

3 Hume's optimism and Williams's pessimism

From "Science of Man" to genealogical critique

Paul Russell

I once had great admiration for Hume. Now I think that he suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism.

—Bernard Williams

Bernard Williams is widely recognized as belonging among the greatest and most influential moral philosophers of the 20th century – and arguably the greatest British moral philosopher of the late 20th century. His various contributions over a period of nearly half a century changed the course of the subject and challenged many of its deepest assumptions and prejudices. There are, nevertheless, a number of respects in which the interpretation of his work is neither easy nor straightforward. One reason for this is that both his views and his methods evolved and shifted in significant ways, especially around the time that he wrote and published *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (i.e. the early 1980s).¹ One way of gauging and assessing these changes in Williams' views and outlook is to consider his relationship and attitude to other philosophers during this period. Of particular interest is his changing attitude to the moral philosophy of David Hume. This relationship is of considerable importance not only because it serves as a useful tool for the interpretation of Williams' views but also because it provides us with some *critical* insight into the respective strengths and weaknesses of both Hume's and Williams' contributions.

The morality system and its modes

Perhaps the most important and influential contribution that Williams made to ethics is his critique of "the morality system". It is presented, most explicitly, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (esp. Chp. 10), but it unites many, if not most, of the core features and issues that Williams pursues on this subject. The precise nature of the morality system, as Williams points out, is rather elusive and not easy to pin-down or summarize. Nevertheless, its essential features can be characterized. The key feature as Williams describes it is "a special notion of obligation" (Williams 1985a: 7–9, 193)

which serves to generate a “sharp boundary” between “moral” and “non-moral” considerations, giving the former overriding weight that uniquely serve as “practical necessities” for the agent (Williams 1985a: 209, 218). This sense of obligation is intimately bound up with two other key concepts: voluntariness and blame. Moral obligations, grounded in reasons that are available to all – what Williams describes as “the universal constituency” (Williams 1985a: 16) – have a “stringency” that attracts blame when the agent violates these requirements or demands (Williams 1985a: 200).² With this conceptual apparatus in place, other key factors of the morality system that Williams rejects fall into line. This includes the “purity of morality”, which insulates it from any pollution of “emotional reactions or social influences” and, most importantly, the immunity of morality from the influence of luck, to satisfy its aspiration to “ultimate justice” (Williams 1985a: 216–8). With these contents and requirements all in place, it is also crucial that moral obligations do not conflict and fit into a coherent, harmonious scheme and hierarchy of reasons (Williams 1985a: 195; see also 59 and 77).

One point that Williams emphasizes is that the morality system is not “the invention of philosophers” (Williams 1985a: 194). It is, on the contrary, “part of the outlook of almost all of us” (Williams 1985a: 194). At the same time, however, the morality system is intimately linked with a certain view about the aims and role of philosophy. In particular, “ethical theory” is constructed to provide a general test for the “correctness” of our basic ethical beliefs and principles – or to show that there cannot be such a test (Williams 1985a: 80, 103). The paradigmatic representative of the morality system is, of course, Kant but utilitarian theory is (at least) a “marginal member” (Williams 1985a: 197–8). Among the features of ethical theory that Williams specifically objects to are its propensity to reductionism and denial of diversity, and its simplifications and efforts to compress all our (diverse) ethical considerations and concepts into “one pattern” (Williams 1985a: 17–9, 95–6, 117, 129–30). All “theorizing” of this kind distorts, impoverishes and diminishes our understanding of the diversity and complexity of ethical life and the resources available to us for ethical reflection (Williams 1985a: 129–30). Williams is deeply sceptical about “philosophical ethics” conceived in these terms (Williams 1985a: 82–3, 87, 98–102, 123–6, 130–2). His point here is not that we cannot think in a reflective critical way in ethics but that “philosophizing can do little to determine how we should do so” (Williams 1985a: 83).

A final feature of the morality system that needs highlighting is its aspiration for some view of human life and ethical life in particular that reveals humans to be “in harmony with their world” (Williams 1993: 164–5). It is this deep aspiration of the morality system that Williams identifies as particularly vulnerable to ethical reflection – a point he emphasizes throughout *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and other writings (Williams 1985a:

57, 59, 77, 123, 169–70, 181–7; see also Williams 1995a: 19 [“How free does the will need to be?”]; and Williams 1982: 29–30 [“Moral Luck”]). It is here that Williams, making common cause with Nietzsche, looks back to Greek tragedy as a more truthful and “realistic” account of our predicament. Crucially, however, it is not a more consoling or comforting picture. According to Williams’ analysis, we face a fundamental question whether or not we believe that

somehow or other, in this life or in the next, morally if not materially, as individuals or as an historical collective, we shall be safe; or, if not safe, at least reassured that at some level of the world’s constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns.

