

A Shelter from Luck: The Roots, Point, and Purity of the Morality System

The “morality system,” Bernard Williams concludes at the end of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, is “a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life” (2011, 218). It combines, in ways that Williams finds problematic, certain quite special conceptions of value, motivation, obligation, practical necessity, responsibility, voluntariness, blame, and guilt. But any attempt to characterize the morality system quickly runs the risk of degenerating into a laundry list of things that Williams happened to dislike. To see what holds the many characteristics of the morality system together, we have to understand what this deeply rooted misconception is rooted *in*: we have to take a view of it that is sympathetic enough to reveal what genuine human needs the system answers to. The morality system may be a misconception, but it is not *simply* a misconception. If Williams calls it a “system,” it is because there are reasons for just those features to come together in just that way. Once we see the *point* of the system, we will be in a better position to see what is wrong with it, and why “we would be better off without it” (2011, 193).¹

When Williams remarks that we would be better off without the morality system, he does not mean that we would be better off without concepts like *obligation*, *voluntariness*, or *blame*. As I propose to argue, his position subtly combines vindicatory explanations of why we have these notions in the first place with a critical evaluation of the particular shape they take in the morality system. He invites us not so much to reject these notions as to cut them down to human size. We will better understand just how peculiar the morality system’s elaborations of these notions are if we can contrast them with a different understanding of them which helps us to see what they do for us when they are not in the service of the system. This vindicatory part of Williams’s account contributes just as much to leading us out of the morality system as the more critical part. It offers an alternative way of making sense of these notions and gives us some positive indication of what, on a revised understanding,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all citations refer to works by Bernard Williams.

we need these notions to be. It helps us “make *some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because we can’t have an idealized version of it” (2009, 203). Only when placed against the backdrop of a rectified understanding of the notions seized upon by the morality system do their peculiar distortions within that system become fully apparent.

To consider the morality system’s deepest roots thus involves not just the task of understanding why the system gives notions like *voluntariness* or *obligation* the shape it does, but also the prior task of understanding why these notions are there to be harnessed by the system in the first place. This, I believe, is a task that Williams recognized, and I will show how in a variety of places ranging from *Morality to Shame and Necessity*, he offers vindictory explanations of four important source materials for the morality system: the moral /non-moral distinction (§1); the idea of obligation (§2); the voluntary/involuntary distinction (§3); and the practice of blame (§4).² I will then bring into the story the needs explaining why just these notions were recruited in the “particular development of the ethical” (2011, 7) that is the morality system. I shall argue that the main point of the morality system, its animating ambition and organizing principle, is to provide a shelter from luck (§5). Finally, I will show how this aspiration generates two problems: it robs useful concepts of their grip on the world we live in, and it generates an incompatibility between our ethical ideas and our naturalistic ideas that threatens to issue in nihilism about value and scepticism about agency. To overcome these problems, I suggest, it is not enough to accept that contingency and luck pervade human life. We also need to revise our understanding of what the facts of contingency and luck entail—in particular, we

² A fuller treatment than I have room for here might add *guilt*, which Williams contrasts in particular with shame (1993, 1997a), and which he describes as “the characteristic first-personal reaction within the system” (2011, 197). The combination I repeatedly explore in this essay, of a vindication of the generic form of X with a critique of the refined form it takes within the morality system, can be found also in Williams’s treatment of guilt. In its generic form, guilt helpfully “turns our attention to the victims of what we have wrongly done” (1993, 222). But this virtue is lost once the conception of guilt is elaborated into something more abstract in the morality system: “When the conception of guilt is refined beyond a certain point and forgets its primitive materials of anger and fear, guilt comes to be represented simply as the attitude of respect for an abstract law, and it then no longer has any special connection with victims” (1993, 222).

need to abandon the purist attitude that blinds us to alternative ways of making sense of human values and agency (§6).

1. The Moral/Non-Moral Distinction

The deepest roots of the morality system are to be found in the needs of a very basic kind that drive human beings to develop a distinction between the moral and the non-moral in the first place. Critical as Williams may be of the particular form which this distinction takes within the morality system, he still has a vindictory story to tell about our need to draw *some* distinction along those lines. One of the aims of his 1972 book *Morality*, Williams declared in the preface he added in 1993, was the “placing of morality in relation to other ethical considerations and to the rest of life” (2001, xiv). The book achieves this, notably, by examining “what the distinction between the ‘moral’ and the ‘nonmoral’ is supposed to do for us” (2001, xiii). Already in his first book, therefore, Williams is concerned to do what he more explicitly aims to do in his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002): to situate philosophically puzzling concepts and distinctions in human affairs by relating them “to other reasons for action that human beings use, and generally to their desires, needs and projects” (2001, xiii).

As Williams makes clear in that preface, his 1972 book did not yet observe the distinction he later came to draw between the “moral” in the narrow sense in which that idea is understood within the morality system and the broader notion of the “ethical.” Accordingly, his 1972 enquiry into the practical point of the moral/non-moral distinction still concerns the *moral* in a generic sense, of which the *moral* as conceived by the morality system is a particular socio-historical elaboration.

In this generic sense, Williams suggests, the moral/non-moral distinction is one we should expect to find at some level in any human society. As he emphasises in his discussion of the amoralist, it may be possible for an individual to live outside the ethical life, but no human community can get by without some kind of morality, i.e. without some minimal ethical consciousness which stakes claims against self-

interest.³ To stake claims against self-interest, Williams suggests in “Egoism and Altruism,” is “one basic and universal function of morality” (1973b, 250).⁴ Now any morality, in order to count as a morality at all, needs to involve some distinction between actions which only minister to the interests of the agent at the expense of others and actions which take the interests of others into account. “If some such distinction is not made,” Williams insists, “there are no moral considerations at all” (2001, 66). In its most primitive form, the concept of the moral marks a distinction between selfish actions and other-regarding actions and selects the latter for approval.

Of course, this primitive distinction between two classes of actions is still too primitive; if we are to make sense of anything like our concept of the moral, we need to understand why it involves discriminating not just between different kinds of action, but also between different kinds of *motivation*. The explanation that Williams gives turns on the idea that actions can be other-regarding while springing from self-regarding motives. He gives the example of “a self-interested business man who writes a cheque to famine relief” (2001, 66), but whose concern is for his own reputation rather than for the relief of famine. “What,” Williams asks, “is the point and content of saying that we do not *morally* approve of the self-interested donor to charity, or that, though he does a good thing, he does not act morally?” (2001, 67). The idea that to act *morally* is to act *from moral motives* will of course figure centrally in the morality system, but Williams’s view seems to be that we have antecedent reasons to refine the moral/non-moral distinction so as to discriminate not just between actions, but also between the motives from which they spring.

