**Recasting Responsibility: Hume and Williams**

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*We need to recast our ethical conceptions. But that is not in order to escape or adjust ourselves to determinism or naturalistic explanation. We need to do so in order to be truthful even to what we know already about our psychology, and to much of our ethical life...*

- Bernard Williams

Few would deny that Bernard Williams has made enormously important and influential contributions to the subject of free will and moral responsibility. His views on this subject have been presented in a number of different works, including several papers published in the 1970s and 1980s, along with *Shame and Necessity* (1993).[[1]](#footnote-1) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), which is arguably Williams’s most ambitious contribution to moral philosophy, has broader reach but it shares a central theme with his other writings, the critique of “the morality system”.[[2]](#footnote-2) What Williams has to say about free will and moral responsibility is fundamental to that critique.

One way to understand and assess Williams views on free will and moral responsibility is to consider them in relation to his most significant predecessors. Two figures who stand out in this regard are Kant and Nietzsche. Kant is the most prominent representative of “the morality system” and Nietzsche is identified by Williams as its greatest critic, and someone whose work Williams increasingly drew from and cited over the years.[[3]](#footnote-3) There remains, nevertheless, a third important figure who should not be overlooked in this context, David Hume. Williams not only regarded Hume’s work in moral philosophy as “manifestly important”, he also mentions him as someone he greatly admired and who impressed him early on.[[4]](#footnote-4) Williams also states that Hume’s work “matters a great deal to some of my [i.e. Williams’] concerns: in his treatment of free-will, for instance, and in his resolute rejection of the assumptions of what I call ‘morality’, in particular of the idea that there is some deep difference between virtues and other forms of admirable human quality.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The discussion that follows will examine the significance of this, not only for their respective views, but also for our own understanding of how we might best make sense of moral responsibility and how it relates to the free will problem.

I. *‘Morality’ and the Free Will Problem*

Williams’s critique of the morality system is a central theme of his influential contribution to contemporary ethics and, as already noted, his critical views concerning moral responsibility and blame are essential to that critique.[[6]](#footnote-6) According to Williams, the most important and distinguishing feature of the morality system is its (peculiar) conception of obligation and, closely associated with this, its understanding of voluntariness and blame.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moral obligations, on this view, are grounded in reasons that are available to all rational agents – what Williams refers to as the “the universal constituency”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Agents who voluntarily violate the demands of morality are subject to blame and retribution.[[9]](#footnote-9) In these circumstances the agent *deserves* to suffer as a matter of justice.[[10]](#footnote-10) According to this (idealized) view, all moral agents belong to a community of rational free agents – “the notional republic” – governed by moral demands and backed by sanctions that apply equally to all.

In order to support this idealized picture of the moral community and moral agency, we need to look well beyond “the ordinary materials of psychological explanation”, such as belief, desire, deliberation, intention and decision.[[11]](#footnote-11) What is required is that we “deepen” and “refine” the idea of the voluntary in order to make it “profound”.[[12]](#footnote-12) This pursuit leads to efforts to secure some sort of “limitless freedom” or “total control”.[[13]](#footnote-13) The “metaphysical fuel” required for this is, Williams argues, impossible to satisfy or make sense of.[[14]](#footnote-14) Lying behind these features of “morality” is the aspiration to “ultimate justice”.[[15]](#footnote-15) In order to achieve perfect equality of moral opportunity we must be able to somehow “transcend luck” and “contingency”. It is clear, nevertheless, that the metaphysical and psychological claims needed to support this are “untruthful” about our human ethical predicament and, consequently, “morality” collapses under the weight of its own extravagant assumptions and aspirations. We are, Williams maintains, “better off without it".[[16]](#footnote-16)

How, then does this critique relate to “the free will problem”? Given Williams’s remarks concerning the “illusions” and “fantasies” relating to the aspiration to “total control”, he might be taken to be specifically targeting libertarian metaphysics and arguing for some form of orthodox compatibilism. That would, however, be a mistake. The aspirations of libertarian metaphysics to secure some form of “ultimate” agency or “limitless freedom” are, no doubt, motivated by the aims and aspirations of “morality”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Williams makes clear, nevertheless, that he also wants to distance himself from the “reconcilers” and “old compatibilists” who are, he claims, no less committed to “moral responsibility” as morality understands it.[[18]](#footnote-18) Compatibilists of this ilk are no less confident than their libertarian counterparts that our existing concepts of responsibility and blame are generally in good shape and that we can “leave everything where it was”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The compatibilism that Williams defends, by contrast, maintains that we need to radically “recast our ethical conceptions”.[[20]](#footnote-20)

If we are to “recast” our ethical conceptions relating to moral responsibility, we need to turn to the methods of genealogy, which draws on history and literature, as well as philosophy.[[21]](#footnote-21) With this in mind, Williams encourages us to turn back to the ancient Greeks.[[22]](#footnote-22) These genealogical resources, he argues, make it clear that we have no reason to accept unqualified or categorical scepticism about moral responsibility. Williams is sceptical not so much about (the concept of) moral responsibility as about the demands that “morality” places upon it.[[23]](#footnote-23) Contrary to the sceptical view, Williams maintains that we can provide a convincing vindicatory genealogy of moral responsibility—this being the fundamental task of *Shame and Necessity*.[[24]](#footnote-24) Although any recognizable form of human ethical life will involve some shared basic elements, such as our concern with an agent’s intentions and state of mind, there is no single “correct” or “ideal” concept of moral responsibility.[[25]](#footnote-25) It is a mistake encouraged by “morality”, Williams argues, to assume that we have evolved to arrive at one correct conception of responsibility. Assumptions of this kind are not only fundamental to the ambitions and expectations of “morality”; they have served to generate the free will problem.

The fundamental point that Williams is making is “that our conceptions of freedom, responsibility and blame are often not what they seem, and are variously exaggerated, self-deceiving, sentimental or vindictive”.[[26]](#footnote-26) “We have”, as he puts it elsewhere, “fooled ourselves into believing that we have a more purified notion of moral responsibility than we have”.[[27]](#footnote-27) One particular danger of “morality’s” misconceptions regarding moral responsibility is that it generates the “free will problem”, where this is understood in terms of the task of “saving” its illusory conception of moral responsibility. Among other things, this entire dynamic pushes us towards the precipice of a misguided, unqualified scepticism.[[28]](#footnote-28) Williams’s concern is not to “solve” the free will problem, but to show that it is generated by the illusions of “morality”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

II. *Making Sense of Hume’s Compatibilism*

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the established view of Hume was that he is a founding figure of the classical compatibilist tradition. This is a tradition that begins with Hobbes and runs through Hume to twentieth century figures such as Schlick and Ayer.[[30]](#footnote-30) In line with much of the modern debate, classical compatibilists believe that what is fundamental to understanding moral responsibility is a credible account of free will. Compatibilists deny that morally free action requires the falsity of determinism or that responsible action cannot be causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. Whether an action is free or not depends not on the absence of causation and necessity but on the type of cause involved. Free, responsible action is caused by the agent’s desires and willings. Action that is produced by the agent’s willings is not compelled or forced to occur through external causes of some kind. If an action were entirely uncaused it could never be attributed to any agent, it would be a capricious and random event. Rewards and punishments secure valuable social benefits (i.e. conformity to the law etc.) only because they cause agents to act differently than they would in their absence. These are the familiar central arguments of the classical compatibilist position. So understood, they are concerned with the *logic* of the relevant concepts in question (freedom, necessity, etc.).[[31]](#footnote-31)

