle in which one is not blameworthy for what one cannot do. Hence, the nature of MS is primarily characterized as a *powerful commitment to voluntariness in blameworthiness*.

A paradigm example of MS' commitment to voluntariness is Galen Strawson's argument about the impossibility of moral responsibility. In its simplest form, Strawson's "basic argument" can be summarized as follows (Strawson 1994, 5):

> P1: Nothing can be causa sui *i.e.* nothing can be the cause of itself.
> P2: To be truly morally responsible for one's actions, one must be causa sui, at least in certain crucial mental respects.
> Conclusion: No one is morally responsible.

[10] To fully understand how the principle is based on the MS' notion of blame, we need to consider the connection between blame and reason, as we discuss in detail in the next section. Blame implies that one has a strong reason to have acted otherwise; in the context of obligation, the strong reason to comply with the obligation. This blame is only excusable if one has a stronger reason to have acted in that way, *i.e.* if one had a stronger obligation.

[11] Unlike other commentators who focus on obligation, Jenkins points out this primary role of blame in MS (Jenkins 2006, 70–71).

According to Strawson, causa sui means having brought about one's principles of choice (Strawson 1994, 6–7). In other words, to be truly responsible for our actions, we must freely choose our will to act in this manner. However, this line of thought falls into an infinite regress: to be responsible for the present will, I must have chosen the past will, and to be responsible for the past will, I must have chosen an earlier will, and so on. The deterministic interpretation of the basic argument is as follows: Since we cannot have chosen our first condition of being (e.g., a result of heredity), which conditions our present state, we cannot be held truly responsible for our actions (Strawson 1994, 7). Strawson argues that this view of true moral responsibility has been central to Western moral traditions (Strawson 1994, 8). Although Strawson's "basic argument" may be an exaggerated form of the MS' commitment, it seems true that the commitment to voluntariness underlies most modern moral thought. The obsessive commitment is a characteristic of MS.

Accordingly, Williams and modern philosophers have agreed upon that the *powerful commitment to voluntariness in blameworthiness* is at the heart of the modern morality. Given this point, we can address the scope objections by arguing that opponents missed the essential point of Williams' critique. It is not that MS is problematic *just because* it tends to have certain stringent features regarding obligation, but that MS is problematic because it has a certain commitment to voluntariness that is not tenable in naturalistic terms. What Williams primarily problematizes is the commitment, the nature of MS, which is at the heart of and encourages the stringent features of obligation.

The fact that opponents have missed this point is shown by the way they have failed to examine the MS commitment to voluntariness in blame. While Kantian philosophers have argued that the Kantian notion of obligation is not as stringent as MS, they have ignored the fact that Kant is most powerfully committed to MS' focus on voluntariness and free will. Kant's discussion of obligations (the categorical imperative) is intended to secure the possibility of *free will* outside the realm of causality and inclination.[12] Moral theorists also seem to be pre-theoretically committed to MS focus on voluntariness, although they may have provided a less stringent theory of obligation than the "obligation-out, obligation-in principle". The principle of alternate possibilities has been the shared principle of moral responsibility, and few moral theories have challenged this principle. This also applies

[12] Indeed, Kant argues that will under the categorical imperative and free will are "one and the same" (Kant 2011, 123).

to dominant moral cultures: in pre-theoretical moral cultures, people have a strong intuition that actions out of free will are only blameworthy, whereas they are less often overwhelmed by the inescapability of moral obligation.

In summary, the scope objections missed the real target of Williams' critique, and therefore, Williams' critique is still substantial. We need to critically examine the commitment to voluntariness that underlies modern moral thought, since it naturally leads not only to demanding conceptions of obligation but also, and more importantly, to the naturalistically untenable view of blameworthiness.

3. The point of morality objection to Williams

Although we recognize that MS' commitment to voluntariness is the real target of Williams' critique and can address the scope objections, the next question is whether it is really problematic. Here, Williams' critique faces another repeated objection: opponents argue that it is the *point of morality* to secure fairness that we conceptualize blameworthiness with the commitment. Let us call this the *point of morality objection*, according to which MS' strong commitment to voluntariness is justified as a point of morality to secure fairness. In this section, I address this objection by arguing that the commitment of MS, in reality, defeats the point of blame.

The point of morality objection: The demand of fairness

Robert Louden points out that the core differences between Kant and Williams "come down to Kant's robust commitment to a strong sense of free will and practical reason, and Williams' firm rejection of both" (Louden 2007, 127):

> In my view, Williams' desire to decouple ethics from the presupposition of free will would, if widely adopted, be a disaster, not only for the morality system and Kant's ethics but for any ethical outlook worth taking seriously. (Louden 2007, 127)

Louden points out here that any decent morality must have the MS' commitment to free will; otherwise, it would become exceedingly difficult to convincingly distinguish cases where agents were responsible from those where they were not (Louden 2007,

127–8).[13] Indeed, the demand for fairness in blameworthiness has led many philosophers to purify voluntariness, an important concern of which is that blameworthiness would be a matter of *luck* if not based on strong voluntariness (Sher 2015, 179–180; ELP 217; Queloz 2022, 197–8). To ensure the immunity of luck in blameworthiness, we need a view in which an agent has real choices of action; the necessary condition for blameworthiness must be that an agent has free will, understood as the ability to act otherwise. Thus, the principle of alternate possibilities is justified by the demand for fairness, which ensures luck's immunity to blameworthiness, according to the proponents of MS.