Williams invites us to consider three types of actions: (i) self-regarding actions, (ii) other-regarding actions done from self-regarding motives, and (iii) other-regarding actions done from other-regarding motives. On the one hand, Williams highlights that there are good reasons for a community to encourage (ii) over (i): an other-regarding action done from self-regarding motives is still better than a selfish

³ See Williams (2011, 32, 51).

⁴ In this usage of the term “morality,” altruism is necessary for morality, where altruism is construed broadly as “a general disposition to regard the interests of others, merely as such, as making some claim on one, and, in particular, as implying the possibility of limiting one’s own projects” (1973b, 250).

action—the self-interested donor will, after all, help relieve famine, and this is surely “better than that another combined cocktail cabinet and TV set should be bought” (2001, 66).⁵ Nor, Williams adds with characteristic subtlety, should approval be limited to the self-interested donor’s *action*: we can also approve *of him* insofar as he has done something which it is a good thing to have done.

On the other hand, however, Williams also thinks that there is “a very good point” (2001, 67) in withholding *moral* approval in the case of the self-interested donor, i.e. in reserving the kind of approval that comes with one’s action being considered a *moral* action for cases of type (iii). To draw a contrast between (ii) and (iii) is to contrast motivations which will only yield other-regarding acts when these happen to align with the agent’s self-interest with motivations that are *steadier* because they are general dispositions to do things of the other-regarding sort: motivations grounded in principle, for example, or motivations grounded in sympathy with others. Such motivations will more reliably give rise to other-regarding actions than motivations which are conditional on those actions aligning with self-interest. “This must surely,” Williams remarks, “have something to do with the *point* of selecting certain motives for *moral* approbation: we are concerned to have people who have a general tendency to be prepared to consider other people’s interests on the same footing as their own” (2001, 68).⁶

The point of having a concept of the moral that ties moral action to moral motive, then, is to cultivate in people a general tendency to engage in other-regarding behaviour by selecting for moral approval “general dispositions to do things of the non-self-interested sort” (2001, 69–70).⁷ So far, this is a vindictory story. We get a vindictory explanation, first, of why any human community would need to draw some kind of distinction between moral and non-moral actions, and then of why this distinction would need to be focused further to make a moral action one that

⁵ In the fifties, the “combined cocktail cabinet and TV set” really was a thing. Williams’s suggestion that this would have been a particularly frivolous acquisition is vindicated by the fact that it now sounds to us rather like Boris Vian’s fictional “pianocktail.”

⁶ There is a parallel here to Philip Kitcher’s claim, in *The Ethical Project* (2011), that the most basic point of morality is to remedy “altruism failures.”

⁷ To say this is not to deny that having such a concept also serves other functions—Williams is explicit about this even in *Morality* (2001, 69), and, of course, he takes the concept as it figures in the morality system to perform different and less benign functions.

stems from a moral motive.

2. The Idea of Obligation

Why do we have the idea of *obligation* in the first place? What does it do for us? In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and in his essay “The Primacy of Dispositions,” Williams goes some way towards offering an explanation that might “help us to understand the point and value of living a life in which obligations counted as ethical reasons” (2006e, 73).

The idea of obligation (along with its correlate, the idea that those towards whom one has an obligation have a *right*)⁸ is grounded in the basic interest of human beings everywhere in being able to *rely* on certain things—that they will not be killed, assaulted, or arbitrarily expropriated, for example (2011, 205). The idea of obligation works to secure reliability about such things of importance by helping to create “a state of affairs in which people can reasonably expect others to behave in some ways and not in others” (2011, 208). In particular, it works to ensure that considerations of importance are given *high deliberative priority*. This, according to Williams, is the most basic point of the idea of obligation: it gives important considerations high deliberative priority. A consideration enjoys such priority for us if, first, it appears in our deliberations, and second, it is given heavy weighting against other considerations (2011, 203). The concept of obligation is thus like the special email format which ensures that important emails are flagged as “high priority” when they appear in the recipient’s inbox: it provides a format for ethical considerations that lends them particular prominence and weight in people’s deliberations.

Using this conceptual tool, we can try to make sure that considerations of basic and standing importance are reflected in “settled and permanent pattern[s] of deliberative priorities” (2011, 206). But obligations can also be more context-sensitive. If the person next to me suffers a stroke, a “general ethical recognition of people’s vital interests” becomes “focused into a deliberative priority by immediacy” (2011, 206). Immediacy *to me* generates an obligation *for me* to help. Even more conditional are obligations generated by promises. The institution of promising “operates to provide portable reliability,” as Williams puts it, “offering a formula that will confer high deliberative priority on what might otherwise not receive it” (2011, 207–

⁸ See Williams (2011, 206).

208).

This account is reminiscent of Hume's genealogy of the respect for property and the institution of promising, and indeed, Williams later noted that his account "is broadly in the spirit of Hume" (1995g, 205).⁹ It presents obligations as one notable way of "securing the protection of important interests" (1995g, 205), but the kind of importance in terms of which the notion of obligation is explained is of an everyday, naturalistically unmysterious sort: it is the importance of satisfying elementary needs.

In light of this, it is not altogether surprising that the morality system should have grown around the notion of obligation rather than around some other category of ethical thought. If Williams is right, the notion of obligation is a device which originally serves to acknowledge and reflect, at the level of deliberation, the overriding urgency and demandingness of our most basic needs and our needs in situations of emergency. Understanding these practical origins helps us understand why the device is so demanding—as Williams puts it, it is "just because the needs involved are so elementary that the psychological mechanisms designed to meet those needs are demanding" (1995g, 205). Yet is also "because those mechanisms are demanding that the theory which grows around them becomes so dense and oppressive" (1995g, 205). Taken beyond its proper remit, the device of obligation can soon seem absurdly overpowered, rather like a Roman dictator who retains his emergency powers beyond the fulfilment of his mandate.

3. The Voluntary/Involuntary Distinction

The last two components of the morality system which I want to examine grow out of the practice of recognizing responsibility. Already in his 1963 essay for the BBC's *Third Programme*, Williams observes that this is a practice which the Greeks shared with us in some form (1963, 1–2). Like us, they recognized that to be responsible for a certain state of affairs is not *just* a matter of being the cause of it through some movement of one's body. To determine whether someone really carries *responsibility* for that state of affairs in the full sense which makes that person a proper subject of blame, we want to know more about the bodily movement. Was it just a nervous twitch, or did they really *act*? Did they *intend* to bring about that state of affairs?

⁹ See Hume (2000, 3.2.2 and 3.2.5) and Queloz (Manuscript, chap. 3).

And what *state of mind* were they in when they did so? Williams elaborates on this conception of responsibility we share with the Greeks in *Shame and Necessity*, where he spells out four “basic elements of any conception of responsibility” (1993, 55):

Cause: the idea that someone brought about a bad state of affairs in virtue of what they did;

Intention: the idea that they intended that state of affairs;

State: the idea that they were in a normal state of mind when they brought it about (i.e. not sleepwalking or subject to extreme incident passions);

Response: the idea that this calls for some response on their part, that they need to make up for it.