According to the naturalistic interpretation, the classical account overlooks Hume’s crucial concern with the role of moral sentiment for understanding these arguments. Holding a person responsible is, according to Hume, a matter of regarding that person as an object of moral sentiments of approval or disapproval. These sentiments are themselves (calm) forms of love or hate.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is virtues and vices, or our enduring pleasurable or painful qualities of mind, that give rise to moral sentiments. We infer a person’s character or qualities of mind from their actions. This inference requires some relevant (causal) regularity or “constant conjunction”, without which no moral sentiment would be produced. The presence of such regularities between action and character is all that causation and necessity involve. If actions were uncaused or caused by external causes of some sort (i.e. other than intentions and motives indicative of the agent’s character), it would be *psychologically* impossible to hold any agent responsible. It is in this way that responsibility actually requires causation and necessity.

The naturalistic interpretation makes clear that the classical account significantly misrepresents Hume’s compatibilist strategy. This can be gauged by considering the significant parallels between Hume’s views and P.F. Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment”, a highly influential contribution to the contemporary debate.[[33]](#footnote-33) The most notable resemblance between them is their shared “naturalistic” approaches, which appeals to the role of moral sentiments or reactive attitudes. The naturalist maintains that describing the psychology of our moral sentiments serves to discredit scepticism about moral responsibility arising from worries about “necessity” or “determinism”. Both compatibilists and (libertarian) incompatibilists, Strawson argues, “over-intellectualize” the issue of moral responsibility.[[34]](#footnote-34) The classical compatibilist appeals to a “one-eyed utilitarianism” that fails to account for *deserved* praise and blame, rewards and punishments. The libertarian tries to fill this gap by appealing to an incoherent “contra-causal freedom”.[[35]](#footnote-35) What they both overlook are moral sentiments, understood as natural emotional responses to the agent’s attitudes and intentions as manifest in their conduct. These emotions are part of our essential human make-up and are naturally aroused in relevant circumstances. While these responses are under rational control, and subject to relevant excusing and exempting considerations, there is no question of us entirely abandoning or altogether suspending them.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Whereas the classical interpretation presents Hume as a notable and obvious target of Strawson’s criticisms, the naturalistic account presents Hume as broadly anticipating a number of the basic features of Strawson’s approach. Both Hume and Strawson are agreed that moral responsibility has to be explained and described with reference to psychological facts relating to human emotions and the circumstances under which they are aroused or inhibited. We cannot, they argue, understand issues of “freedom” and “necessity”, as they concern moral responsibility, unless we consider their relevance to the operation and functioning of our moral sentiments. According to the naturalistic interpretation of Hume, it is this aspect of his discussion that constitutes its principal interest and significance for the contemporary debate. This brings us back to the question concerning the relevance of Hume’s views for Williams’s critique of the morality system and its (problematic) understanding of moral responsibility and blame.

III. *Hume Against “Morality”: Virtue, Voluntariness, Luck*

Although Williams regarded Hume’s work in moral philosophy as “manifestly important”, his various remarks about Hume also make clear that his admiration was not unqualified and that it waxed and waned over time.[[37]](#footnote-37) This blend of admiration and criticism is apparent in Williams’s remarks (in reply to Simon Blackburn) explaining why Hume is “absent” from his discussion in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. The reason for this, Williams suggests, is that in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, he is primarily concerned with issues arising from “moral diversity”. Hume is unhelpful with respect to this, because he is committed to the view that there is “a uniformity in the *general* sentiments of mankind” and is, in this sense, an insufficiently “modern” thinker.[[38]](#footnote-38) However, Williams prefaces this remark with the observation, cited above, that Hume’s work on free will shows a “resolute rejection of the assumptions of ... ‘morality’”. Elsewhere, Williams repeats his view that Hume displays a “striking resistance to some central tenets of... ‘morality’” and, again, draws attention to Hume’s refusal to “take seriously” the distinction between “virtue and talents”.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Williams recognizes that Hume is “in some ways an archetypal reconciler” or “old compatibilist”, but also notes some important points of difference. This includes Hume’s refusal to present blame “simply as an instrument for social control”.[[40]](#footnote-40) The more fundamental difference, lying behind this, is that Hume is “less indebted to ideas of free will of an overambitious kind”. In this respect, he “is very consciously operating in a pagan perspective” that positions him closer to the ancient Greeks.[[41]](#footnote-41) Clearly, then, Williams’s brief and passing remarks suggest that the classical reading, with its emphasis on utilitarian instrumentalism, fails to capture important features of Hume’s position. Although Williams does not explicitly endorse the naturalistic interpretation, the observations he makes fit neatly with it. The details of this, however, still need to be unpacked.

The morality system encourages us to understand responsibility in terms of obligations, as laid down by rules or principles (laws), where violations constitute a wrong that is liable to blame and punishment. This view of responsibility places heavy weight on the role of choice, will and voluntariness. Classical compatibilism accommodates this understanding of responsibility and fits it neatly. According to classical compatibilism, responsibility is a matter of free action, where the agent acts according to her own will and desires. This does not require indeterminism or any special form of “moral causation”. Nevertheless, both the classical compatibilist and incompatibilist libertarian are agreed that responsibility is essentially a matter of free action (under some contested interpretation). Hume, on the other hand, rejects this doctrine, which we may call “voluntarism”.[[42]](#footnote-42)

For Hume, as we noted, an action must be indicative of durable qualities of mind if a person is to be held accountable for it.[[43]](#footnote-43) This requirement reflects his commitment to virtue ethics and its focus on traits of character rather than individual actions. While voluntary action plays an important and significant role in the assessment of character, there are other channels by which a person’s character and qualities of mind may be expressed. This includes feelings, desires, sentiments and even our gestures and deportment.[[44]](#footnote-44) In light of this, it is clear that our moral qualities may be betrayed in ways that we have limited or even no control over. It is a mistake, therefore, to suppose that Hume endorses the view that responsibility is simply a matter of free action or that it is confined to our interest in an agent’s voluntary, intentional conduct. Hume rejects the doctrine of “voluntarism” and the understanding of moral responsibility that goes with it.[[45]](#footnote-45)

A second issue, closely related to this but distinct from it, concerns the way in which moral character is *acquired* and to what extent this depends on our own (free) choices. Hume makes clear that while our qualities of character are *expressed* primarily through our choices and decisions, for the most part our character is not acquired this way. By and large our character is conditioned and determined by factors independent of our will, such as age, sex, bodily condition, occupation, social situation, and so on.[[46]](#footnote-46) Even when character is expressed through voluntary action, the character that it expresses is one that the agent herself does not choose or could have (fundamentally) altered or changed. Our conduct and character is no less subject to “absolute fate” and “the bonds of necessity”, on Hume’s account, than physical bodies or material objects.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Hume’s views concerning the natural abilities can be better understood in terms of this account of the relationship between virtue and voluntariness.[[48]](#footnote-48) Since our moral character may be acquired without our choice or consent, and it may be expressed independently from our voluntary conduct, any pleasurable or painful quality of mind will, on Hume’s principles, naturally arouse moral sentiments. It follows that the natural abilities (e.g. intelligence, imagination, wit, memory, etc.) stand on the same footing, in these respects, as the moral virtues more narrowly understood.[[49]](#footnote-49) Certainly any distinction that we may draw between the natural abilities and moral virtues cannot, on this account, be based on the suggestion that the former have been acquired involuntarily. There is, nevertheless, some relevant distinction to be drawn here.