(Williams 1993: 164)

The morality system is strongly oriented towards this optimistic assumption – however varied its modes and forms may be. Its proponents include the likes of Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel. For Williams there is, of course, no turning back to the Greeks who opposed this outlook. Nor is there any need to suggest that “modernity is just a catastrophic mistake” or that “there has been no progress” (Williams 1993: 7, 11). Nevertheless, we share more with the Greeks than the dominant “progressivist” account suggests and to the extent that we diverge we have important things to learn from them – not the least, they may help us free ourselves from distortions and illusions encouraged by the morality system.

Hume and the morality system

The above taxonomy of the morality system provides us with a schema for considering the Hume-Williams relationship and, more specifically, for assessing where Hume stands in relation to the morality system itself. Although the elements are diverse, there are three core aspects that we might separate out:

- 1 “The Blame system” (Williams 1985a: 216),
- 2 Ethical theory,
- 3 Optimism and the aspiration to “harmony” and “good news” (Williams 2007: 49 [“Women of Trachis”]).

Each element listed above deserves careful and detailed analysis, and this requires sifting through the complexities of Hume’s system. For now, however, it will suffice to provide a more rapid overview. In each of the above dimensions, the relationship between Hume and Williams is, I suggest, complex enough that it resists any simple “close”/“distant” dichotomy. There is, however, a useful contrasting pair of assessments on this

topic in the form of an exchange between Lorenzo Greco and Paul Sagar, both of whom have some illuminating observations to make (Greco 2007; Sagar 2013).

Greco argues that Williams' ethics "is close to the Humean project of developing and defending an ethics based on sentiments which has its main basis in the virtues" (Greco 2007: 312). Although Greco does make reference to "the anti-theoretical spirit" of Williams' ethics, the Humean elements that he is most concerned with relate to "the blame system". This account places particular emphasis on Williams' criticisms of a Kantian conception of morality and the way in which he and Hume "converge on many important points" in this regard (Greco 2007: 313). Rather than basing morality on rational foundations, what Hume and Williams share, according to Greco, is the view "that ethics has to do with individuals whose human nature is basically specified by being essentially sentimental rather than rational" (Greco 2007: 315). In this way, Greco draws out various features of Williams' moral psychology that have obvious Humean sources. We find, for example, that Williams' influential views about practical reason are broadly Humean (Williams 1982: Chp. 8 ["Internal and External Reasons"]) and that his concern with virtues and vices rather than commands and obligations is also broadly Humean (Greco 2007: 318–9). Another example that Greco mentions are the similarities between Hume and Williams on the issue of free will and moral luck. Both of them, Greco argues, reject the central role of voluntariness that morality insists on and are committed to a view of moral responsibility that is not narrowly focused on intentional action (Greco 2007: 321).³ Having reviewed these and other common elements in their ethical systems, Greco concludes that "Hume and Williams develop ethical reflections which definitely have more in common than is normally believed" (Greco 2007: 325). This is a conclusion which is entirely consistent with Williams' own remark that he "once had a great admiration for Hume" (Williams 1999: 256).

The problem for Greco's general hypothesis that there exists a "close" relationship between Hume and Williams on the subject of ethics is that in the same 1998 interview, in the same passage, Williams goes on to say that he now thinks that Hume "suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism". This remark certainly suggests that there is some "distance" between Hume and Williams – whatever early influence Hume may have had on Williams. It is Paul Sagar's concern to identify what this distance or distancing involved. According to Sagar, although the parallels between Hume and Williams that Greco cites exist, "they mask profound differences" (Sagar 2013: 2).

Williams' work following his early contribution on "internal reasons", Sagar maintains, "constitutes a profound shift away from Hume's ethical outlook" (Sagar 2013: 1). The Hume-Williams contrast reflects much the same contrast we find between Hume and Nietzsche, with (the later) Williams coming down decisively on the side of Nietzsche. Both Hume and

Nietzsche attempt to provide naturalistic explanations which may “destabilize certain human practices”:

... But Hume's ethical thought maintains a crucial distance from Nietzsche's. Whilst Hume's *Natural History of Religion* shares structural features with Nietzsche's later 'genealogy' critique of morality, the point is that Hume did *not* think morality vulnerable to the same critique of religion. Humean ethical practice could not be destabilized the way religion could, because living within ethics is a necessary part of fully realized human nature for Hume. Whereas we would actively be better off living without religion, this is not true, not even a coherent possibility, with regard to ethics....