Williams’s thought is that out of these four basic elements—easy to remember because they form the acrostic *CISR*—a great many different conceptions of responsibility can and have been constructed by interpreting the elements in different ways and varying the emphasis between them. These are “universal materials” (1993, 56), because the need for them follows “simply from universal banalities” (1993, 55):

Everywhere, human beings act, and their actions cause things to happen, and sometimes they intend those things, and sometimes they do not; everywhere, what is brought about is sometimes to be regretted or deplored, by the agent or by others who suffer from it or by both; and when that is so, there may be a demand for some response from that agent, a demand made by himself, by others, or by both. (1993, 55)

It may be plausible enough that the ideas of *Cause* and *Response* are universal, but why should we expect the ideas of *Intention* and *State* to be universal? Williams’s answer, in a nutshell, is that we are bound to be interested in drawing some distinction between what is intended and what is not, and what is done in a normal state of mind and what is not, because these distinctions are crucial to understanding how an action relates to the plans and character of the agent.

Every time we act, some aspects of what we are doing are intentional while others are not, and we care which is which because it makes a great difference to our relations to other people. Williams gives an example from the end of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus and Telemachus confront Penelope’s suitors and find, to their great alarm, that the suitors are handing out the weapons that Telemachus was supposed to have hidden away in a storeroom. Odysseus angrily wonders who opened the storeroom, and Telemachus explains that it was his mistake, and that no one else is to blame—

he left the door of the storeroom ajar, and one of the suitors must have been a better observer than he was (1993, 50). Telemachus is clearly drawing a distinction here between aspects of what he did that were *intentional* and aspects that were *unintentional*: it was he who left the door ajar, but he did not *mean* to. This, Williams contends, shows that although Homer had no direct equivalent for the word “intention,” he nevertheless had the *concept* of intention—not because we are disposed to draw on this concept in describing the situation, but because Homer and his characters themselves make distinctions which can only be understood in terms of that concept (1993, 50–51). For Williams, it is no surprise that they draw such distinctions: “it must be a possible question how the intentions and actions of an agent at a given time fit in with, or fail to fit in with, his intentions and actions at other times,” he writes, because “[u]nder any social circumstances at all, that is a question for other people who have to live with him” (1993, 56). Being sensitive to which aspects of an action are intentional helps us understand what kind of action it is, and what else to expect from someone who, in that situation, intends those things. If Telemachus had intentionally left the door ajar, this would have disquieting implications for Odysseus, suggesting that Telemachus was not, after all, on his side. Here, the question whether Telemachus *meant* to do what he did is a matter of life and death.

Similarly, we are bound to care about whether actions are done from a normal state of mind or not, because this is crucial to figuring out what to expect from people in the future: if someone acts intentionally but in a strange state of mind, we know that their actions probably do not stand in a very regular relation to their overall plans and character. Williams gives the example of Agamemnon, who took Briseis from Achilles, and did so intentionally, but was in a strange state of mind when he did so: the gods cast *ate* on his wits, so that he was in a state of delusion or blind madness (1993, 52). (The example also brings out that what *counts* as a normal state of mind is interpreted rather differently in different times and places.) Being sensitive to the state of mind from which people act helps us see how their intention and action on one occasion fits into the broader pattern of their intentions and actions on other occasions. It helps us separate the exceptional from the expectable. Like the capacity to separate the intentional from the unintentional, this is a capacity that human beings living together are bound to have an interest in possessing.

This brings us to what, for our purposes, is Williams’s key point, namely that if the notions of *Cause*, *Intention*, *State*, and *Response* are available, one already has all

the material necessary to construct the notion of the voluntary. The notion of the voluntary picks out all those actions we are left with once we have filtered out things done unintentionally or in an abnormal state of mind: “a certain thing is done voluntarily if (very roughly) it is an intentional aspect of an action done in a normal state of mind” (1993, 66). As he puts it in a later essay, “‘A does X voluntarily’ is equivalent to ‘A does X intentionally in a normal state of mind’” (2006a, 120).¹⁰

This notion of the voluntary may strike one as superficial—if we push beyond a certain point such questions as what exactly someone intends, what makes it true that they intend it, and whether they intended to become the kind of person who can intend such a thing, this notion of the voluntary gives out. But for Williams, its superficiality is precisely what makes it worth having: it is “essentially superficial” (1993, 67), and “if voluntariness is to do its work such questions cannot be pressed beyond a certain point” (2006a, 124). It is “an essentially superficial notion, which works on condition that one does not try to deepen it” (1997b, 495). A useful notion of the voluntary is one that helps us capture such obviously important differences as that between intentionally turning on the stove and somnambulism. Distinctions at this superficial level do nothing to settle the problem of free will (nor, indeed, do they generate that problem in the first place).¹¹ But it is by doing work at this superficial level that the notion of the voluntary helps us to live. It is (in Nietzsche’s phrase which Williams quotes more than once) superficial out of profundity.¹²

Because the notion of the voluntary can be constructed already out of distinctions that human beings everywhere are bound to find worth having, Williams concludes that “[a]ll conceptions of responsibility make some discriminations” between what

¹⁰ Another formula he uses is: “an agent does X fully voluntarily if X-ing is an intentional aspect of an action he does, which has no inherent or deliberative defect” (1995i, 25).

¹¹ See Williams (1993, 67–68): “It is a mistake to suppose that the notion of the voluntary is a profound conception that is threatened only by some opposing and profound theory about the universe (in particular, to the effect that determinism is true). That supposition underlies the traditional metaphysical problem of the freedom of the will ... there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened.”

¹² Nietzsche himself uses the phrase more than once—first in *The Gay Science* (2001, Preface, §4) and then again in *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (2005, Epilogue, §2). For further discussion of the superficiality of the notion of the voluntary, see Williams (1993, 67–68, 1995b, 127–128, 1995e, 243, 1997b, 495–496, 2006a, 124–125).

is voluntary, in the undemanding sense of being an intentional aspect of an action done in a normal state of mind, and what is not (1993, 66). Although he is at the same time adamant that “no conception of responsibility confines response entirely to the voluntary” (1993, 66), he grants that the voluntary/involuntary distinction, and the concomitant notion of “the will” in a correspondingly unambitious sense, are universally worth having. They earn their keep in virtue of the human need to understand the *place* of intentions and actions in people’s plans and characters.¹³

4. Blame

The last component of the morality system I want to examine, which also grows out of the practice of recognizing responsibility, is the practice of blame. Here also Williams’s critique of blame as understood within the morality system is rooted in a more charitable account of blame more broadly understood, an account which presents blame as a valuable, if peculiar, “instrument of social control” (1995c, 15). It is an instrument of social control because it helps sustain human communities by inducting new individuals (including notably children) into a shared ethical sensibility, and by helping to secure some degree of realignment with that sensibility where individuals problematically deviate from it. It is a peculiar instrument, however, because as long as the participants in the practice of blame think of it in purely instrumental terms, as justified only by its *efficacy* as a tool of alignment, blame will fail to produce the desired effects—it will tend to produce resentment rather than remorse.