The relevance of the voluntary/involuntary distinction in this context concerns our interest in the regulation of conduct in society. Unlike natural abilities, the moral virtues and vices, or the particular actions that flow from them, “may be chang’d by the motives of rewards and punishments, praise and blame”.[[50]](#footnote-50) By means of rewards and punishments we can, in some measure, influence and change the voluntary actions of agents. For the most part, however, this is not true of the natural abilities. The significance of the “invented” distinction between the moral virtues and natural abilities, Hume maintains, rests largely with considerations of this kind.[[51]](#footnote-51) It remains nevertheless a mistake, however, to suppose that the boundary of moral concern rests with the voluntary/involuntary distinction. On Hume’s principles, it would distort and truncate the nature and foundations of moral concern to limit or confine our views about responsibility in these terms.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Hume’s arguments along these lines, relating to virtue and voluntariness, are of considerable relevance to Williams’s critique of the morality system. According to “morality”, when agents voluntarily violate their obligations they do wrong and are liable to blame and some measure of retribution. This engages what Williams calls “the blame system”. The blame system, with its focus on particular acts, requires “a voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological and social determinism, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent’s own contribution, no more and no less”.[[53]](#footnote-53) The reason why the morality system is under pressure to “deepen” the voluntary and “make it profound” is that it aspires to show that morality – specifically moral responsibility and blame – somehow “transcends luck”.[[54]](#footnote-54) This is required to ensure that blame is distributed in a way that is “ultimately just”.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Despite the significant challenges involved, compatibilists have attempted to satisfy these aspirations of the morality system. They do this by describing powers of rational agency that ensure that we are self-controllers who are capable of guiding and shaping our own practical identity and moral trajectories. This suffices to provide for free and responsible agency, insulated from fate and luck, within compatibilist constraints.[[56]](#footnote-56) In contrast with this, Hume’s naturalistic arguments do not attempt to satisfy these aims and aspirations. The particular form of moral luck that is immediately relevant to Hume’s views concerning the involuntariness of (moral) character may be described as “constitutive luck”.[[57]](#footnote-57) Constitutive luck concerns the sort of person we are. It includes our desires and feelings, abilities and dispositions, as well as our deliberate actions. It is Hume’s view that we are all subject to moral luck in this respect.[[58]](#footnote-58) That is to say, although we have little or no control over the kind of person we turn out to be (in these respects), we are still liable to be praised and blamed, rewarded and punished, on this basis. According to Hume’s naturalistic principles, our (moral) interest in an agent’s conduct is guided by our more fundamental interest in her qualities of mind or character traits. Depending on whether these are found pleasurable or painful, an agent is liable to be praised or blamed on this basis – which is to say they will be held responsible. This is true despite the fact that, for the most part, agents have no (final or ultimate) control over their fundamental character, since this is almost entirely conditioned and determined by external factors of various kinds. There is, from Hume’s perspective, nothing “unfair” about this so long as our beliefs about the agent are accurate and our responses are suitably calm and measured (i.e. as governed by the “general point of view”).[[59]](#footnote-59)

These features of Hume’s system make clear that he rejects what Nagel has called “the condition of control”. According to this principle no one can be justly held responsible – subject to (moral) praise and blame - for what they do not control.[[60]](#footnote-60) Not only does Hume reject this principle, he maintains that it is directly at odds with ordinary human experience and observation. Since the condition of control, in some form or other, is essential to “the morality system”, Hume plainly rejects this fundamental component of “morality”.[[61]](#footnote-61) In this respect, as Williams suggests, Hume’s views about freedom and moral responsibility show that he is “very consciously operating in a pagan perspective” that displays some strong affinities with the ancient Greeks.[[62]](#footnote-62)

*IV. The Blame System and Moral Address*

Blame is, Williams argues, “the characteristic reaction of morality”.[[63]](#footnote-63) Closely related to this is morality’s concern with “guilt”, which is “the characteristic first-person reaction”.[[64]](#footnote-64) These conceptions, as suggested by morality, are “purified” to meet the standards “demanded by moral justice”. This, as we have noted, pushes blame towards the ideal of “the absolutely voluntary act” and “the peculiar psychology of the will”.[[65]](#footnote-65) Blame, conceived in these “purified” terms, requires “complete control” and a source of “ultimate authorship” – this being the point at which the will is introduced.[[66]](#footnote-66) For the purposes of this conception, what we are blamed for cannot be a matter of luck, as otherwise the very justice of our “moral” reactions would be placed in doubt.

One important point of agreement between Hume and Williams, in opposition to the assumptions of “morality”, is that not every failure to comply with moral norms – or to do the right thing – is a product of “deliberative failure” or “irrationality”.[[67]](#footnote-67) The problem we face, in these circumstances, is that blame may be in order even though it is not true that there was a reason for the agent to have acted otherwise or do the right thing. There are, as Williams points out, people who are “part of our ethical world” who are subject to various vices (malicious, selfish, brutal, etc.), and arouse “various negative reactions”, but who are evidently not unreasonable.[[68]](#footnote-68) It is these agents who we need to “recruit into our deliberative community”. Blame can serve to “recruit people into the deliberative community”, Williams suggests, by appealing to the “fiction” that the agent being addressed had a reason to act differently.[[69]](#footnote-69) Even in circumstances where the blamed agent lacks the relevant motivation to do the right thing, they may still be “reached” as long as they have “a disposition to have the respect of other people” – in particular, other people who they respect and care about. This is not just a matter of wanting to avoid the hostility of others but of having “a desire to be respected by people whom, in turn, one respects”.[[70]](#footnote-70) This involves what Williams labels the psychology of “the proleptic mechanism”.