(Sagar 2013: 22 – emphasis in original)

The issue that Sagar is pointing to here concerns, in the first place, Hume's emphasis on the *uniformity* of human nature and human sentiments (T: 3.2.8.8n/547n; 2.1.11.3/318; 3.3.1.7/575; also EM 9.7/273) as a basis for providing a naturalistic explanation of human ethical life. This is certainly one point on which Williams insists that he diverges from Hume. Whereas Hume seeks to emphasize the uniformity of human nature (and the significance of this for ethical life), it is Williams' concern to emphasize the “diversity” and variation of our ethical concepts and practices (Williams 1986: 204, 206). Although Hume is an early practitioner of genealogy he is, Williams suggests, insufficiently “impressed by the problems raised by moral diversity”.

These concerns about diversity and genealogy are rooted in a fundamental gap between the “inside” and the “outside” perspective – this being a gap that is forced upon us when we reflect upon diversity and ethical variation when we confront other cultures and radically different forms of ethical life (Williams 1985a: 57; also Chp. 9, esp. 177–8). From inside ethical life, it is not true “that the only things of value are people's dispositions; still less that only the agent's dispositions have value” (Williams 1985a: 58). The welfare of others, requirements of justice and other such things have value. However, from the alternative outside perspective, the “ultimate supports of ethical value” are people's dispositions, and so there is a sense in which the ethical point of view depends on the existence of these dispositions. If the agent reflects from the outside point of view, in a way that abstracts from these dispositions, he is likely to find that “he cannot get an adequate picture of the value of anything, including his own dispositions” (Williams 1985a: 58). As Sagar puts it, in these circumstances “ethical vertigo threatens”, as the inside/outside gap encourages the thought that there is no validating or justifying foundation for our values (Sagar 2013: 8). After reflection, the view of our dispositions as the supporting basis of our values makes us aware that our ethical orientation is just one of many possibilities and may not secure a “harmony” of the various values and ends we may have (Williams 1985a: 59, 77–9, 129–30, 169–70).

Sagar is certainly correct that Williams believes that Hume is not sufficiently genealogically sensitive and that, like others following him, he is too confident that our natural explanations for ethical life, as rooted in human nature and sentiments, need not disturb us or radically alter ethical life and practice itself.⁴ Having said this, there are at least two respects in which Sagar misrepresents the relevance of the “gap” between inside/outside for understanding the Hume-Williams relationship. As Sagar presents it, Hume is substantially committed to the morality system (Sagar 2013: 20–4), as revealed by Hume’s tendency to be ethically conservative in the implications he draws from his sentimentalist theory. Although Sagar grants that Williams is “Humean” in respect of his “internal” theory of practical reason, Williams’ critique of the morality system goes well beyond anything that Hume endorses. This is not, however, an adequate account of Hume’s commitments, as Williams himself makes clear. Williams points out, for example, that Hume “resolutely” rejects what he [Williams] calls “morality” (Williams, 1986: 206) and that Hume shows “striking resistance” to its central tenets (Williams, 1985b: 20n12 [“How free does the will need to be?”]). What Williams is particularly impressed by – and that Sagar largely overlooks – is that the key elements of “the blame system” are firmly rejected by Hume. It is a mistake, therefore, by Williams’ own lights, to place Hume on the side of the morality system, in opposition to Nietzsche and Williams. Whatever the issue may be, it should not be characterized in this form.

The other respect in which Sagar characterizes the contrast between Hume and Williams concerns Hume’s attitude to the inside/outside gap that Williams is focused on. According to Sagar, although Hume was aware of this distinction, he “chose not to adopt it himself” (Sagar 2013: 14). Hume is committed to the view that the “gap” is really an “illusion” – it is not so much that it can be “closed as that it never really existed” (Sagar 2013: 17–8). The inside perspective is the only perspective available to us and the only one that we need. The justificatory apparatus required for supporting ethical life comes from our “inside” resources, in which our happiness and well-being coincide with virtuous practice. Hume is undisturbed, on this view, by the outside perspective and experiences none of the “vertigo” or conflict that troubles Williams.