Blame that is perceived as unjust often fails to have the desired results, and merely generates resentment. This shows that the idea of blame’s justification is not the same as the idea of its efficacy. When a recipient thinks that blame is unjustified, the content of his thought cannot be that the blame will be ineffective. This does not show that the purpose of blame may not in fact lie in the modification of behaviour; it means only that if this is true, it cannot be obvious to those who are effectively blamed. (Williams 1995c, 15)

The practice of blame can be efficacious only insofar as it is understood by participants to be more than just a regulative device, because only then will recipients of

¹³ As Williams puts it in a footnote to “Moral Luck: A Postscript,” “the idea of the voluntary ... is inherent in the concept of action” (1995e, 247 n. 4). See also Williams (2002, 45, 1995c, 1995f, 1999; Magee and Williams 1971).

blame be suitably moved by the normative demands that blame expresses. Consequently, no account of blame that bases its justification merely on its efficacy or functionality can be adequate, because “it collides with one of the most obvious facts about blame, that in many cases it is effective only if the recipient thinks that it is justified” (1995c, 15).

At first pass, Williams’s conclusion that blame cannot wear its function on its sleeve seems subversive rather than vindictory, thereby calling into doubt my claim that Williams had a vindictory account of blame in its generic form. But there are two ways of hearing the claim that blame cannot wear its function on its sleeve. On the first interpretation, which, admittedly, is strongly suggested by some passages in Williams’s writings from the 1980s, he is indeed critical of blame even in its generic form: he is saying that there is bound to be a *tension* between the non-instrumentalist spirit involved in the practice of blame and the instrumentalist spirit involved in grasping its point. If the practice of blame is to be stable despite this tension, the argument then goes, some way must be found of driving a wedge between what justifies blame from the point of view of the participants, and what justifies blame from a detached, reflective point of view. But this yields a “Government House” account of blame akin to what Williams dubbed “Government House” utilitarianism (1995h, 166). It “most naturally fits a situation in which those who understand the justification, and those whose behaviour is being modified, are not the same people” (1995c, 15), and therefore invites the same concerns about social transparency that utilitarianism does. And even if one instead tries to compartmentalise the individual consciousness using some distinction between theory and practice, and assumes that participants are aware of blame’s efficacy only off-duty, in the “cool hour” of reflection, this distinction between theory and practice possesses no real “saving power” (1995h, 165). The tension will manifest itself even in a compartmentalised mind, and the practice of blame must unravel under reflection.

But there is a second way of hearing the claim that blame cannot wear its function on its sleeve, one which does not commit us to there being a tension in the first place. Taking a leaf out of *Truth and Truthfulness*, we can see blame as a practice exhibiting what I call *self-effacing* functionality:¹⁴ the practice of blame is functional, but only

¹⁴ See Queloz (2018).

insofar as it is sustained by motives and reasons that are autonomous, i.e. not conditional on the practice's functionality in each particular case. The practice must outrun its functionality in order to be functional. As a result, the functionality of blame is inconspicuous or effaced, i.e. it is not the primary consideration for participants as they engage in the practice, but *for benign functional reasons*: we reap the benefits of blame only if we are bloody-minded about it rather than benefit-minded.¹⁵ In this sense, the functionality of blame is *self-effacing*.

This account of blame also predicts that its functionality will not be obvious to participants, because that very functionality requires that their motivations and reasons focus on something other than the practice's functionality, and hence blame's functionality will efface itself in favour of those other motivations and reasons; but it crucially differs from the first account in that it does not present the functionality of blame as *necessarily* effaced: participants can become fully conscious of it without the insight into the functionality having a destabilising effect on the practice.

On this reading of Williams on blame, we get an explanation of why we go in for blame that is in the first instance vindictory rather than subversive—one, moreover, that does not just vindicate blame as a salient solution to the problem of securing the alignment of ethical sensibilities required for humans to live together, but that also specifically vindicates the peculiar self-effacingly functional structure of blame: blame is needed as a device of ethical alignment, but also that it needs to be *more* than that; in particular, that it needs to be *justified* by more than its functionality in order to be functional. Indeed, Williams's account of the point of blame might be taken to suggest that we who live in heterogenous liberal societies have a *special* need for blame, since the more diverse societies are, and the more they deny themselves more draconian ways of securing alignment in behaviour, the more there is a need for blame.¹⁶

¹⁵ A phrase Williams uses to describe similar functional dynamics in his account of truthfulness (2002, 59).

¹⁶ Nor does the fact that blame sometimes over-stretches the idea that one had reason to act otherwise seem to count against it on Williams's reckoning, since even the fiction that one had reason to act otherwise has a valuable tendency to instil in the blamed just the sensitivity to reasons that it pretends they already possess (1995d, 41–44). On this “proleptic” function of blame, see Miranda Fricker's Williams-inspired “What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation” (2016).

5. The Point of the Morality System

The four components of the morality system I have focused on—the moral/non-moral distinction, the idea of obligation, the voluntary/involuntary distinction, and the practice of blame—are thus not the invention of the morality system. They have deeper roots in more generic needs. But what more socio-historically local concerns explain the “particular development of the ethical” (2011, 7) that is the morality system?¹⁷ To what end does it harness and adapt just the notions it does in the way it does? What is the *point* of the morality system?

Williams gives his most pointed answer to this question in “Moral Luck: A Postscript,” where he writes that “the point of this conception of morality is, in part, to provide a shelter against luck, one realm of value (indeed, of supreme value) that is defended against contingency” (1995e, 241). Our need for a shelter from luck grows, Williams suggests, out of a longing for “ultimate justice” (2011, 43). In the face of the fact that “most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that, if not unjust, are at any rate not just, and some people are simply luckier than others,” the morality system expresses “the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just,” because it offers a special kind of value, *moral* value, that outshines every other kind of value and at the same time “transcends luck” (2011, 217).¹⁸

These needs and aspirations are more clearly located in history than the generic needs we considered earlier. As Williams frequently and rather vaguely puts it, the morality system grows out of Platonic and Christian influences that find their purest expression in the philosophy of Kant.¹⁹ And indeed we find in Christianity a special emphasis on the ideals of ultimate justice—“God is just”—and equality—“everyone is created equal and is equal before God.” It is also true that it is Plato who, by developing Pythagorean ideas,²⁰ provided the dualism of soul and body, and in particular

¹⁷ A more general, but related, question is what drives the systematization of ethical thought that ultimately issues in ethical theory in the first place. See Cueni and Queloz (Forthcoming) for a reconstruction of Williams’s answer to this question.

