

*Subjectivism and Blame*¹

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My own conclusion is that “One ought to be moral” makes no sense at all unless the “ought” has the moral subscript, giving a tautology, or else relates morality to some other system such as prudence or etiquette. I am, therefore putting forward quite seriously a theory that disallows the possibility of saying that a man ought (free unsubscripted “ought”) to have ends other than those he does have.² – *Philippa Foot*

H.A. Prichard’s “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”, like Descartes *Meditations*, is remembered better for the skeptical moment in the author’s thinking than for its unskeptical conclusions. Prichard’s paper is complicated, but the lore about its message is simple. The lore is that Prichard pointed out that in trying to vindicate the reason-giving power of morality we might do so by appealing to moral norms or to non-moral norms. If we appeal to moral norms, then we are only justifying a standard in terms of that standard and just about any old standard could survive such a test. But if we justify moral standards by appeal to other standards, such as self-interest, then we will not really have justified morality but have only shown that morality must borrow authority from some genuinely authoritative standard. In the former case the justification is question-begging and trivial. In the latter case the justification is not really a justification of morality but rather showing that behaving as morality requires is recommended by

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- 1 Thanks to Sam Black, Janice Dowell, Josh Gert, and Evan Tiffany for helpful comments on this paper.
 - 2 Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” p. 320, note 15, in Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton’s *Moral Discourse and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press).

genuinely authoritative non-moral standards. Thus there is a puzzle about how we might vindicate the authority of morality itself.

What is less noted is that Prichard's dilemma is equally a problem for providing a justification for any normative system, including justifications for behaving self-interestedly. Thus it seems to me that Prichard's dilemma should not be thought to be a source of skepticism about morality any more than it is a source of skepticism about practical normativity generally. If Prichard's dilemma seems to raise especially troubling questions about why we should be moral, this must reflect our pre-existing anxiety about the authority of morality rather than a problem for morality that Prichard's dilemma generates.

But Prichard suggests another rationale for misgivings about the authority of morality, namely that its recommendations conflict with what we want to do. This rationale does have the potential to especially challenge the authority of morality. He writes, in addressing our need for an answer to the "Why be moral?" question,

The formulation of the question implies a state of unwillingness or indifference towards the action, and we are brought into a condition of willingness by the [self-interested] answer. And this process seems to be precisely what we desire when we ask, e.g. Why should we keep our engagements to our own loss?; for it is just the fact that the keeping of our engagements runs counter to the satisfaction of our desires which produced the question.³

That is, what prompts us to question morality's authority is that it bids us to do what we do not want to do. But Prichard offers this thought as an explanation, not vindication, for the concern about morality's authority. It is this thought, Prichard appears to suggest, that explains why the "Why be moral?" question is found to be so salient while the "Why be prudent?" is not. But even if we could show that being moral will reliably get us something that we want, Prichard tells us, this would not really address our normative question. "The answer is, of course, not an answer, for it fails to convince us that we ought to keep

3 H.A. Prichard, "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?", in *20th Century Ethical Theory*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 38–39.

our engagements; even if successful on its own lines, it only makes us want to keep them."⁴ Prichard is highlighting the lack of connection between being able to be brought into a condition of being motivated to *O* and having a normative reason to *O*. Thus Prichard is at least flirting with the view that Bernard Williams would label "externalism."

Prichard's main point is that, once we accept the need to provide a justification for morality's authority in the ways made available by Prichard's dilemma, we are in a hopeless predicament. I assume that Prichard would agree that the dilemma applies to the attempt to vindicate any normative system and he would go on to claim that we can explain but not justify the appearance that moral norms, because they conflict with our wants, are more in need of justification than other norms.

But one might think that the fact that morality asks one to perform actions that one could not be brought into a state of "willingness" to perform not only explains but also vindicates worries about morality's authority. Indeed there exists a popular conception of practical reason that gives vent to this sort of thought. Subjective accounts of reasons for action famously, or notoriously, maintain that at bottom the only thing that gives a person a practical reason to do something is that doing so will help bring about something that they want. It is the plausibility of this kind of account of reasons, often called Humean, subjectivist, instrumentalist, or hypotheticalist, which animates much skepticism about our reasons to be moral.