While it may well be true that Hume appears to be less troubled or disturbed by the “gap” than Williams is, it is not obvious that Hume dismisses concerns of this nature as wholly illusory. After all, Hume is well aware that there are many philosophers who seek to ground moral distinctions, in some way or other, in “the fabric of the world” – independently of our contingent, variable human sentiments.⁵ It is a major sceptical concern of Hume’s to show that these ambitions are neither credible nor necessary for ethical life (see, e.g., T, 3.1.1–2; EM, 1, 9, App. 1).⁶ He is, nevertheless, also well aware of the disturbing and disconcerting effects of sceptical reflections of this kind – in ethics and beyond. While Hume gives expression to these observations in more dramatic form when discussing the impact

of scepticism with regard to human understanding, it is evident that the threat of “despair” and “melancholy” may extend to sceptical reflections concerning the foundations of ethics (T, 1.4.7; see also T, 3.1.1.16; EM, 1.2, 5.3, 5.39, 9.5–9). Hume believes that it is possible to contain and control responses of this kind, but it is still a challenge that has to be met, not just dismissed as illusory. One of the challenges that has to be met is to establish that the position taken is *not* a sceptical position about ethics itself – a charge that was raised against Hume from the beginning.⁷ Hume labours hard to make clear that he is not a sceptic, so considered, but he is entirely aware that both his sentimentalism and his conventional theory of justice may be construed this way and will be found unsatisfactory and unconvincing by all those who seek groundings in something external and independent of our (pre-existing) ethical dispositions – as encouraged by the “outside” perspective.

What Hume does believe is that his naturalism, and the realistic psychology it relies on, is adequate to the task of fending off the sort of nihilistic vertigo that is generated by the aspiration to root our ethical concepts and practices in “the fabric of the world”. On Hume’s account, human nature provides resources that are more than sufficient to resist any fundamentally destabilizing or eroding influence generated by the “outside” view. The key elements of this are sympathy and the mechanisms of the indirect passions, both of which serve to ensure that we remain engaged and motivated by ethical considerations. These are, moreover, aspects of Hume’s ethical system that Williams singles out for praise and draws from himself (Williams 1972: 26, 82; Williams 1986: 206; Williams 1995b: 205, 222n18). Williams has no objection to appealing to the resources of a realistic moral psychology, something that “ethical theory” and the morality system are both generally resistant to. The difficulty from Williams’ point of view is that the materials Hume is working with are inadequate to their task – which is to close the “gap” and insulate us from the sort of pessimistic attitudes which the outside view is liable to encourage.

Optimism, convergence and consolation: where Hume and Williams diverge

While Sagar’s analysis points us in the right direction, which is to see that Williams wants to distance himself from Hume in some crucial respects, we still require a more refined picture of what this comes to and what conclusions we should draw about the Hume-Williams relationship in light of it. Williams makes clear that what concerns him most about the limits of Hume’s analysis – and renders him an “insufficiently modern” thinker – is that Hume underestimates the importance of ethical and cultural diversity and overestimates the uniformity of the general sentiments of humankind (Williams 1986: 206). This conceals from Hume the limits of his ability to deal with the “gap” issue that is Williams’ primary concern. Where

Hume fails to address the challenge we face here is not with regard to any continued commitment to key elements of the morality system but in his excessive confidence that an “optimistic” outlook can be retained even when these elements of the morality system are discarded. This is a failure that Williams believes carries on in the contemporary “Humean tradition” – and that separates that tradition from Nietzsche and Williams.

There are two dimensions to Hume’s ethical outlook that Williams may well view as expressive of an implausible “terminal optimism”. The first concerns our ability to secure mutual understanding and agreement about ethical matters on the basis of our shared human nature. Although Hume is certainly aware of ethical variation and diversity he believes that underneath this, we are still able to converge on some shared moral “standard” (T, 3.3.1.13–18/581–4; 3.3.3.3/602–3; EM, 5.42/228–9; 9.5/272; App. I, 9–10/288–9).⁸ This moral standard is, however, a weak standard. It provides no “test” for moral right or wrong, nor does it suggest any (unique) life plan. Most importantly, this moral standard or “general point of view” is entirely consistent with ethical dilemmas and conflicts persisting among our various competing ethical concerns and interests. Such conflicts and dilemmas are not always, in principle, resolvable from this perspective. Hume is not a sceptic, where this is understood to involve denying that we can establish any shared moral standard, but he is a *pluralist* about the virtues and suggests no algorithm or rule by which conflicts and differences between them can be adjudicated.⁹ Nevertheless, despite these limitations of the moral standard, Hume is still confident that we have such a standard available to us such that we can handle ethical diversity and variation and reach some shared ethical point of view. It is this form of optimism that Williams is sceptical about and finds complacent.