¹⁸ Many have since highlighted the importance of justice or fairness as a motivation for the immunisation of morality against luck; see Latus (2000, 166), Levy (2011, 9–10), Otsuka (2009, 374–75), Sher (2005, 180), Statman (2005, 425), and Walker (1991, 16). For a critical discussion of various fairness-based arguments in favour of luck-free morality, see Hartman (2016, 2017).

¹⁹ See Williams (2014, 86).

²⁰ See Williams (2006d, 16).

the idea of a “featureless moral self” (1993, 160), which, as we shall see, proved crucial to the hope for ultimate justice. When Plato had Socrates say that “*the good man cannot be harmed*, since the only thing that could touch him would be something that could touch the good state of his soul” (2011, 39), he was foreshadowing the driving idea of the morality system. It was also Plato who, with his tripartite model of the soul that imposes a stark division between “rational concerns that aim at the good, and mere desire” (1993, 42), provided the strategy of *ethicizing psychology*, as Williams calls it—the strategy of fitting psychological ideas to moral demands instead of trying to fit moral ideas into an independent understanding of human psychology.²¹ As we shall now see, this strategy is key to the morality system’s attempt to “make the world safe for well-disposed people” (2006f, 59).²²

Once we see the morality system as organized by the ambition to provide a shelter from luck, we receive some guidance in reverse-engineering the distinctive contributions of its various components. The guiding question then becomes: *How does one construct a shelter from luck?*

First, one needs a special kind of value that is not “merely a consolation prize you get if you are not in worldly terms happy or talented or good-humoured or loved,” but the “supreme” form of value—it “has to be what ultimately matters” (2011, 217) if it is to eclipse any lack of luck in other respects. This is where the *moral/non-moral* distinction comes in. In its generic form, Williams agrees with Hume, the distinction is not very sharp.²³ But it can be elaborated and exaggerated into a stark distinction to provide a special kind of value—*moral* value—whose importance can then be dialed up to the point where it drowns out any other kind of value. The supremacy of moral value importantly contributes to shutting out luck by ensuring that misfortunes in dimensions other than the moral do not count. The most effective way of achieving this is for moral value to be supreme not just in the sense of carrying more weight than other kinds of value, but of forbidding comparison altogether. It is not

²¹ In Williams’s own terms, to ethicize psychology is “to provide a psychology that gets its significance from ethical categories” (1993, 43) or to define “the functions of the mind, especially with regard to action ... at the most basic level in terms of categories that get their significance from ethics” (1993, 160). See also Williams (2006b, 78).

²² A phrase Williams used in the referenced passage to describe “the tireless aim of moral philosophy.”

²³ See Williams (1995c, 20 n. 12) and Hume (1998, Appendix IV).

that moral value ends up *outweighing* other kinds of value—there is not even a competition. This is what Williams means when he notes the tendency of the morality system to *close in on itself*, so that it comes to seem an “indecent misunderstanding” (2011, 217) to ask, as Nietzsche does, what the value of that system is.²⁴ The morality system’s “purism and its self-sufficiency mean that it is structured not to hear any considerations that might limit its own” (1995g, 204). From the point of view of the system, nothing outside the system really matters.

Second, one needs to ensure that the point of view of the system, and the demands it makes on us, are truly inescapable. This means that the demands raised by the system have to combine two aspects: *ubiquity*, so that there is no domain in which the demands of the system do not arise; and *stringency*, so that these demands are forceful enough not just to get a hearing, but to take precedence over other demands. This is where the notion of *obligation* comes in as the ideal format in which to couch moral thought. For the reasons we considered, obligations are stringently demanding, and are designed to intrude into deliberation and impose themselves at the top of the priority list. Moreover, as Williams notes, “[i]f obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether” (2011, 202). If only an obligation can overrule an obligation, the felt need to resist a given obligation will invite one to look for ways in which the need to resist it can itself be rationalized as expressing a general obligation; and the more this happens, the more general obligations multiply, so that they end up providing “work for idle hands” (2011, 202) across all wakes of life. The notion of obligation is thus perfectly suited to the task of ensuring that the system will be truly inescapable. The proliferation of moral obligations means that there is always something that one is under an obligation to do, so that there is no sphere of life that the morality system fails to reach into; and the stringency of moral obligation ensures that what the morality system demands is what one really *must* do. The notion of obligation allows the demands of the morality system to become *categorical*—a

²⁴ In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche asks after “the *value* of morality,” urging that “we need a *critique* of moral values, for once the value of these values must itself be called into question” (1998, Preface, §§5–6). Williams echoes Nietzsche when he notes that “the principal aim of all moral philosophy” is that of “truthfully understanding what our ethical values are and how they are related to our psychology, and making, in the light of that understanding, a valuation of those values” (1995a, 578).

Kantian term, which, as Williams notes (2011, 198), usefully combines the two aspects of ubiquity and stringency.

Our construction thus far already looks pretty well defended against contingency. Insofar as agents manage to stand in the right relation to their moral obligations, they will be living well in the only respect that ultimately matters. Insofar as they manage to enter the shelter, therefore, they will be safe from luck. And everywhere, the shelter is there to be entered, because everywhere, morality makes a claim on one—and not just a claim, but *the* claim: everywhere, what morality demands is what one really must do. We have a robust shelter from luck which ubiquitously invites us in and promises to shut out the raging elements.

But though ubiquitous and contingency-proof in itself, our shelter from luck does not yet effectively serve people's need to escape contingency, because it potentially still suffers from what might be called an *unequal access* problem: some people may, for contingent reasons, find it easier than others to align their lives with the demands of the morality system. To eliminate contingency even here, we need to find a suitable way of specifying what exactly has to happen on the side of the agents for them to become angels, so to speak: we need to regulate entry to the shelter in terms that guarantee equal access. Clearly, for example, moral value must not be tied up with the consequences of actions, because this would again render the agent vulnerable to incident luck. Taking a sufficiently long-term view of the consequences of an action can effectively leave us clueless about its moral value—as a Medieval proverb has it, when the flung stone leaves the hand, it belongs to the devil.²⁵ To truly discount luck, moral value therefore needs to retreat into the agent, to lie “in trying rather than succeeding, since success depends partly on luck” (2011, 217). Harnessing the emphasis on moral motivation which we noted already in the generic form of the moral/non-moral distinction, the system is thus driven to focus exclusively on the agent's moral intentions and motives.²⁶

²⁵ On the problem of cluelessness, see Greaves (2016).

²⁶ Some attempts to render utilitarianism actionable issue in a notably similar structure: by enjoining the agent to maximize *expected* rather than *actual* utility, utilitarianism condenses into an obligation to do whatever has the highest expected utility to the best of the agent's knowledge, and although how much actual utility this produces is to a great degree a matter of luck, agents escape blame as long as they maximize expected utility (at least most of the time—see Monton (2019) for a discussion of exceptional cases).