For the purposes of “morality”, considerations and processes of these kinds are insufficiently “pure”:

To the extent that the institution of blame works coherently, it does so because it attempts less than morality would like it to do.... [The blame system] is surrounded by other practices of encouragement and discouragement, acceptance, and rejection, which work on desire and character to shape them into the requirements and possibilities of ethical life.[[71]](#footnote-71)

These are social and psychological resources that morality neglects and seeks to replace with a form of total (rational) control that bypasses contingencies of character and psychological or social determination, in order to ensure that responsibility and blame are distributed on an “ultimately fair basis”. Almost everyone knows, says Williams, that it is an “illusion to suppose that this demand can be met”. Nevertheless, as long as we remain wedded to this illusion, we are discouraged from employing the “impure” psychological and social materials that the proleptic mechanism relies on for dealing with “deviant members” of the community.[[72]](#footnote-72)

So how, then, should we understand Hume’s views about blame in relation to Williams’s concern with the “proleptic mechanism”? The classical reading of Hume closely associates him with the “reconciling strategy” and its (utilitarian) emphasis on the efficaciousness of blame and punishment as an instrument of social control. This is not, as we have noted, how Williams’s reads Hume. In contrast with this, the naturalistic account places considerable emphasis on the role of the “proleptic mechanism” that Williams describes, taking this to play a significant part in Hume’s account of moral responsibility.[[73]](#footnote-73) The basis of this is the mechanism of the indirect passions and sympathy in sustaining moral motivation and conduct. It is, more specifically, the motivations offered by pride and humility, and love and hate, that serve this purpose.[[74]](#footnote-74) It is a fundamental feature of Hume’s system of ethics to emphasize the social context and importance of sympathy in motivating and sustaining virtuous conduct and character. Granted that we care about and value the opinion of others, and believe that their evaluations are well-founded, we will be directly affected and influenced by praise and blame.[[75]](#footnote-75) Virtue enables a person to take pleasure in herself, just as vice makes it painful for the mind “to bear its own survey”.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Hume and Williams are clearly agreed about the importance of “proleptic mechanisms” as means of “reaching” people who fail to act in appropriate ways. Blame, when expressed and communicated to the wrongdoer, has this “function or point”.[[77]](#footnote-77) It aims to “recruit” others into our moral community and to encourage them to share our ethical values. Beyond this, however, there are some important differences between Hume and Williams concerning the nature of blame. In his discussion of blame, Williams makes clear that when we blame agents for some specific act or omission (i.e. “focussed blame”), we treat the person blamed “like someone who had a reason to do the right thing but did not do it”.[[78]](#footnote-78) Proleptic mechanisms provide the blamed agent with a “sound deliberative route” by which they may arrive at a different conclusion than might otherwise be available to them.[[79]](#footnote-79) There are, however, some individuals who we cannot reach at all because they “lack any general disposition to respect the reactions of others”. Faced with these “hard cases”, the fiction that we can “recruit” them into a deliberative community of shared values (i.e. through available rational channels) evaporates. In these circumstances, Williams suggests, “we cease to blame” and regard those concerned as simply “hopeless and dangerous characters” who are beyond blame. “Hard cases”, understood this way, become *exempted* from blame, as blame loses its (practical) function and point in respect of them.[[80]](#footnote-80) Taken this way, Williams’s account of blame retains the view, which is fundamental to “morality”, that moral address is an essential feature of blame. Blame functions as a form of communication (“advice”) with a view to bringing the wrongdoer (back) into the moral community. In the absence of any capacity to respond to such overtures, however, blame lacks any point and cannot be justified and the wrongdoer is exempted.

It evident that Williams wants to retain the connection between blame and moral address. This accounts for the importance of “proleptic mechanisms” with respect to agents who (currently) do not have any reason to do the right thing but may not be “unreasonable” – since we can still “reach” them through these alternative channels. However, when an agent is “beyond any such mechanism” then, Williams claims, “we cease to blame”.[[81]](#footnote-81) Hume, however, does not share this view. According to Hume, blame is targeted at persons (*qua* objects of blame) on the basis of their virtues and vices, which are taken to be pleasurable or painful qualities of mind. This includes, as we noted, the natural abilities as well as moral qualities more narrowly conceived. Neither our natural abilities nor our moral qualities are acquired voluntarily, as both are generally unchosen. What distinguishes the moral qualities from the natural abilities is that they “may be chang’d by the motives or rewards and punishments, praise and blame”.[[82]](#footnote-82) Blame, expressed and communicated to the wrongdoer, *may* serve as a form of proxy-punishment or sanction, with the intent of influencing the agent’s conduct and character. It does not follow from this, according to Hume’s system, that blame would cease to be “appropriate” unless we are able to secure these (aimed at) benefits or pragmatic ends.[[83]](#footnote-83) Any proleptic function that (expressed) blame may perform, important as this may be, is not, on Hume’s account, essential to blame being justified or appropriate. Nor, related to this point, does Hume grant that we exempt agents from blame where they do not satisfy the condition of being open to moral address or rational persuasion such that they may come to share our values.[[84]](#footnote-84)

On a Humean analysis, it is a mistake to assimilate blame too closely with any “proleptic” function or any role that it may play (e.g. qua some form of proxy-punishment). The psychological structure and rationale of blame and punishment are, although intimately connected, quite different. Among the prominent features of (standard cases of) punishment are the following[[85]](#footnote-85):

(1) Punishment must be voluntarily and intentionally administered (by someone other than the wrongdoer or offender).

(2) Punishment must involve some sort of harsh or unpleasant treatment of the offender.

(3) Punishment must be imposed in a public, open manner. The imputation of harsh treatment is not properly punishment if it is purely private of concealed (e.g. private revenge, even when motivated by wrongdoing, is not punishment).

(4) In the case of punishment, the wrongdoer or offender is made aware that the harsh treatment is imposed on them because of their offence or wrongdoing. To this extent, properly speaking, punishment is a form of “communication” directed at the wrongdoer.[[86]](#footnote-86)

(5) Punishment is a voluntary practice, it can be suspended – either in the particular case or as a (social or legal) institutional practice.

(6) One ground that may be proposed for suspending or abandoning punishment is that it serves no practical or worthwhile end or purpose (i.e. it is pointless in these terms).

(7) Those who impose or administer punishment must have some relevant standing of authority. The imposition of harsh treatment on the ground that the agent has violated some (legal or ethical) normative standard is not properly punishment in the absence of any relevant authority.

Although the features described above may not always be satisfied and there are “non-standard” cases of punishment, these are features that serve to identify and distinguish punishment from other forms of ethical response available to us.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Hume’s views about punishment are both scattered and thin, but all of the above features are entirely consistent with his own views.[[88]](#footnote-88) These features do not, however, apply to his views about blame. We may blame an agent without imposing any harsh or unpleasant treatment. Blame need not be publicly expressed, and when it is, such expression may be voluntary or involuntary. We may, indeed, find it difficult in some circumstances to *conceal* the (overt) expression of blame even when this is what we aim or intend to do. Moreover, even when we intend to express our blame, we may or may not intend to communicate with the offender or wrongdoer – our intended audience may be others. In some cases, we may want or wish to communicate our sense of blame to the wrongdoer, but we cannot (e.g. because they are dead or beyond our reach). We can, nevertheless, still blame them (in contrast with punishment). Even in cases where blame lacks and practical point or value, and we may prefer not to dwell on it or entertain it for that reason, we may still find that it (naturally) forces itself upon us. To the extent that we are (sincerely) normatively committed to certain values and standards, there are *psychological limits* to the extent to which we can (voluntarily) suspend the attitudes and feelings involved in blame.[[89]](#footnote-89) Finally, blame need not be confined to those who stand in some relevant relationship of authority over the offender, (although the overt, public expression of blame may be deemed inappropriate when we lack relevant moral standing). The moral psychology of blame is, in all these ways, fundamentally different – both on Hume’s account and in fact – from what we find with punishment.