The viability of this subjectivist tradition is a key component in the appearance that reason does not require, or in some cases even permit, us to do as morality commands. This paper will concern itself with one threat to the viability of this subjectivist tradition. Should the tradition prove not to be viable, the concern with morality's authority will be significantly less threatening. That is, if Prichard is right that the fact that morality bids us to act contrary to our concerns does not tell against morality providing powerful reasons, morality will have dodged one of the historically most prominent challenges to its authority.

Subjective accounts of reasons maintain that one's rationally contingent non-truth assessable pro-attitudes ground correct claims about

4 Ibid., 39.

what one has reason to do.⁵ Subjectivists tend to acknowledge that the agent's actual pro-attitudes can fail to point her towards her reasons. Actual desires do not seem to correlate with one's reasons. Informed desires seem to have a better claim to do so.⁶ The most influential subjective accounts of reasons (and well-being) have maintained that our reasons or our good is determined not by what we in fact want but by what we would want if we were idealized in certain ways, such as being informed about the various options one is choosing between. Such views have received broad philosophical support and have as good a claim to being thought of as the received view about practical reason as any view out there.⁷

5 The set of pro-attitudes I have in mind includes counterfactual pro-attitudes or dispositions to have them.

6 Some challenge whether subjective accounts have a rationale for granting authority to idealized desires rather than actual, non-idealized desires. I respond to this challenge in "Subjectivism and Idealization," *Ethics* 119 (January 2009): 336–52. The challenge is issued by Arthur Ripstein, "Preference," in *Value, Welfare, and Morality*, ed. R. G. Frey and Christopher Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), reprinted, with a new conclusion, in *Practical Rationality and Preference*, ed. Christopher Morris and Arthur Ripstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); H.L. Lillehammer, "Revisionary Dispositionalism and Practical Reason," *Journal of Ethics* 4 (2000): 173–90; and David Enoch, "Why Idealize?" *Ethics* 115 (2005): 759–87.

7 On the reasons for action side, see, for example: Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in his *Moral Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 101–113; and David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. ser., 63 (1989): 113–37. On the well-being side, see: Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 111–12; Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 10, 113, 329; John Harsanyi, "Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 55; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 407–24; R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 101–5 and 214–16. See also *Hare and Critics*, ed. Douglas Senor and N. Fotion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 217–18; Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29; David Gauthier, *Morals By Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), chap. 2; James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11–17; and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 283–91.

Subjective accounts do not merely claim that desires co-vary with normative status or that having a desire (of the right sort) is a necessary and/or sufficient condition for having normative status (contrast Williams' "internalism"⁸).⁹ Subjectivism claims that the relevant sort of desire grounds, not merely tracks, the correctness of claims in a normative domain. What an option is like provides an agent with reasons to bring about that option, according to subjective accounts, because she has a desire (of the right sort) for the option.¹⁰ The distinctive subjectivist thesis is that an agent has a reason because she has a desire and the set of desires that plays this role is a function of her rationally contingent conative set.

The Problem for Subjectivism

An upshot of subjectivism is that there are possible rational agents who lack any reason to be moral.¹¹ Some actual humans may fall into

8 Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons." Kantians and neo-Humeans can, and typically do, share a commitment to what Williams labelled "internalism." See Christine Korsgaard's "Skepticism about Practical Reason," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 311–34. The internalist thought is that an agent's normative reasons must resonate with or motivate her when she has deliberated in an ideally rational way. Neo-Humeans interpret this thought as showing that reasons must be relative to an agent's contingent concerns. Neo-Kantians interpret this thought as showing that rationality can guarantee resonance or motivation, regardless of her contingent psychological make-up. See also Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

9 I move incautiously between claims about "internalism" in Williams' sense and "subjectivism" in this paper. For my more careful thoughts about the differences between the two and how they work do the disadvantage of the former, see my "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001): 218–35.

10 Even if, as in Plato's *Euthyphro*, God loves an action if and only if it is good, there remains the question of whether God's love explains the goodness or the goodness explains the love.