Yet if the basis on which we allocate moral worth is to be ultimately just, our conception of moral responsibility still needs to eliminate various contingencies *within* the agent as well, because as Williams remarks, the “capacity to try,” or to act from moral motives, “is itself a matter of luck” (2011, 217). Various contingencies at the level of natural inclinations or endowments, socialisation, education, and other biographical and historical circumstances may make it easier for some agents to have the right kind of motivation. Moral motivation must therefore itself be understood in terms that insist on purity from contingency. It must not be conditional on the agent’s contingent desires or motives. It must be a form of motivation that the agent has anyway already—for instance, in virtue of being a rational agent.

The requirement that makes itself felt here is that in order to guarantee equal access to the shelter from luck, the morality system must base itself solely on what any agent has complete control over no matter their circumstances. This is where our third component, the *voluntary/involuntary* distinction, comes in. Even in its generic form, it already does some of the work required by separating out what the agent unintentionally did or did in an abnormal state of mind. But the “search for an intrinsically just conception of responsibility” (1993, 95) leads one to push responsibility even further back, to a *purified* form of trying that is not conditioned by any disposition or desire, or any other trait that the agent contingently has: what Williams calls “utter voluntariness” (2011, 218) or, following Kant, “the unconditioned will” (1981, 20). To be truly unconditioned, of course, this purified conception of “the will” may not be in any way empirically determined by what the agent contingently is. So the locus of the will in this demanding form cannot be the socially situated and contingently constructed self. It has to be the *featureless moral self* that lies beyond all determination by contingent empirical circumstances (in Kantian terms: the noumenal or transcendental self). The intrinsically just and ultimately fair basis on which moral responsibility is allocated in the morality system is thus the unconditioned will of the characterless self.

It should be acknowledged in passing that this idea of the unconditioned will, which has a rich history in the theory of action,²⁷ also has other roots, as Williams

²⁷ For overviews of that history, see, e.g., Glock (1996, ‘will’), Hyman (2011), Candlish and Damnjanovic (2013), and Queloz (2017).

himself acknowledges in various places. The morality system is in that sense “over-determined” (1995g, 204). Williams notes, for example, that the “phenomenology of bodily movement and the notion of trying” (1999, 149) already invite, via the observation that one can will a movement without that movement actually ensuing, the distinction between the self *qua* locus of action and the self *qua* locus of the will. He also notes that the notion of the will as something free from empirical determination comes in because we want there to be something over us which we have complete control, and we want that because we feel the need for “*real authorship* of our actions” (1999, 149). A further driving force is the powerful feeling of resentment we feel when others wrong us. Williams here takes a leaf out of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, which describes the idea of a featureless moral agent—of an agent lying beyond all determination by circumstance who can will to actualize his contingent dispositions or not—as being motivated by the felt need to blame, not just the nature of things in general, but those who wronged us in particular: by postulating the idea that agents are free to transcend their nature, the wronged ones “gain for themselves the right to hold the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey,” because it allows them to say that “*the strong one is free* to be weak, and the bird of prey to be a lamb” (Nietzsche 1998, I, §13). Connected to this is the human tendency to indulge in what Williams calls a “special fantasy of retrospective prevention” (1995f, 73), where the victim fantasizes about replacing the wrongdoer’s action with an acknowledgement of the victim. This fantasy again motivates thinking of the agent in isolation from the network of circumstances, as an autonomous entity capable of willing to act otherwise than the agent in fact did.

Lastly, the morality system must also allocate moral *blame* in a way that shields the agent from luck. This is easily achieved at this point, since moral blame only needs to track utter voluntariness to make sure that the agent is blamed only “on the ultimately fair basis of the agent’s own contribution” (2011, 216). This is what Williams calls the “purified conception of blame” (1995f, 72). By tying blame to utter voluntariness, the morality system ensures that agents are blamed “for no more and no less than what is in [their] power” (1995f, 72). In effect, given that the moral demands on the will take the form of obligations, the purified conception of blame ties blame to the *purely voluntary breaking of obligations*. Because the morality system focuses on blame at the expense of other reactive attitudes and links blame to the

purely voluntary breaking of obligations, “[t]he thought *I did it* has no special significance” within the resulting picture of the ethical life; the only question is “whether I voluntarily did what I ought to have done” (2011, 196). This leads to a blinkered disregard for what Williams insists is an important dimension of ethical experience, namely “the distinction simply between what one has done and what one has not done” (2011, 196).²⁸

The purified conception of blame comfortingly shields one from two kinds of blameworthiness that would otherwise render one vulnerable to luck. On the one hand, it shields one from being blamed for what one does involuntarily. (This is what George Sher aptly calls the “Searchlight View” (2009, chap. 1) of responsibility, on which agents are responsible only for those features and results of their acts of which they are *aware* when they perform the acts.) On the other hand, it shields one from incurring blame when one does something as the lesser of two evils. These fateful choices between wrong and wrong—the stuff of tragedy—lose their sting in the morality system, because if blameworthiness is tied to broken obligations, and if *ought* implies *can*—one can only be under an obligation to do what one can do—one is not blameworthy when one does something as the lesser of two evils.²⁹ There might have been what W. D. Ross (1930) calls a *prima facie* obligation not to do what one ended up doing, but this obligation was eventually defeated by the consideration that the alternative would have been worse, and so there was no *real* obligation not to do what one did.

Once the practice of blame is appropriately purified to be sensitive only to purely voluntary acts, our moral agents longing for ultimate justice are finally home and dry. The only thing that ultimately matters—moral value—is now completely within their control, for it depends only on whether they choose, from motives they all equally have anyway, to align their unconditioned will with their categorical obligations.

²⁸ This, I take it, is one of the main messages of “Moral Luck” (1981). See also Williams (2011, 43–44).

²⁹ Williams suggests that the principle of “ought implies can” derives directly from the fact that moral obligations are understood as *practical* conclusions about what one must do: “If my deliberation issues in something I cannot do, then I must deliberate again” (2011, 195). Of course, as he goes on to note, this does not yet settle the contested issue of what is to *count* as “something I cannot do.”

6. The Frictionless Purity of the Morality System

What, then, is wrong with this attractive and even “moving” (2011, 217) system? Williams finds numerous things wrong with it, and although he does not always criticize it under that heading, it is clear that much of the criticism levelled either at moral philosophy and ethical theory in general or at Kantianism and utilitarianism in particular applies also to the morality system. One line of criticism is that the morality system leaves us with *too few ethical thoughts and feelings* to be true to ethical experience: like a color filter laid over the ethical landscape, it masks all but a few morally relevant features of it.³⁰ Another (and by now rather well-trodden) line of criticism is that the morality system attacks our *integrity* by alienating us from our projects and thus from what sustains the possibility of a meaningful life—the system leaves no-one in particular for me to be.³¹

In this final section, I want to focus on two less explored, but connected, lines of criticism: that the morality system robs useful concepts of their grip on the world we live in; and that it generates an incompatibility between our ethical ideas and our naturalistic ideas that ultimately entrains paralyzing forms of nihilism and scepticism. The criticisms are connected because they turn on what might be called the morality system’s *frictionless purity*.