In making the claim that Hume “suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism”, Williams may be understood as placing Hume on “the same side” as Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, of whom Williams says:

... all believed in one way or another that the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations.

(Williams 1993: 163; cp. Sagar 2013: 20–1)

This is, as we have noted, a matter of the deepest importance for Williams’ critique of the morality system in all its dimensions. Although Williams, conspicuously, does not mention Hume in this context, a case may be made that Hume is playing on the side that Williams is battling *against*. In particular, Hume’s “science of ethics”, while it dispenses of many of the elements of the blame system, tries to retain the “optimism” that these discarded elements were intended to support. In this regard, Hume is in denial about how significant the *losses* are when we strip-away the morality system.¹⁰ The first casualty that Hume’s system fails to fully or adequately appreciate

is our “confidence” after moral reflection (i.e. in light of the inside/outside gap). Faced with ethical diversity, and the modes of “confrontation” that this involves, we lose the (moral) *knowledge* that comes with belonging to a “hyper-traditional society” (Williams 1985a: Chp. 9; and see also 157–8, 164–7, 185–6). This is, as Williams puts it, our contemporary predicament after “the Fall” that is generated by “the growth of reflective consciousness” (Williams 1985a: 181; see also 167–70). In respect of these developments, Hume is not sufficiently “a modern thinker”.

The root of Hume's complacency – like those who follow him – is that he fails to appreciate that our shared human nature, although it demands a commitment to *some form* of ethical and social life, radically underdetermines what those options are (Williams 1985a: 59, 169–70).¹¹ Once we recognize “that the agent's perspective is only one of many that are equally compatible with human nature”, the agent's particular ethical dispositions do not seem adequate to the task of maintaining “confidence” in our existing concepts and practices. Nor is this simply a point about “theory”. On the contrary, once we find ourselves in this reflective predicament, it has significant practical consequences and we have no reason to complacently assume that these observations “just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought itself” (Williams 1985a: 177; also Williams 1986: 207). In all these respects, Hume is excessively conservative in respect of the implications he draws – or fails to draw – from his critique of the morality system and this reveals his own lingering commitment to a misplaced optimism.

The second dimension of Hume's ethical outlook that Williams plainly does not share is the supposition that there exists some more or less reliable connexion between virtue and happiness (Hume, T 3.3.6.8/620; EM, 9.10/276; also Hume ESY, 178 [“The Sceptic”]).¹² This connection is, according to Hume, strong and steady enough to provide reflective support for our commitment to ethical life and practices. Sagar presents Hume in even more optimistic terms, which serves to put even more distance between Hume and Williams (Sagar 2013: 12, 15, 17–8). Any such picture of the human predicament is at odds with the more disturbing and troubling features that Williams emphasizes, drawing on Nietzsche and the Greeks. Even admirable ethical types may find themselves drawn into tragic conflicts and dilemmas or, more generally, subject to simple misfortune as this relates to other goods and interests, such as ill-health or melancholy. The aspiration of the morality system, with its Socratic roots, to assure the virtuous that they are not vulnerable to the play of fortune is an aim that Hume caters to. To the extent that Hume follows this path, it compromises his ethical outlook and it is less truthful than the sort of realism that Williams finds in the likes of Sophocles and Thucydides (Williams 1993: 163–4).

The above analysis suggests that the “distance” that exists between Hume and Williams should not be understood in terms of Hume being

a proponent of the morality system but of Hume's reluctance to abandon the optimistic aspirations of the morality system and provide some "good news" about the human predicament.¹³ Williams is well aware that Hume firmly rejects much of the morality system and the apparatus of the blame system which lies at its heart. He is also aware that Hume does not share the ambitions of "ethical theory" to provide some external or outside foundations or justifications for our existing ethical dispositions.¹⁴ Nevertheless, as Williams sees it, Hume is insufficiently impressed by ethical diversity and the limits of human nature – or philosophy – to dictate any particular form of ethical life. Much less adjudicate among them when they come into conflict. Related to this, Hume is too hopeful that ethical life, in its various forms, neatly and reliably integrates with human needs and interests of a broader kind. The world, as Williams finds it after "the Fall", is a bleaker and less accommodating place for human beings seeking an answer to how they should live. The consolations that the morality system provided are simply no longer available to us. To the extent that we accept Williams' (Nietzschean) critique, Hume's system will be found wanting and there will be, as Sagar claims, some significant distance between Hume and Williams.