11 Mark Schroeder's excellent *Slaves of the Passions* (New York: Oxford, 2008) develops a neo-Humean account according to which this may not be true. In a nutshell, Schroeder argues that because desires are cheap, having a reason to do something is also cheap. Further, he argues, the neo-Humean should reject the

this category. Famously, morality's commands cannot be avoided by not wanting to do what it requires. So if we can avoid having a reason to *0* by not having concerns that *0*-ing answers to, then morality must only contingently give reasons. Perhaps this is being too quick as there are two ways to ensure that morality's commands do not run counter to reason's instructions. The most common path is to insist that morality is set roughly where we were taught and our reasons, for one reason or another, find a way to match morality's instructions.¹² Another way to maintain the strong connection between reasons and morality would be to cut morality's demands down to whatever we independently determine that we have most reason to do.¹³ So, with the possibility of the latter sort of view in mind, let's say that subjectivism implies that there are possible rational agents who have no reason to comply with anything like traditional understandings of morality. According to such traditional understandings, for example, one is morally required to not cut innocent humans in half with a chainsaw merely to reduce the amount of traffic. From now on I will say that subjectivism holds that rational agents may lack any reason to be moral without any caveat.

Subjectivism maintains that rational agents may lack any reason to act in conformity with morality. Subjectivists have tended to note and endorse this upshot. But subjectivists have dealt less convincingly

view that the weight of reasons is in proportion to the strength of the desire. I hope to criticize Schroeder's view elsewhere but for now I will simply assume that subjectivist views have the upshot that some rational agents lack any reason to be moral.

- 12 I am not fussing about the distinction between varieties of rationalism. Some such views maintain that morality's instructions just are reasons instructions. Others maintain that reason always permits, but does not always require, one to behave as morality commands. I am assuming the most plausible variant of subjectivism will reject both claims.
- 13 Some who champion "the Demandingness Objection" against Consequentialism can sound as if they are arguing that Consequentialist morality would require action that diverges too much from our practical reasons, so Consequentialist morality must not be genuine morality. I argue that the Demandingness Objection is not a good ground for rejecting Consequentialism in my "The Impotence of the Demandingness Objection," *Philosophers Imprint* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Digital Library, 2007), vol. 7, no. 8.

with what forms of condemnation of immoral behaviour are available once one concedes that the target agent is acting as she has most reason to. The central issue that this paper will address is whether accepting the subjectivist view of reasons permits a person to intelligibly speak against immoral behaviour in ways that are common practice.

In one kind of case that interests me, the assessor is a subjectivist but morally earnest and the assessed is not morally decent and, by the assessor's own subjectivist's lights, has no reason to comply with morality's requirements. But this is not yet to say that the assessor's own stance towards the assessed person is uncritical. Indeed, it seems obviously true that if the assessor were morally decent she would be quite critical of this person. So one threat to the subjectivist story is that the subjectivist cannot coherently have the critical attitude towards terrible immorality that we think decent people would have. This makes it seem that, at least in her assessments of others, the subjectivist is not merely contingently morally awful (depending on her concerns), but necessarily so because she cannot have a morally decent critical response to those that are immoral but are acting in conformity to their subjectively determined reasons. As Foot puts it, the theory "disallows the possibility of saying that a man ought (free unsubscripted 'ought') to have ends other than those he does have."¹⁴

This threat to subjectivism is partially generated by the plausibility of the thought that earnest criticism of an agent for doing *X* entails a judgment that the agent, all things considered, ought to have behaved otherwise. So if I earnestly criticize you for *X*-ing, this entails that I think, all things considered, that you ought not to *X*. And this judgment can appear to conflict with the assessor's judgment about what the agent has most reason to do – for judgments about what the agent, all things considered, ought to do seems to entail the judgment that the agent has most reason to do that thing.