In summary, the *point of morality objection* claims that the commitment of the MS—the purification of voluntariness to the extent that alternate possibilities or free will are conceptually necessary—is justified by the demand for fairness. Without this commitment, morality would never be fair.

Response: Nihilistic ideal of the morality system

The Williamsian response to the *point of morality objection* would be twofold: first, we can make a naturalistic sense of the sufficiently fair practice of blame; and second, MS' commitment to voluntariness is so strong that it defeats the very practice of blame. In other words, the MS' ideal of voluntariness is *nihilistic*; we will deglamorize *adequately-voluntary* actions once we attempt to idealize *ultimately-voluntary* actions as MS demands. This is a problem for defenders of MS.

As for the naturalistic understanding of the practice of blame, we have already seen a summary of Williams' account: the system of blame is a device for securing coexistence which functions as far as we have an adequately fair attribution of blame. This is secured through certain requirements of voluntariness. Indeed, Williams has pointed out that there are requirements of self-knowledge and intention that one knew what one was doing and one intended the action (ELP 215–6), or, in the later writing, Williams asserts that a voluntary action is an intended action "which has no inherent or deliberative defect" (Williams 1995b, 25). In fact, as in political and legal cases, we have a certain sense of freedom, such as a distinction between persuasion and manipulation, without committing ourselves to a metaphysical

[13] Louden also ascribes to Williams a complete skepticism about free will or an agent's ability to act otherwise (Louden 2007, 127–8), based on a reading of Williams' desire-based picture of action. But I will leave this issue aside since Williams never proposes such a view in his text, and certainly attempts to secure *freedom*, though not free will in the strict MS' sense, in various texts (e.g. Williams 2006b).

discussion of free will. What is needed, then, for a Williamsian naturalistic account is an examination of such practical conditions of voluntariness to ensure fairness.[14]

However, the question is, why are these conditions sufficient? Proponents of MS would argue that we need a stronger requirement for voluntariness, such that one must have a real possibility of acting otherwise, if we are to make one blameworthy. Here, Williams needs an *additional explanation* against the MS' requirement. Williams seems to provide this additional explanation hinted at in ELP and argued at length in later writings. This explanation consists of two considerations on the practice of blame and human motivation and amounts to showing that MS' requirement cannot make sense of the proper working of blame by which we *change* through blame.

The first step is to consider the working of *reason-statements* implied in the practice of blame. As Williams points out, blame "seems to have something special to do with the idea that the agent had a reason to act otherwise" (ELP 214). When we blame someone for acting in a certain way, we imply that the person has a *reason* to act otherwise. Indeed, much of the time, this statement is straightforwardly true as they are motivated to act otherwise.[15] I may have been irritated by small things, even though I was motivated not to do so; straightforwardly, I had more reason to act differently than I did. Here, blame acts as a reminder that I had reason to act differently. However, if we carefully examine the workings of reason statements, we find various ways other than this straightforward case. Most importantly, Williams points to the case of "a proleptic invocation of a reason," in which a blamed agent is retrospectively given a reason to have acted otherwise by the very fact of being blamed (Williams 1995c, 41–2). For example, even if I have no direct motivation to hide my irritation, I get a reason for having done so when I am confronted with blame from someone I respect and love.

An important point regarding proleptic blame is that, as a practice of mutual modification of behavior, this kind of *transformation* of agents is essential to blame. Indeed, we *change* ourselves through the experience of being blamed. The most robust case is blaming children, where they had a very strong motivation to behave as they did, but the blame itself provides the reason for behaving otherwise. Not only children but also adults learn and share an ethical understanding through the proleptic work of blame. However, this kind of proleptic working of blame cannot be made sense, given

[14] In fact, Williams commits himself to such a project elsewhere in later writings (Williams 1993; Williams 1995c; Williams 2006a; Williams 2006b).

[15] On the Williams' argument for the necessary connection between the truth of reason-statement and an agent's motivation, see Williams 1981a.

the MS' requirement; we cannot blame someone when, at the very time of action, they have no reason or motivation to act otherwise. One may not have *the capacity to act otherwise* because of a strong motivation to act in a certain way or a lack of cognitive understanding that acting otherwise is good. For example, an ingrained racist may have no reason or ability to stop making racist remarks. Nevertheless, we have a point in blaming the racist because blaming might proleptically provide a reason to stop racist remarks. The MS' commitment to voluntariness overlooks this working of blame.