To illustrate the first line of criticism, which we might label the *No-Friction* critique, let us focus on the purified conception of blame. The criticism then is that this conception of blame fails to help us to live in the respects we considered earlier: it cannot help us recruit people into a shared ethical sensibility or bring deviators back into it. The reason is that it fails to get enough of a grip on the kind of world we actually live in, where an agent’s character and biographical and historical circumstances largely lie outside that agent’s control. A conception of blame that tracks purely voluntary acts has no friction with, or no empirical basis in, the world we live in. This is a line of criticism we find already in Williams’s “The Idea of Equality” (first published in 1962), where he insists that “the concept of ‘moral agent’, and the

³⁰ See Williams (2011, 130). For a helpful discussion of this line of criticism, see Krishna (Krishna 2014).

³¹ See Williams (1973a, 116–117, 2011, 78, 224). For a recent discussion of the idea that projects are what sustains a meaningful life (though more from a Wigginsian than a Williamsian perspective), see Millgram (2019).

concepts allied to it such as that of responsibility, *do and must have an empirical basis*” (1973c, 235–236, emphasis mine). To be concepts worth having, our concepts must allow us to make discriminations *within* the empirical world we live in rather than only between that world and something *beyond* it. This is not the case with the purified conception of blame and its attendant conception of voluntary action. To be voluntary in this demanding sense, actions would need to be free of, and not to reflect, anything that agents involuntarily and contingently are; but this means that actions can only be voluntary insofar as agents *chose* the natural endowments, socialisation, education, and other circumstances that shape their lives and their actions. Needless to say, hardly any action will pass this test. We did not choose our circumstances, or if we did, that choice was likely itself a reflection of prior circumstances we did not choose. Voluntariness cannot extend all the way back. Indeed, we *could* not have chosen our circumstances all the way through life, because at the beginning of this process there would have to be the pure, spirit-like self envisaged by the morality system, and this characterless self would lack the basis to make such a choice: it would be too unencumbered by commitments and attachments to get an adequate view of the value of anything.³²

If, as a matter of fact, the “machinery of everyday blame” (2011, 214) does any work for us at the merely phenomenal level of experience, this is the case because—and only insofar as—it “attempts less than morality would like it to do” (2011, 215). It works with a conception of voluntariness that is less demanding than that of the morality system. In inquiring whether an action was voluntary in this undemanding sense, we typically seek to determine only whether the person really *acted*, *knew* what they were doing given the state they were in, and *intended* such and such aspect of what they did (2011, 215–216). This standard—the standard, roughly, of the generic conception of blame—is one that many actions will easily meet. But if we really consistently allocated blame according to the demanding conception, the institution of blame would largely cease to serve our need for ethical alignment—it would cease to discharge a function that we need to see discharged.

The fact that in practice, the function is being discharged at least some of the time raises a difficult issue about the relation of our undemanding everyday notions (of blame and so on) to their purified analogues in the morality system. One might say,

³² See Williams (1993, 158–9, 2011, chap. 6).

resorting to a Wittgensteinian locution, that the morality system is an impoverished picture of our own behavior. But the contrast between picture and practice is not quite right here. It is more a matter, as Williams puts it in *Shame and Necessity* (1993, 7), of distinguishing what we *think* from what we *merely think that we think*—though as this formulation itself brings out, the boundary between these two things cannot ultimately be a sharp one. Perhaps the best way to put the contrast is in terms of the concept/conception distinction. When describing the morality system, Williams fairly systematically speaks of our *conceptions* of moral value, obligation, voluntariness, blame, and so on. In writing that the morality system is “the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us” (2011, 194), he would then be saying that almost of all of us share these conceptions, and do so *incoherently* because we also have, alongside these purified and narrow conceptions, more permissive everyday conceptions of moral value, obligation, voluntariness, and blame that we draw on—and need to draw on—a lot of the time. Hence, when we talk simply of “our concepts” in the more coarse-grained way that ignores finer distinctions between different conceptions of the same thing, there is an important sense in which “our concepts” are *not* those of the morality system. This explains how Williams can say, for instance, that “[w]e have fooled ourselves into believing that we have a more purified notion of moral responsibility than we have” (1999, 163).

The *No-Friction* critique of the morality system is thus that the purity of blame and its concomitant ideas robs them of the much-needed friction with the empirical world: if we tie our practice of blame to such a demanding conception of voluntariness, to take the example we discussed, hardly anyone is ever blameworthy, and the socially valuable technique of blame, along with techniques that build on it such as the practice of holding one another responsible, will be pointless, having become too purified to achieve a grip on the rough ground we live on.

It is tempting to conclude that the remedy is simple: if we only learn to admit to ourselves the plain fact that the requirements of utter voluntariness cannot be met, then all will be well. We just need more truthfulness and more knowledge about the world we inhabit, so that we come to see that we are “building ethical life around an illusion” (2011, 212).

But it would be a mistake to conclude that things are so simple. There is a deeper and more insidious problem here, which brings us to the other line of criticism—

what we might label the *Purist-Attitude* critique. The problem with the morality system is not just that we find *nothing* in the world that plausibly falls under the purified conceptions of moral value, moral motivation, voluntary agency, blameworthiness and so on; the problem is also that these conceptions shape our attitude towards what we *do* find in the world. The morality system cultivates in its adherents certain *overblown normative expectations* about what shape the world can properly have if our ideas of value and agency are to have a place in it—the attitude that Williams labels its “purity” (2011, 216).

This purist attitude involves thinking in terms of stark contrasts between the purity of moral values and free agency and the natural, emotional, and social forces pervading human life: it “abstract[s] the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence” (2011, 216) and conceives of moral value as lying beyond “beyond any empirical determination” (2011, 217). “In truth,” of course, “almost all worthwhile human life lies between the extremes that morality puts before us” (2011, 216).

But the problem is that the purist attitude fostered by the morality system *blinds* people to the forms of value and freedom to be found in this middle ground. The morality system “conceals” all the “options for ethical thought and experience” that there are outside itself—“Kantian associations constantly work to short-circuit our understanding” (1993, 77) of those other ways of making sense of things as valuable. This is why, from the perspective of morality, the “Greeks do emerge as premoral” (1993, 77).