It seems quite intuitive that earnestly blaming a person for *0*-ing entails the view that the agent, all things considered, ought not to have *0*-ed. It also seems quite intuitive that the judgment that, all things considered, *A* ought not *0* entails the judgment that *A* had more reason to do something other than *0*-ing. This version of the thought

¹⁴ Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," 320, note 15.

runs via judgments so call it: “The Judgment Connection.” Another version of it would run using the thought that if it is true that one ought not θ , then one has more reason to do something other than θ . Call this “The Metaphysical Connection.” It also seems quite intuitive to say that if one is acting as one has most reason to act, then one is acting as one ought and therefore one’s action is not worthy of blame. When I speak of “The Connection,” I will understand it to include all of these claims.

Other thoughts in the neighbourhood do not seem as intuitive. If one has sufficient reason to θ (such that θ -ing would not be contrary to the sum of one’s reasons), it does not follow that one ought to θ . One may have just as good reasons for doing something else or incommensurable reasons for doing something else. Or consider the claim that if one has most reason to θ , one therefore, all things considered, ought to θ . Here, perhaps, we could imagine the fan of satisficing views saying that one has most reason to θ but it is permissible to do less than θ -ing and so it is not the case that one ought to θ . We might think blame is not warranted whenever a person behaves suboptimally with respect to her reasons but rather only when she falls below a certain threshold. Where one has most reason to θ yet θ -ing would be supererogatory perhaps we should not say that one ought to θ .

Suppose that Sue’s considered opinion was that Joe had, all things considered, most reason to do one thing. In what sense could Sue, in consistency with that thought, earnestly criticize Joe for failing to do something else? Of course, it could be that Sue thinks that Joe had no good reason to believe that he had reason to act as he did, despite having most reason to act that way, and so was irrational, given his information, to act as he did. Such a possibility opens the door to the earnest criticism of Joe that he was irrational. But let us set aside such cases. Additionally Sue might criticize Joe with an eye only to the causal upshot of that criticism, not in response to her judgment of the warentedness of the blame.¹⁵ She might hope that the criticism would

15 The claim that someone is blameworthy need not involve the claim that blaming the person is, all things considered, the thing to do. The claim that someone is not blameworthy need not involve the claim that blaming the person is not the thing to do. Judging that a joke is amusing need not entail the view that, all things considered, it makes sense to be amused by it. Many different types of considerations speak to the question of whether amusement is, all things

produce a situation that she thinks is better in some way. Let us ignore cases where one's criticism of the agent is instrumental in this way and not a response to the judgment that the action was intrinsically worthy of blame.

There seem to be a tension between sincere and non-instrumental moral criticism of Joe and the thought that Joe had most reason to behave in the criticized way. Stephen Darwall puts the point like this:

Try formulating an expression with which you might address a moral demand to someone. I doubt that you can find one that does not carry the implication that she has conclusive reason to do what you are demanding or not to have done what you are blaming her for. Certainly none of the obvious formulations will work. For example, you can hardly sensibly say "You really shouldn't have done that," and then add "but you did have, nonetheless, conclusive reasons for doing it." And if you try to pull your punches, by saying "You shouldn't have done that, I mean, you know, morally speaking," although you may end up canceling the implication of conclusive reasons, it's hard to see how you can without also canceling an implication of blame or demand. Or to turn the point around, if someone were actually able to establish that she did have good and sufficient reason for a putative violation of a moral obligation, then it seems she would have accounted or answered for herself. When we charge her with wrongdoing, therefore, we must be implying that she can't.¹⁶

Sue might criticize Joe from various points of view. She might say that, although he did what he had most reason to do, what he did was contrary to etiquette and therefore is criticizable as uncouth. But such a criticism in Sue's mouth would seem to need to be tempered, if not downright ironic, due to Sue's concession that it did not make most

considered, the thing to feel. But not all of these considerations speak to the question of whether the joke is funny. See Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 65-90. When I use the terms "judge blameworthy" or "meriting blame," I mean to screen off these other, more instrumental, sorts of reasons to blame a person.

¹⁶ Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 98.

sense for Joe to heed the call of etiquette in this case. Sue's maintaining that Joe's reasons to heed the call of etiquette were outweighed in this case makes her criticism that Joe's act was uncouth seem less than (all things considered) earnest.