To generalize the case of the racist, we obtain the second consideration that helps to favor the naturalistic account over MS. This is a consideration of *practical necessity*, where one has such a strong motivation to act in a certain way that no other option is available (ELP 209). We cultivate certain moral characters that often determine our actions, because the actions are essential to the characters (Williams 1995a, 17). For example, a determined liberal's vote against a monstrous anti-liberal president is largely determined by her character and moral identity, and it was not obvious that the liberal had the capacity to act otherwise. Her line of thinking is literally "I cannot do otherwise." However, this moral phenomenon of practical necessity seems compatible with the practice of blame and moral responsibility; the liberal would be morally responsible for her actions. This is also true of blame, as seen in the case of racism. If someone acts unethically out of practical necessity, there is a point of blame. We hope that persons will *change* their character through blame, as seen in cases of proleptic blame. However, the demand of MS is too strong to allow this possibility. On MS' account, if one's action is determined, then that action cannot be considered voluntary and therefore never blameworthy; on the Williams account, however, a proleptic blame for action of practical necessity has the point that one will be motivated to reconsider and *change* one's character.

Blame, like obligation, is essentially an ethical practice of living together in a society in which each member has very different motivations and does not know each other's motivations. That we are different is very important; given one's motivation or character, one's actions can be practically necessary. To make sense of blame as the art of coexistence in such a society, we must accommodate the possibility of ourselves changing through blame. The MS' requirement of voluntariness prevents us from accommodating such a possibility: we are never blameworthy unless we have a

real choice to act differently. The MS' requirement suggests that we never really *change* through blame; blame only reminds us of what we already have.[16]

While making sense of blame as changing each other, as shown in the proleptic blame to practical necessity, already gives us one reason to criticize the MS' requirements, we have another well-known reason to do so. That is, the naturalistic picture of human action suggested by modern science discourages us from presupposing the real choice to act differently all the time.[17] In a naturalist perspective, motivation and character often, if not always, determine one's actions. If we take the naturalist picture seriously and still accept the MS' requirements, the consequence is the impossibility of blame and moral responsibility, as pictured by Galen Strawson. In this context, MS is *nihilistic*; the proponents of MS attempt to secure a fair basis of moral responsibility but destroy moral responsibility altogether. As long as we presuppose MS, this is a real threat. But the good news for those who are concerned about this threat is that there is no need for the practice of blame to be understood with the commitment of MS. As Williams eloquently puts it: "(j)ust as there is a "problem of evil" only for those who expect the world to be good, there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened" (Williams 1993, 68).[18] Instead of such a nihilistic demand on blame, we have a naturalistic account of the practice and a tradition of thinking about the fair condition of blameworthiness.

Conclusion

In this paper, I defend Bernard Williams' critique of modern morality, which Williams calls the morality system, against two major objections. In the first section, I

[16] Williams points out that this line of thinking places the metaphysical demand on Kant and Kantians to show that ethical reasons are necessarily available to every human agent: "if morality is to limit genuinely moral comment to blame, and blame to what is available to the rational deliberator, it is faced with a vast epistemological demand, to show (as Kant appropriately thought) that the correct ethical demands are indeed available to any rational deliberator—as Kant was disposed to put it, 'as such'" (Williams 1995e, 246).

[17] In this sense, Kant has been consistently faithful to MS in attempting the project of conceptualizing an agency outside the natural world, which Williams calls "the more extravagant metaphysical luggage of the noumenal self" (ELP 73).

[18] The problem of free will, which has preoccupied many modern philosophers, is a distinctive product of MS. This Williamsian view of the free will debate is called "free will pessimism" and is defended by Paul Russell. See Russell 2017.

summarize Williams' critique in the way it has been widely understood by commentators. The critique is about the unnaturalistic understanding of obligation and blame. In the second section, I address the *scope objection* to Williams, according to which Williams' critique—especially the critique of the concept of obligation—is only applicable to extreme morality. In response, I argue that the critique is directed at commitment to voluntariness rather than at the conception of obligation, which is only a possible product of commitment. Indeed, the commitment that one can only be blamed for what one is capable of doing otherwise is widespread in moral philosophy, as well as in pre-philosophical modern moral cultures. In the third section, I answer the *point of morality objection* that the commitment of the MS to voluntariness is essential for satisfying the fairness of blameworthiness. I argued that this commitment is so demanding that it defeats one of the important purposes of blame as an ethical practice in agent modification. Although blame should function as a modification of an agent, the MS' requirement for fairness thwarts the functioning of blame. By answering the two objections, I have clarified the nature of the modern morality and why it should be criticized.

Williams concludes his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* by saying that the MS' "philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful *misconception of life*" (ELP 218; my emphasis). In this paper, I defended this conclusion by showing specifically how the philosophical errors of MS express the misconception of life; MS contains the misconception of human motivation, the real workings of the arts of coexistence, and the fairness required. The next question is whether we can convincingly reconstruct ethics in a way that is not based on such a misconception but on the naturalistic understanding of the human art of ethics. An example of such a work would be a more detailed theory of blame, in which the conditions of fairness, though not the misdirected fairness of the MS, are sufficiently protected. What we need, I think, is to free ourselves from illusions of the morality system and take this project of naturalistic reconstruction seriously.[19]

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