How, then, does this “gap” between blame and punishment relate to Williams’s “proleptic” account of blame and the role that it assigns to moral address? According to Williams, when we cease to blame because the “hard case” lies beyond reach of the proleptic mechanism, we will simply regard the person concerned as a “hopeless and dangerous character”.[[90]](#footnote-90) Although this is consistent with the attitude that “morality” would encourage us to adopt, Williams’s own critique provides reason to resist this view. The fact is, as Williams suggests elsewhere, we encounter people who are rational and normatively competent, and “part of our ethical world”, who are still beyond reach and cannot be (rationally) persuaded to arrive at “a different conclusion”.[[91]](#footnote-91) They are bad but they are “not necessarily behaving irrationally or unreasonably”.[[92]](#footnote-92) This is, at any rate, Hume’s view. Expressing or communicating blame *to them* may well be pointless and of no value – but entertaining blame towards them may still be entirely justified and appropriate. Moral address is not, for Hume, an essential or a fundamental feature of blame (however significant a role it may still play in ethical life). There is no basis for exempting an agent from blame simply of the ground that they are not open to moral persuasion or “correction” (e.g. via the proleptic mechanism). Our practical interest in moral persuasion or “correction” is irrelevant to the justification of blame itself.

The general Humean view is that a person may (fully) satisfy the requirements of moral competence and still not be someone we can *reach* through “moral address” of any kind.[[93]](#footnote-93) That they do not and cannot share our reasons does not imply that they are like a child, or a mentally ill person, or someone who lacks any capacity to understand our moral norms and the responses that they give rise to (such as blame).[[94]](#footnote-94) It may be that, even when moral address and blame are pointless in these terms (i.e. with regard to our hopes for moral persuasion and conversion), entertaining and expressing blame towards the wrongdoer still serves to recognize and acknowledge that the agent concerned is not only a human agent but remains an *ethical* agent. Our own ethical responses are, to this extent, constrained by this recognition and this serves to constrain the ways in which we may treat them – however “hopeless and dangerous” they may be.

*V. Responsibility Realism: Naturalism, Genealogy, Pessimism*

It is clear from the account provided that Williams’s assessment of Hume as a prominent philosophical figure who rejects the assumptions of “morality” is well-founded. There are, in fact, some respects in which Hume’s position is even more radical than Williams’s in this regard. Lying behind Hume and Williams’s shared opposition to the presuppositions of “morality” is their “naturalistic” understanding of human moral psychology and the materials that this involves (or does not involve). What a “naturalistic” moral psychology commits us to is, as Williams points out, open to different interpretations.[[95]](#footnote-95) With regard to Hume there are two particularly important strands to his “naturalistic” account. The first is rooted in his wider project of a “science of man”, where this involves applying the observational or empirical (i.e. “experimental”) methods of the natural sciences to moral subjects.[[96]](#footnote-96) What is crucial to this approach is that it excludes any appeal to non-empirical (i.e. “metaphysical”) entities or agents (e.g. Gods, immaterial souls, modes of “free will”, etc.) It begins its investigations with a descriptive account of what (actual) moral agents and their capacities are like. The description offered aims to explain as much of human ethical life as possible in terms of psychological and social features that can be independently identified. A naturalism of this kind aims to find universal features of human nature that best accounts for the attitudes and practices that we seek to understand.[[97]](#footnote-97) Second, and related to this, Hume’s naturalism emphasizes, as we have noted, the importance of “feeling” and emotion in human life – especially as this concerns ethics. In highlighting the role of moral sentiment in the sphere of moral responsibility, Hume’s naturalistic approach pursues a theme that runs throughout his moral philosophy. One particularly important aspect of this is that, in the words of P.F. Strawson, it discourages any effort to “over-intellectualize the facts” as they concern the attitudes and practices involved in responsibility.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Williams’s attitude to these two modes of naturalism is entirely sympathetic. Much of his own moral psychology draws on material that could well be described as broadly “Humean”.[[99]](#footnote-99) It is, nevertheless, Nietzsche who Williams refers us to as providing the most reliable “route towards the naturalization of moral psychology”.[[100]](#footnote-100) The reason for Williams’s preference for Nietzsche over Hume, in this respect, is that the approach that he endorses needs to be more than “naturalistic” in the terms that Hume suggests, it needs to be “realistic” as well.[[101]](#footnote-101) As Williams sees it a naturalistic moral psychology can fail either because it includes or excludes too much. It includes too much if it fails to exclude aspects of our self-image that are illusory and distort our nature. In this respect Hume’s naturalism is evidently sufficiently “suspicious” of non-natural, metaphysical entities and forms of self-deception that this encourages. It includes too little, on the other hand, “if it tries reductively to ignore culture and convention; this is misguided even on a scientific basis, in the sense that to live under a culture is a basic part of the ethology of this species.[[102]](#footnote-102) This concern with the importance of “culture” - and cultural variation and diversity – returns us to a point of criticism, mentioned earlier, that Williams raises against Hume. Hume’s naturalism is primarily concerned with the universal psychological features that help us to make sense of moral responsibility and blame. What he is insufficiently concerned with, according to Williams, is the significance of cultural variation in this context.[[103]](#footnote-103)

It is a matter of fundamental importance for Williams’s critique of ‘the morality system” that there are “different possibilities for ethical life: some of them possibilities for different cultures, others for our own culture”.[[104]](#footnote-104) Related to this, Williams argues that human nature underdetermines ethical life.[[105]](#footnote-105) What gives any particular form of ethical life its identity is its culture, history and language.[[106]](#footnote-106) It is in these terms that we need to understand that “morality” is a product of a culture with a particular history and is in this sense “local” and “contingent” – not an inescapable, inevitable feature of human nature.[[107]](#footnote-107) These considerations apply to “morality’s” conception of responsibility and blame. Faced with contingencies of this kind, we require something more than the methods of a naturalism that is concerned only with universal features of human nature.[[108]](#footnote-108) What we need, methodologically speaking, to move beyond “morality”, is a (Nietzschean) genealogy.[[109]](#footnote-109)

It may well be that Williams’s suggestion that Hume is insufficiently concerned with the problem of ethical variation (and the associated conflicts that this presents us with) is unfair to Hume. These are, after all, matters that Hume draws attention to and seeks to explain in the context of his (genealogical) account of justice and in many other contexts.[[110]](#footnote-110) It remains true, nevertheless, that Hume is primarily interested in emphasizing the “uniformity in the general sentiments of mankind” and the possibility of some shared “standard or morals” or “common point of view”.[[111]](#footnote-111) For Williams, however, this is the *starting* *point* of his (more sceptical) investigations. We need to consider our particular (i.e. culturally-embedded) ethical concepts, and the assumptions and aspirations that they carry, in historical and genealogical terms. The naturalist program, as advanced by Hume, is too general and universal in its orientation for this purpose.