Williams

Williams considers a man who is severely unkind to his wife, yet who we are to understand lacks concerns that would lead him to be motivated to amend his ways after ideally sound deliberation. Because of this lack of motivation, Williams' internalism entails that the man lacks a reason to be better to his wife. Yet Williams insists "There are many things I can say about or to this man: that he is ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things."¹⁷

Suppose the unkind man were to hear Williams' combination of attitudes toward him. The man could be excused for thinking that Williams' assessment of the situation amounts to a wink of approval of his behaviour, with perhaps some pejoratives thrown in to appease propriety. For to be said to be acting as one has most reason to act or to be acting rationally seems a master-assessment of one's actions. Such assessments trump other assessments that might feed into the master assessment. If Williams sincerely thinks that he is acting as he has most reason to act, does this not entail that he thinks he is behaving as he ought?

Another way to see the apparent tension is to see that the criticisms that Williams (and presumably we as well) want to level against those that are acting according to their subjectively determined reasons purport to a kind of objectivity. That is, they purport to say not merely that the criticized agent acted in a way I didn't like or that was bad for me, but in a way that violated legitimate and authoritative norms. But how can I simultaneously hold that the agent violated legitimate and authoritative norms in acting as she did and say that she had no reason to act otherwise. Doesn't that fact that legitimate norms speak against such action give the agent reason to behave differently?

¹⁷ Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39.

T. M. Scanlon presses just such a concern against Williams' internalism. Scanlon thinks that to be entitled to continue to give voice to the "disadvantageous things" that Williams wants to say against the person that is nasty to his wife but who, according to Williams, has no reason to act otherwise, Williams must be willing to say that the criticized person has some "deficiency" such that they are "not able to see the force of certain considerations." Scanlon thinks that Williams should allow that there is such a deficiency in the criticized agent but attempt to maintain that such deficiency need not create reasons for the deficient agent.¹⁸

Williams, in response to Scanlon, is tempted by the line that Scanlon recommends. Williams writes,

I agree that the agent's faults can be understood in terms of a failure to see certain considerations as reasons, just as the opposed virtue can be understood as dispositions to see those considerations as reasons. I also agree that if we think of this as a deficiency or fault of this man, then we must think that in some sense these reasons *apply* to him; certainly he cannot head off the criticism by saying that the reasons do not apply to him because he does not have that kind of *S*, as someone else might appropriately say that the fact that a brilliant new opera is being staged in New York is not a reason for him to go there, because a taste for opera is no part of his *S*. This is a point about the (special kind of) universality of (this kind of) reason.

But none of this implies that these considerations are already the defective agent's reasons: indeed, the problem is precisely that they are not. Let *N* stand in for some normative term: if the critic expresses himself by saying "There is a reason for this man to behave differently to these people," then what he says is of the form "There are considerations about people's welfare, interests, and so on such that it is *N* that this man should treat those considerations as reasons." What can we take *N* to be? It does not seem to me that there is anything in this

18 T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), Appendix, 370–71. While Scanlon does not prefer the option he offers Williams, and seems to want to continue to be an externalist, he concludes that the remaining issues that divide his position from the internalist one he recommends to Williams do not make a "great deal of difference." 373.

way of putting the situation which takes us beyond understanding *N* as, very roughly, “better.”¹⁹

Williams replies that we are merely saying that it would be “better” if the agent saw these reasons or acted differently, and saying this in no way entails that the agent herself has reasons to behave so as to make things “better.” But saying that it would be better if things were different, if the agent had a different subjective motivation, for example, does not rationalize blaming the agent for anything. Ordinarily the charge that a person is selfish or sexist carries with it blame (or the thought that the agent ought not to have done what she did), which the bare claim that things would be better if the agent were different in this respect cannot vindicate on its own. We, or at least some of us, do sometimes level disadvantageous claims against a person where we do not think that that person is to blame for anything. The claim that a person is ugly, low of birth, or unhealthy can retain their disadvantageous tone even when we think a person has done nothing to bring these things on herself and even if we think there is nothing to be done to avoid these disadvantageous claims applying to oneself. One way of thinking of some disadvantageous things we say is merely as a grading of a person’s action on a particular scale regardless of whether the agent is responsible for their position on the scale or had reason to do what they did. Williams is surely right that his commitment to internalism does not threaten his ability to coherently make such judgments. That Joe has no reason to make himself a better tennis player does not conflict with the truth of the claim that he is a poor tennis player.