Distance without repudiation: further reflections and refinements

If we accept the above account of the Hume-Williams relationship it suggests that as Williams' thought matured he did, indeed, move away from Hume but this falls well short of Sagar's claim that these developments in Williams' thought "constitute a profound shift away from Hume's ethical outlook" or reveal "profound differences". These claims are too strong, as they tend to misrepresent and obscure the deep (and continuing) relevance and importance of Hume's ethical outlook for the very problems that came to dominate Williams's later work. In what follows, I want to make two further claims relating to the Hume-Williams relationship. The first concerns whether Williams is right in representing Hume as a "terminal optimist". The second concerns how we should characterize the Hume-Williams relationship given the real and significant differences that do exist. With respect to the first matter, there are features of Hume's outlook that do not fit neatly into any framework that presents him as systematically "optimistic" or entirely complacent about the significance of his own radical critique of the foundations of morals. Hume, for example, is plainly aware of the vagaries of the relationship between virtue and happiness and, indeed, emphasizes this point in several different contexts (see, e.g., ESY, 178 ["The Sceptic"]). Perhaps this "darker" side of Hume appears in the starkest form in his *Dialogues*, where Hume discusses the problem of evil. The miseries of human life are there described in some detail and it is clear that he is plainly sceptical of any metaphysical or moral

outlook that pretends to secure “harmony” for human beings.¹⁵ Even if Hume does not endorse the more extreme (pessimistic) claims being made, he in no way endorses an easy or complacent optimism.¹⁶ Just as Hume's optimism should not be overstated, neither should his emphasis on the uniformity of human nature. Williams' remarks to the effect that Hume was insufficiently impressed by “moral diversity” are arguably ungenerous to Hume. Not only does Hume devote his final discussion in the second *Enquiry* to “A Dialogue” that takes up the issue of moral variation, he advances a genealogical account of the basis of justice that make clear that the conventions involved can and do vary a great deal (Hume, T, 3.2; EM, 3 and App.3). The ethical foundations of these conventional schemes are not arbitrary and arise and operate according to common principles and origins. They vary, nevertheless, radically and Hume proposes no rule or higher principle for deciding between them when they come into conflict. Moreover, much of what recommends any particular scheme, consistent with it being open to criticism and adjustment, is that it has been established through its own historical and cultural roots, something which provides a stability and authority that it would otherwise lack. All this is generally consistent with Williams' own observation that human nature radically underdetermines ethical life and that particular historical and geographical contingencies serve to distinguish and separate the relevant concepts and practices involved. For this reason, it may be argued that Williams' suggestion that Hume is too unconcerned about such matters is not entirely fair to Hume, given his considerable effort to address such concerns and considerations.¹⁷

In light of these considerations, it may also be argued that in important respects the differences between Hume and Williams on the optimist/pessimist axis are more apparent than real and, to the extent that such differences can be found, it reflects their very different concerns, circumstances and aims. Briefly stated, Hume's fundamental concern was to show that ethical life could be explained and accounted for in terms that did not require the apparatus of *religious* metaphysics and morals (Russell 2008, 2016). The aims and aspirations of the morality system are, of course, intimately rooted and connected with these theological commitments (as Williams makes clear: Williams 1985a: 217–8, 220; Williams 1993: 166). Hume's core philosophical concerns involved trying to show how both philosophy and ethics could be freed of the corruptions and distortions encouraged by religion and theology. Hume was also clear that advances along these lines meant real, practical changes in the world. Discrediting religion and religious ethics would not “leave everything where it was”. There is, nevertheless, a pronounced tendency on Hume's part to *downplay* the extent to which his philosophical critique of religion and religious ethics would disrupt and alter human life. What he was especially concerned to deny – contrary to what religious apologists maintained – was that secular ethics would encourage cynicism and nihilism.¹⁸ To defuse this general line

of criticism, Hume tends to emphasize the extent to which we can arrive at some shared moral standard rooted in a uniform human nature. This will suffice, he suggests, to avoid any ethical chaos or conflict generated by theological scepticism. In a similar vein, Hume tends to placate his (religious) critics by emphasizing the extent to which virtue and happiness coincide, in the hope of providing the sort of consolation that the religiously minded are seeking (e.g. via the doctrine of a future state). Historically speaking, these are intelligible concerns and positions for Hume to adopt and they do much to explain the “optimistic” features of his philosophy and what motivates them. These considerations also encourage us to view Hume’s “optimism” with some suspicion and to look for darker themes concealed behind this veneer.