This difference between Hume’s naturalism and Williams’s genealogy is reflected in their approach to responsibility and their divergent understandings of the problems that we are faced with. The gap between Hume and Williams can be described in terms of three significant issues where they present their concerns in very different terms. On the interpretation provided, Hume plainly rejects the assumptions and aspirations behind “morality’s” conception of responsibility – and to this extent, as we have noted, he anticipates important features of Williams’s critique. Williams, however, is careful to emphasize that this requires us to “recast our ethical conceptions” (which are tainted and distorted by “morality”).[[112]](#footnote-112) Taking this step suggests that, ethically speaking, we cannot “leave everything where it was”. In particular, contrary to what the “old compatibilists” or “reconcilers” have supposed, we cannot claim to vindicate our “ordinary” views or assume that our current (modern, western) understanding of these matters is all in good order.[[113]](#footnote-113)

In contrast with this, Hume’s presentation of his views on ethics, as they concern responsibility, are less *openly* radical or revisionary. The general tenor of his remarks is to suggest that his account is more or less consistent with our ordinary or common-sense views about such matters.[[114]](#footnote-114) To a considerable extent, the differences between Hume and Williams in this respect proceeds “more from the manner than the matter” of his views. Much of this can be explained in terms of Hume’s very different primary concern, which is to discredit religion and religious ethics without leaving himself open to the charge that he aims to undermine morality as such.[[115]](#footnote-115) Nevertheless, even when we allow for this, it remains true that Hume suggests a more “conservative” picture than Williams with regard to the wider implications of his naturalistic understanding of moral responsibility. This is certainly a feature of Hume’s ethics that Williams is concerned to reject.[[116]](#footnote-116)

When it comes to “recasting our ethical conceptions” Williams is clear that, not only does this not leave our ordinary conceptions undisturbed, these changes come at some cost. Proponents of “morality” will be disposed to present the costs as taking the form of scepticism about “genuine” or “true” moral responsibility. Williams’s *vindicatory* genealogy aims to block and discredit that suggestion. This does not, however, entirely erase the taint of “pessimism” that hangs over this effort to dispense with the apparatus of “morality” and replace it with a more “realistic” and “truthful” account of moral responsibility. The relevant source of pessimism is not based on any kind of general scepticism about moral responsibility, but rather on the observation that moral responsibility is not immune to conditions of fate and luck. In light of this, we are invited to accept a kind of “pessimism of strength” (in Nietzsche’s language) that involves recognizing that while we cannot, on one side, deny or repudiate our standing as responsible moral agents acting in the world, we also cannot deny that there are features and forces operating in the world that we cannot control but that, nevertheless, substantially shape and influence the ethical trajectories of our lives.[[117]](#footnote-117) While Hume’s own understanding of moral responsibility is subject to pessimistic reflections of this nature, Hume’s presentation of his ethical system tends to conceal these “darker” implications of his views.[[118]](#footnote-118)

Perhaps the most significant gap between Hume and Williams on this subject concerns the free will problem itself. Hume’s approach, particularly as presented in the sections concerned with “liberty and necessity”, is (famously) presented as a “reconciling project”.[[119]](#footnote-119) This suggests, as most Hume commentators would agree, that Hume belongs squarely on the side of compatibilism. It is, on this reading, the compatibilist/incompatibilist divide that Hume is primarily concerned with, as structured around the traditional free will problem. It is evident that this is not how Williams understands his own position on this subject. As Williams understands it, the divisions that matters here is not between compatibilist and incompatibilist but between those who are committed to “morality” and those who reject it. The “old compatibilists” accept the framework of the free will problem as presented by “the morality system”. They have, as their critics suggest, failed to show “that our actual ethical notions are compatible with determinism”, which leaves them open to the charge that “they have changed the subject”.[[120]](#footnote-120) This situation leaves Hume’s position straddled between the (morality-oriented) aims of the “old compatibilists” and the “recasting” ambitions that Williams’s critique proposes. This is not entirely surprising, since Hume’s problem is not, primarily, with “the morality system” but with religion and the (flawed) ethical systems that it suggests.

Where do these observations concerning the relationship between Hume and Williams on the subject of moral responsibility leave us? There is, of course, an asymmetry in their relationship in that Hume serves to provide the foundations for much of Williams’s thinking about ethics, and this does not hold the other direction. We can make sense of Hume’s relevance to Williams’s critique of “the morality system” to the extent that he provides much of the basic (more “realistic”) psychological material that Williams draws from. The significance of this “Humean” material is that Williams *pushes it further* to reveal the illusionary assumptions and aspirations that “morality” relies on and aims to satisfy. Looking in the other direction, backwards from Williams to Hume, we can consider Hume’s ethics and naturalistic views about moral responsibility in terms that were not available to Hume but that serve, nevertheless, to illuminate what he has to say. More specifically, we can understand the way in which Hume’s concern to describe secularized ethics, grounded in human nature, involves rejecting many of the assumptions and prejudices of “morality”. Despite their different interests and concerns, and their different idioms, what Hume and Williams share is a fundamental commitment to providing a more “truthful” and “realistic” understanding of moral responsibility and our human ethical predicament.[[121]](#footnote-121)

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**Abstract**:

Bernard Williams identifies Hume as “in some ways an archetypal reconciler” who, nevertheless, displays “a striking resistance to some of the central tenets of what [Williams calls] ‘morality’”. This assessment, it is argued, is generally correct. There are, however, some significant points of difference in their views. This includes Williams’s view that a naturalistic project of the kind that Hume pursues is of limited value when it comes to making sense of “morality’s” illusions about responsibility and blame. It is, Williams maintains, only when we consider moral responsibility in genealogical terms, which give attention to the importance of culture and history, that we can find a way of exposing the various prejudices and illusions of “the morality system”. Nevertheless, despite these differences, what Hume and Williams share is a fundamental commitment to provide a more “truthful” and “realistic” understanding of moral responsibility and our human ethical predicament.