Disenchanted our view of the world through more truthful naturalistic enquiry therefore risks making things worse rather than better. It risks exacerbating the sense that there is no room for moral value in a world thus understood, resulting in the kind of *nihilism* that maintains that nothing has value. Moreover, because the ethical ideas of the morality system entrained an ethicized psychology reflected in our conceptions of free and rational agency as something that sharply contrasts with and excludes the influence of mere desires and emotions, nihilism about value will be accompanied by *scepticism* about agency. This is why the morality system encounters the problems of free will and determinism “in a particularly acute form” (2011, 195). The system “makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice” (2011, 218). The result is a bleak and

flattening vision of human life, one that elides all difference between rational persuasion and manipulation, convincing and coercing, the force of the better reason and the force of a punch in the face. This danger, which was a central concern of Nietzsche's³³ and which Williams identifies as the ultimate problem with the morality system at the end of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, shows that merely facing up to the world we live in—the mere revision of beliefs—is not enough.

The *Purist-Attitude* critique is therefore this: that in the face of a suitably disenchanting and naturalised view of the world, the attitudes cultivated in us by the morality system threaten to turn us into sceptics or nihilists who see no room in the world either for real value or for real agency. To focus the mind, take, once again, the example of blame. Once one admits to oneself that the demand for utter voluntariness cannot in fact be met, there are two ways one can go: what, in vaguely Strawsonian terminology, we might call the *sophisticated optimist* would indeed renounce the demanding conception of voluntariness in favour of a less demanding one, and confidently allocate blame on that basis; this, I take it, is the exit from the morality system that Williams recommends. But it is at least equally tempting to reason in a different direction and to conclude, with the *sophisticated pessimist*, that if the demands of the morality system cannot be met, no act of blaming is ever truly justified, and all we are left with is people being coerced by their circumstances.

Notice that the difference between the optimist and the pessimist is not a difference in knowledge. They both agree that no act is ever truly voluntary in the way the purified conception of blame requires. It is just that while the optimist takes this to speak against the purified conception of blame, the pessimist takes it to speak against the hope that blame might ever be justified. The pessimist thus betrays his or her continued adherence to the morality system in concluding that since no act is ever voluntary in the demanding sense, blame is never justified—in much the same way that an atheist betrays a residual religiosity if he or she believes, with Ivan Karamazov, that since God does not exist, everything is permitted. The pessimist's position thus involves a kind of *counterfactual adherence* to the morality system (which is structurally analogous to the “counterfactual scientism” (2006c, 187) that Williams accuses Putnam and Rorty of): the pessimist believes that blame is in fact never justified, but that if it *were*, this would *have* to be due to there being utterly voluntary

³³ See Clark (2015) and Queloz and Cueni (2019).

acts.

The pivotal question may be put as follows: what does the fact that luck and contingency pervade human life *entail*? In drawing from it the conclusion that nothing has value and no-one is free, one betrays a residual commitment to the morality system. In particular, one betrays a commitment to the purist pattern of reasoning encoded in the conceptions of the morality system—a pattern that notably licenses inferences such as the following:

If anything has value, it is the moral value of things done from moral motives.

If an action is done from a moral motive, it is a voluntary action.

If an action is voluntary, it is not conditioned by anything that is contingent or lies beyond the agent's control.

Via the contrapositives of those claims, one quickly gets from the realisation that every action is in one way or another conditioned by things that are contingent or lie beyond the agent's control to the conclusion that no action is ever voluntary and nothing has value. But as the rather different pattern of reasoning exemplified by the optimist shows, one might also take the same realisation to entail nothing of the sort. Drawing on conceptions of voluntariness, moral motivation, and value that are more tolerant of contingency and draw contrasts such as that between the voluntary and the involuntary, or between the moral and the non-moral, *within* the empirical world we actually find, one can also endorse a different pattern of reasoning—one that allows us to accept that no moral motivation is ever fully pure of contingent desires, or no action ever fully pure of the influence of unchosen circumstance, and still see value and freedom in the world. To endorse one of these two patterns of reasoning rather than the other is not to fall prey to cognitive error; it is to evince a *bad attitude*, an attitude whose badness is *ethical* rather than cognitive. It is an attitude that does not help us to live. As Nietzsche would have put it, it is a life-denying attitude.

We can see that the journey out of the morality system involves not just a first, epistemic step of facing up to reality, but also a second, more radical step, of liberating oneself from overblown normative expectations about just how pure of contingency the world would have to be in order to contain things of value and responsible

agents. The conclusion that we are left with nothing turns out to depend on an overblown conception of what counts as something.³⁴

In light of this, it may be helpful to think of the emancipation from the morality system in terms of a movement through three possible stages. At the *initial stage*, one is still blissfully immersed in the illusion that the “rationalistic metaphysics of morality” (1993, 159) correspond to something in reality. Through truthful reflection and inquiry, one moves to a *transitional stage*, where one realizes that those metaphysics do not correspond to anything in reality, but retains the idea that they would *have* to correspond to something if the world *were* to contain true value and free agency, and thus falls into a kind of nihilism and scepticism. Upon being shown that there are other ways of making sense of values and agency in naturalistic but nonetheless vindictory terms, one can finally move out of the morality system altogether. One “resituate[s] the original opposition[s] in a new space, so that the real differences can emerge” between contingent desires that are moral and contingent desires that are not, between conditioned actions that are voluntary and conditioned actions that are not, and “between the force which is argument and the force which is not—differences such as that between listening and being hit, a contrast that may vanish in the seminar but which reappears sharply when you are hit” (2002, 9). At this third stage, one is liberated from the morality system’s constraining conceptions and capable of affirming one’s values on different grounds than before. There is no guarantee that *all* of our ideas will survive a truthful understanding of them, but the threat of nihilism and scepticism will have been averted if some of them do. Arguably, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, with its relentless assault on the various “philosophical errors” (2011, 218) involved in the morality system, primarily helps move its readers from the initial to the transitional stage, whereas *Truth and Truthfulness*, with its naturalistic but vindictory explanation of intrinsic values, is more concerned to move its readers out of the transitional stage by giving them somewhere outside the morality system to stand.

I have argued that the morality system works by harnessing a variety of perfectly helpful notions to its own ends. What Williams invites us to do is not to give up on these notions altogether, but to give up on the morality system’s purified versions of

³⁴ Williams diagnoses an analogous problem in the view of some ethical theorists that if give up on ethical theory, we are left with nothing (2011, 223).

them. Combining a largely vindictory understanding of why we have these notions in the first place with a sympathetic but ultimately critical understanding of why they take the form they do in a system that seeks to immunise us against luck, I suggested, can provide us with a nuanced sense of what we need these notions to be and what we need them *not* to be. It can show us what we need them to do for us, and what kind of friction with the world they need in order to do that. But it has also emerged that it is not enough simply to admit such facts of life as that no action is ever voluntary in the sense demanded by the morality system because contingency and luck pervade human life. We also need to throw off the still powerful misconceptions that shape our sense of how much contingency and luck we are willing to tolerate, and thereby determine what these facts of life entail.

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