Williams is historically well “downstream” from Hume’s project of a “science of man”. His investigations *begin*, substantially, with materials that were provided by Hume. The Humean outlook, we may say, is the principal *point of entry* for the trajectory of Williams’ ethical thought. This includes his scepticism about the role of “ethical theory” in shoring-up the aims and objectives of the morality system. For Williams, however, this is not the endpoint, this is where we (moderns) must begin our own investigations. The problems we face are problems that Hume tends to suppress (given his own distinct concerns). Our reflections begin with the fact of moral diversity and fragmentation, as genealogical methods have made us aware that human nature underdetermines our ethical dispositions. To this extent, the very foundations of ethical life must be viewed as historically and culturally contingent, with no basis for privileged authority. It is these developments, as Williams sees it, that generate a crisis of ethical “confidence” and demand some response. While Williams’ ethical outlook has a Humean point of entry it *exits* with a Nietzsche set of reflections and concerns – and these do not encourage any easy optimism about our ethical predicament.

It is, of course, important not to exaggerate the extent of Williams’ own pessimism. What we seek, on his account, is some basis for “bringing up children within the ethical world we inhabit” (Williams 1985a: 54, 58). What reflection – after “the Fall” – reveals is that the only adequate platform that can secure this project is one that is rooted to a “human point of view”, and has, as such, a particular, concrete historical and cultural location and identity (Williams 1985a: 123, 131–2). Williams retains some optimism that such ethical confidence can be achieved but it cannot be achieved either through the evasions of the morality system or through the illusory ambitions and methods of “ethical theory”. Nor should we try to collapse back into some reactionary retreat to “traditional societies” (Williams 1986: 206; cp. Williams 1985a: 181). These are the problems that Williams is addressing and whatever response to them may be available to us it is not one that offers comforting or “good news” about our

predicament. It is at this point in these investigations that the contrast between Hume and Williams becomes sharper.

Where does this leave us? Greco's suggestion that we should see the Hume-Williams relationship as being "close" cannot, as Sagar suggests, be the whole truth. Having said this, we should not lurch to the opposite extreme and represent this relationship as ending on "profound differences" and involving "considerable distance" between these two philosophers. The reading that has been defended above suggests not only a more intermediate and qualified view but also a view that gives priority to the *process* through which Hume features in the evolution and development of Williams' thought. It would be incorrect, among other things, to present Williams as in some way or other repudiating or rejecting his own early Humean origins and commitments. Humean commitments and origins *persist* in Williams' philosophical outlook and they are not discarded. On the contrary, they serve as the relevant foundations for his later concerns and arguments. Williams does not reject them, nor does he come to regard Hume as a friend and ally of the morality system. The Nietzschean side of Williams, as it evolved and became increasingly pronounced in his later work, is a development from *within* the Humean tradition that gave shape and structure to much of Williams' early thinking on this subject. The limitations of Hume's thought, as Williams came to see it, were that despite overturning much of the morality system and the forms of "theorizing" that it encouraged, Hume remains too wedded to an unconvincing optimism about our ethical predicament – and fails to address the challenges that we now face in this respect.

We may conclude by noting that there is, on this interpretation, a sense in which the Hume-Williams relationship mirrors the relationship between the early and later Williams. This is not a case of a thinker kicking away the ladder that he has climbed up on and dispensing with his earlier philosophical commitments. It is, rather, a case of coming to recognize the limitations and inadequacies of the earlier view and pressing on to confront the more disturbing and radical implications that they contain. To this extent, we may say that Williams unmask the façade of optimism that the Humean outlook retains. As already explained, there is reason to suppose that Hume was not entirely unaware of these more disturbing implications and that he would not have denied them if pressed. Hume's "terminal optimism", although real, is in many respects superficial. If this is correct, then the distance between Hume and Williams is not as great as Williams took it to be.

An early draft of this paper was read at a conference held in 2014 at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), Oxford University ["The Moral and Political Legacy of Bernard Williams"]. I am grateful to the audience on this occasion for their comments and discussion. I would also like to thank the editors of this collection for their encouragement and interest.