**Key words:**

Moral responsibility; blame; Bernard Williams, David Hume; free will

1. The papers I have particularly in mind are: ‘Moral Luck’ (1976); ‘How Free Does the Will Need to Be? (1985)’; ‘Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame’ (1989); Nietzsche’s minimalist moral psychology” (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Williams, 1985/2011: esp. Chp. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Williams, 1985/2011: 194; Williams, 2014: 256: “It is certain, even if not everyone has yet come to see it, that Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century...” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Williams, 1983: 41-2; Williams, 1999: 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Williams, 1986: 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a general overview of Williams’s views on this subject see Russell, 2022; and Queloz, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Williams, 1985/2011: 193-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Williams, 1985/2011: 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Williams, 1985/2011: 200; and Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Williams, 1985/2011: 214; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72; Williams, 1994: 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Williams, 1993: 31-4,36-7, 40,46, 55-6, 66-7; and also Williams, 1985/2011: 64-6. The crucial element missing from this list, according to “morality” (and the “progressivist” view associated with it) is “the will”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Williams, 1993: 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Williams, 1985/2011: 63-5, 215-7; Williams, 1985/1995: 16; Williams, 1993:152; Williams, 1994: 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Williams, 2002/2004: 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Williams, 1985/2011: 43, 216-7; Williams, 1993b/1995a: 241-4.. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Williams, 1985/2011: 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Williams, 1976/1981: 38-9; Williams, 1985/2011: 63-5; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72-5; Williams, 1993: 66-8; Williams, 1993b/1995a: 242-4; Williams, 1994: 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Williams, 1985/1995: 6-7, 19; Williams, 1995b: 578. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Williams, 1976/1981: 39; Williams, 1985/1995: 19; Williams, 1995b: 578. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Williams, 1985/1995: 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Although Williams employs genealogical methods most extensively in *Shame and Necessity*, he does not discuss them in detail in that context. See, however, his extended remarks on genealogical methods in Williams, 1993a/1995a: esp.75-6n12); Williams, 2000; and, at greater length, in Williams, 2002: Chap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Williams, 1993: esp. Chap. 1; and also Williams, 1994: 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, in particular, Williams, 1993: Chap. 3 (esp. pp. 55-6, 67-8,153, 158); and also Williams, 1985/2011: 43, 63-5, 216-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, in particular, Williams, 1993: Chap. 3, which is titled “Recognizing Responsibility”. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Williams, 1993: 55-6. Other core (or universal) elements that Williams mentions include our concern with any harm or injury caused by an agent’s actions and forms of compensation when this occurs. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Williams, 1985/2011: 216; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72; Williams, 1995b: 578. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Williams, 1994: 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The danger, related to this, this is that once these illusions of “morality” are exposed, and discarded, we will go on to conclude that “there can be no coherent ideas of social justice, but only efficiency, or power, or uncorrected luck.” (Williams, 1985/2011: 218) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See, e.g, Williams, 1993: 67-8, 94-5, 152, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. An influential statement of this orthodoxy is presented in Stroud, 1977: Chp. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In both the *Treatise* (T, 2.3.1-2) and *Enquiry* (EU, 8) accounts “Of Liberty and Necessity” Hume makes clear that his most original contribution to “the free will controversy” rests with his “new definition of necessity” (TA, 34). It is because we confuse necessity with some form of force or compulsion that we mistakenly suppose that liberty requires the absence of causation. When we recognize that causation involves nothing more than a regular succession of objects or constant conjunction this confusion is eliminated. Although classical compatibilists coming after Hume endorse some version of this argument, the emphasis remains on distinguishing two kinds of “liberty”, one that requires the absence of force or constraint and the other requiring the absence of causation and necessity. For details relating to the classical interpretation of Hume see Russell, 1995: esp. Chaps. 1-3; and Russell 2007; and Russell 2015/2021. (This and the section that follows draws from this earlier work.) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On this aspect of Hume’s system see Árdal*,* 1966: Chp. 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Strawson, 1962/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Strawson, 1962/2013: 81. Strawson refers to compatibilists as “optimists” calls and (libertarian) incompatibilists “pessimists” because they suppose that the truth of determinism threatens our attitudes and practices associated with moral responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Strawson, 1962/2013: 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Strawson, 1962/2013: 71-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. There was a period in the early 1990s when Williams became more critical of Hume and distanced himself from him. During this same period, Williams became more heavily influenced by Nietzsche. (See, e.g., Williams’s remarks in Williams, 1994: 9.) Nevertheless, in later reviews and works, Williams continues to refer to Hume in respectful terms (e.g., Williams, 2002/2004: 86). This is particularly apparent in *Truth and Truthfulness*, where Williams discusses genealogy and presents Hume as anticipating Nietzsche’s methods (Williams, 2002: 35-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Williams, 1986: 206. Citation from Hume, T, 3.2.8.8/547n1 – Hume’s emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Williams, 1985/1995: 20n12. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Williams, 1985/1995: 14-6, 20n12; see also Williams, 1985/2011: 197-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Williams, 2002/2004: 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. On this theme in Hume, see Russell, 1995: 6, 14, 171, 176-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Russell, 1995: Chp. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Hume, T, 2.1.11.3/317; EU, 8.9/85 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. We might understand “voluntarism” in terms of what J.L. Mackie has labelled “the straight rule of responsibility: an agent is responsible for all and only his intentional actions.” [Mackie, 1977: 208] [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Hume, T, 2.3.1.5-10/ 401-03; Hume, EU, 8.7-15/83-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Hume, T,2.3.2.2/408. See also Hume’s remark that “the fabric and constitution of our mind no more depends on our choice, than that of our body.” (Hume, ESY, I, 141/168 – “The Sceptic”) [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Russell, 1995: 125-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hume, T, 3.3.34.1/606; Hume, EM, App. 4.2, 20/ 313, 321-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Hume, T, 3.3.4.4/609. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. It should be noted that Hume also associates the origin of this distinction with the (“warping”) influence of theology, which treats “all morals, as on a like footing with civil laws, guarded by the sanctions of reward and punishment” (Hume, EM, App. 4.21/ 322). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. It is worth pointing out that we may reject Hume’s (controversial) claims about responsibility for our natural abilities and still accept his (independent) claim that responsibility for our moral qualities does not depend on their being voluntarily acquired. What is implausible about Hume’s position is his (utilitarian-oriented) conception of moral virtue, not his understanding of moral responsibility. On this, see Russell 1995: Chap. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Williams, 1985/2011: 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Williams, 1985/2011:217; Williams, 1993: 68, 158; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72-3; Williams, 1993b/1995a: 241-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Williams, 1985/2011:216-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See, e.g., Dennett, 1984: esp. chaps. 4 and 5; Wallace, 1994: esp. Chap. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Nagel, 1976/2013: 37, “Kant was particularly insistent...” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. On this see Russell, 1995: Chp. 9 (esp. pp. 128-33). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Hume, T, 3.3.1.14-17/580-84; Hume, EM, 5.2/229. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. “Where a significant aspect of what a person does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck...” [Nagel 1976/2013: 32] [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For a more detailed examination of Hume’s views on moral luck and the limits of control see Russell 1995: esp. 130-33. It may be argued that although Hume rejects the condition of control he is careful to limit the scope of moral luck. His various remarks on this subject suggest that the moral spectator can filter out the extraneous influence of “fortune” as it may affect the particular circumstances we are required to act in, and also the variable and unpredictable consequences that our actions may have in given circumstances. To this extent it seems clear that his position on the subject of moral luck is complex and allows for some degree of ambiguity. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Williams, 2002/2004: 85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Williams, 1985/2011: 197. See also Williams’s related remarks about morality’s tendency to flatten and constrain “moral” reactions into binary judgments of approval/disapproval and guilt/innocence. This excludes “non-moral” reactions such as resentment, contempt and other “such minor revelations of ethical life”. (Williams, 1985/2011: 42-3) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Williams, 1985/2011: 197; see also Williams, 1993: 88-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Williams, 1985/1995: 16; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72-3; Williams, 1985/2011: 42-3, 197, 216-8; Williams, 1993b/`995a: 243-4.. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Williams, 1994: 4-5; Williams, 1993a/1995a: 72-3; Williams, 1993: 36,40, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Williams, 1985/1995: 16; Williams, 1989/1995a: 42-3; Williams, 1985/2011: 213. Williams’s (Humean) views about the limits of practical reason are especially relevant here [Williams, 1980/1981]. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Williams, 1985/2011: 213-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Williams, 1985/1995: 16; Williams, 1985/2011: 214-5; Williams, 1989/1995a: 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Williams, 1989/1995a: 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Williams, 1985/2011: 215-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. These are issues that are further developed in Williams’s discussion of “Shame and Autonomy” in Williams, 1993: Chp. 4), particularly as this concerns the shame/guilt contrast. A fundamental objective of this chapter is to show that “the Greeks’ understanding of shame... was strong and complex enough to dispose of the familiar criticism that an ethical life shaped by it is unacceptably heteronomous, crudely dependent on public opinion” (Williams, 1993: 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See Russell, 1995*:* Chp. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See, in particular, T, 2.1 and 2; esp. 2.1.7 and 11; 2.2.5 and 6; and EM, 5 and 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Hume, T, 2.1.9.9-13/320-2. See also Russell, 1995: 156-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Hume, T, 3.3.6.8/620; EM, 9.10-11/ 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Williams, 1985/1995: 14-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Williams, 1989/1995a: 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Williams, 1989/1995a: 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Williams does not cite any examples of “hard cases” but a relevant example is provided by Robert Harris, as described in a well-known paper by Gary Watson (Watson, 1987/2013). Harris was a vicious murderer who eventually executed in California in 1992. Watson makes clear that the problem with Harris is not that he lacked moral understanding - as we might find with a child or a mentally ill person - but that “his heart is frozen” (p.97) Watson goes on to observe: “To be homicidally hateful and callous in Harris’s way is to lack moral concern, and to lack moral concern is to be incapacitated for moral community. However, to exempt Harris on these grounds is problematic. For then everyone who is evil in Harris’s way will be exempt, independently of facts about their background....” (p.100) [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Williams, 1989/1995a: 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Hume, T, 3.3.4.3-4/ 608-09; see also Hume, EU, 8.28/97-8; Hume, EM, App. 4.2, 4.20-1/ 313, 321-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. For Hume, of course, the “proleptic mechanism” cannot be effectively employed to alter a person’s natural abilities. However ashamed we may be of our faults of this kind, our ability to alter them is limited. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. For an influential statement of (moral) blame understood in these terms (*qua* “the morality system”) see, e.g., Darwall, 2006: esp. 27-8 and Chps. 2 and 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. The list provided here draws from Hart, 1959/1968: 4-6. Hart specifically is concerned with *legal* punishment. He is especially concerned to offer a “definition” of punishment that does not confuse the (distinct) issue of the justification of punishment. Nevertheless, even unjustified punishment must take a certain form and structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. For an influential discussion of this aspect of punishment, see Duff, 2001: esp. Chp. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Hart cites collective or vicarious punishment as an example of a “non-standard” case [Hart, 1959/1968: 5]. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. An account of Hume’s views on punishment is provided in Russell, 1995: Chp. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. On the natural foundations of moral sentiments (reactive attitudes) see, e.g. Hume, EM, 9.7; App. 1.10; App. 4.21/ 273, 289, 322. The same general (“naturalistic”) theme is presented in Strawson, 1962/2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Williams, 1989/1995a: 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Williams, 1989/1995a: 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Williams, 1985/2011: 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Suffice it to note that Hume’s views on moral capacity and competence are not sufficiently detailed or robust (as argued in Russell, 1995: 91-3, 179-81). This does not, however, compromise his view that normative competence (e.g. as based on moral understanding and an appreciation of the moral responses of others etc.) does not presuppose that the agent has a capacity to come to share or endorse our values and norms. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. What matters, in other words, for this (evolved and amended) Humean view, is that the person we blame is able to understand our moral reactions and the reasons *we have* for them – but this does not require a capacity to (come to) share or endorse them. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Williams, 1993a/1995a: 67-9, 74-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Hume, T, Intro, 4-10, 2.4.7.13, 2.4.7.14/ xix-xxii, 271,273. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. On this see, Russell, 1995: 173-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Strawson, 1962/2013: 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. See Williams, 1995c: 203-05. This is, perhaps, most apparent in his earlier writings, such as Williams, 1971/1973 and Williams, 1980/1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Williams, 1993a/1995a: 75. See also the related discussion in Williams, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Williams, 1993a/1995a:68. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Williams, 1993a/1995a: 67. See also Williams, 1991/1995a: 86, where this theme is discussed at some length (“What is true is that each action...”); and Williams, 2000: 151 (“A special case that interests us...”. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Williams, 1986: 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Williams, 1985/2011: 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Williams, 1985/2011: 59, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Williams, 1985/2011: 53-5, 106-07, 115-6, 123-5, 129-30, 169-70, 176-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Williams, 1993a/1995a: 74; Williams, 1993b/1995a: 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Williams, 1995c: 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Williams, 1993a/1995a: 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. See, e.g., Hume, “A Dialogue” [EM, 314-43]. For further discussion of this see Russell, 2018/2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Hume, T, 3.3..1, 3.3.3.2/ 574-91, 603; Hume, EM, 5.42/228-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Williams, 1985/1995: 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Williams, 1985/1995: 6-9; Williams, 1995b: 578; Williams, 1993: 4-11; Williams, 2002/2004: 85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. See, in particular, Hume’s remarks at EU, 8.23/ 95, where he suggests that the whole free will debate “has been hitherto merely verbal”. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. On this see Russell 2018/2021: 277-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. It is arguable that a similar gap – in tone if not in substance – opens-up between P.F. Strawson’s views in “Freedom and Resentment” and those of Williams. In contrast with Williams, Strawson presents his naturalistic account of moral responsibility as essentially “descriptive” and supportive of our “ordinary” ethical conceptions. On this see Russell, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. For a discussion of the wider relevance of this mode of “pessimism” for the free will problem see Russell, 2017. Also of relevance here is Krishnan and Queloz, 2022. They argue that Williams’s “pessimism of strength” reveals more than just a commitment to view the world truthfully, without comforting illusions. Williams was, they argue, a “shaken realist”, living in the shadow of the horrors of the second world war and the late 20th century. Arguably considerations of this kind go some way to accounting for the distance that Williams’s perceives between his concerns and Hume’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Here too, it may be argued, the distance between Hume and Williams should not be exaggerated, since despite the (superficial) “optimistic” tone of Hume’s presentation, the substance of his position is plainly in line with the more “pessimistic” outlook that Williams describes. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Hume, EU, 8.23/95. The tone of the parallel discussion in the *Treatise* is somewhat different, emphasizing a defence of necessity against “the doctrine of liberty” (Hume, T, 2.3.2/407-12). But the difference is largely superficial, as a “reconciling project” is implicit in both. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Williams, 1985/1995: 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. I am grateful to the editors of this collection, Marcel van Ackeren and Matthieu Queloz, for the support, patience, and helpful comments and suggestions that they have provided. I should also mention, in this context, that my own thinking about both Hume’s philosophy and problems of free will and moral responsibility dates back to the early 1980s, when my PhD work at Cambridge was supervised by Bernard Williams. This was also the period when he was writing *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Suffice it to say that this paper reflects my considerable debt to – and respect for – his philosophical contributions and influence. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)