Notes

- 1 The publication of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* may be used to distinguish Williams' earlier and later philosophy, although there was a period of transition from the late 1970s to the late 1980s that could itself be marked off as a "middle period."
- 2 Related to this see Williams' various remarks concerning "the citizens of the notional republic," governed by its laws of reason (Williams 1985a: 70, 73, 114, 214).
- 3 On the Hume-Williams relationship as it concerns "the blame system" see Russell 2015: esp. 242–7.
- 4 In this respect, Williams' outlook contrasts with J.L. Mackie's. Mackie notes that for some the "denial of objective values can carry with it an extreme emotional reaction, a feeling that nothing matters at all, that life has lost its purpose" (Mackie 1977: 16–7, 34). He goes on to argue that denial of objectivity in this sense does not provide any "good reason for abandoning subjective concerns or for ceasing to want anything." Williams is doubtful that we can insulate our subjective commitments from consciousness about their lack of objective foundations in the manner that Mackie supposes (Williams 1985b: 195–7). Williams also believes that Blackburn makes assumptions similar to Mackie's and Hume's. Our "understanding at a very general level of who we are and what we are doing" will, as Williams sees it, inevitably affect our deliberative reflections, as they are more intimately related than the separate realms model suggests (Williams, 1986: 206–7; cp. Blackburn 1986).
- 5 The quoted expression comes from Mackie 1977: 15.
- 6 Perhaps an especially important work in this regard is Hume's essay "The Sceptic," as well as his "Of the Standard of Taste." Sagar discusses "The Sceptic" at some length and notes its considerable relevance to Williams' concerns – but goes on to dismiss it as unrepresentative of Hume's own views or problems (Sagar 2013: 12–4).
- 7 See, e.g., the charges levelled against Hume by one of his earliest critics in *A Letter from a Gentleman* (1745).
- 8 On this, see Russell 2013: esp. 97–104.
- 9 Although utility and sympathy serve as the basis for our moral standard, Hume does not endorse the suggestion of utilitarian theorists that conflicts should always be settled or decided with a view to *maximizing* utilitarian outcomes. As Hume sees it, this misrepresents the natural basis of the psychological operations at work and aspires to a form of quantifying and computing ethical problems that is illusory.
- 10 It is a mistake to suppose that Williams is wholly hostile to the mortality system, in an unqualified manner. On the contrary, there are important passages where Williams speaks with respect and admiration for the ideals or "morality" See, e.g., Williams 1985a: 217–8.
- 11 This is a long-standing view of Williams (see, e.g., Williams 1972: 76 – "While it is true...").
- 12 On this, see Russell 1995: 154–60; Russell 2013: 103–4.
- 13 "Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news." Williams 2007: 49 ["*The Women of Trachis*"].
- 14 These ambitions drive ethical theory away from "the human point of view" to an increasingly "abstract" perspective leading eventually to "the absolute conception" as the idealized ethical point of view. It is a central theme in Williams' work to discredit all such philosophical programs and "theorizing" as taking us in the wrong direction (Williams 1985a: 19, 77–8, 114–6, 123–6, 130–1). Although there are some aspects of Hume's moral philosophy that are prone

to these tendencies of “theory,” for the most part Hume is also resistant to them and aims to secure our understanding of ethical life grounded in a more concrete, realistic moral psychology. The flaw in Hume’s approach, as Williams understands it, is that he fails to recognize the extent to which “the human point of view” is highly variable and “local,” resulting an ethically fractured world that lacks “harmony.”

- 15 In the context of the *Dialogues*, Hume expresses this bleak outlook in the voice of “Demea,” a theist who does not speak for Hume in any systematic way. Nevertheless, it is evident that Hume accepts much of Demea’s description of the human condition in this world and that (unlike Demea) he is sceptical of hopes for a better life in a future state.
- 16 In assessing Hume as an Enlightenment thinker, we may contrast his outlook with that of Baron D’Holbach (also an atheist/irreligious thinker concerned with secular morality). Hume is much more sceptical about the prospects for human happiness and progress, as these may be secured in a secular world order.
- 17 It could well be argued that, relative to *his own contemporaries*, Hume is unusually *advanced* in his thinking about such issues and their (troubling) implications.
- 18 On this, see Russell 2008: Chp. 17; and also Russell 2013: esp. 112–5.

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