However, the sort of blame we are interested in seems to involve a claim that the person has failed to act as they ought, and not merely that things have gone non-optimifically. So if Williams is saying that we can continue to level such “grading” charges, empty of blame, at people where we judge that it would be better if the person were otherwise, this seems quite right. However, to restrict ourselves to these sort of disadvantageous things when a person has no internal reason

19 Williams, “Some Further Notes on Internal and External Reasons,” in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 95–96.

to behave otherwise would still be a quite radical revision of our commonsense practice. Williams hopes to avoid such a radical revision and so what he says here about our ability to say disadvantageous things about people is insufficient for his purposes. Williams' main effort to address these issues without radical revision is offered in his "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame." Let us now address Williams' most official response to this worry offered there. First I will briefly remind us how Williams set up the issue and then criticize his attempt to deal with the problem from within an internalist framework. He hoped to show that his favoured internalism does not force us to withdraw criticism or blame aimed at those who have internal reason to behave in nasty ways.

Williams sets up the issue by placing side by side his commitment to internalism together with the thought that there is a "close connection between focused blame and the agent's reasons."²⁰ Williams tells us that he is tempted to believe there is this connection because "If 'ought to have' in the mode of blame corresponds to 'ought to' in the mode of advice, this strongly suggests that what it refers to is the agent's having (having had) a reason: 'ought to have' will carry the thought that the agent had a reason to act in the desired way but failed to do so."²¹ Williams does not think he has demonstrated this connection but he finds the thought compelling enough to assume it in one of his more significant writings on internal reasons.

The problematic that Williams is worried about is that internalism together with The Connection claim seem to conflict with what "may seem a rather obvious fact about blame," namely, "that someone can be blamed even though his *S* does not contain anything that would lead to the appropriate motivations: we can blame a man (we may think) for neglecting his wife even though he has no motivation to be concerned about his wife."²² The task Williams sets for himself is to combine successfully 1) internalism, 2) The Connection between claims about what a person ought (or ought not) to do and her reasons, and 3) our going practice of blaming and judging that a person

²⁰ "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

ought not to do things even when they (appear to) have most internal reasons to behave in the way we are criticizing. Williams hopes to show that the internalist can retain commitment to 2 and 3 above without undue revision.

Let me briefly elaborate slightly on each of Williams' key assumptions. Obviously exactly what internalism comes to and what motivates it has been the subject of a great amount of discussion that I cannot hope to summarize here.²³ The above short discussion will have to serve.

Williams' second key assumption concerns the connection between blame and reasons, The Connection. The most obvious way to take him here is that in maintaining that someone is blameworthy for some action, one thereby assumes that the agent had reason to behave otherwise. Alternatively, the thought could be that if it is true that a person is blameworthy for an action, then it follows that they had reason to behave otherwise. I will assume Williams intends both theses.²⁴ It is not entirely clear why Williams focuses on the case of blame when the issue he is interested in seems to be generated by any instance of (prospectively or retrospectively) maintaining that a person ought to do (have done) something different from what she (apparently) had most internal reason to do. Perhaps Williams intends a broad notion of blame or perhaps he thought that the blame case was a useful example of a more general phenomenon.²⁵

Williams' third key (but tacit) assumption is, roughly, that it would be rather bad news for internalism if it genuinely conflicted with our common practice of blaming those who appear to have no internal

23 For my take on these issues, see my "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action," and "Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action," *Ethics* 111 (April 2001): 461–92.

24 I think the former claim entails the latter.

25 Like Williams, I will not say enough about blame to differentiate it from neighbouring concepts. For a detailed account specifically of blame, see T. M. Scanlon's *Moral Dimensions*, Harvard University Press, 2008 especially chap. 4, entitled "Blame." Scanlon's view is that "to claim that a person is blameworthy for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitude towards others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her" (128).

reason to act otherwise. Williams argues as if he believed that being forced to repudiate this feature of our common practice would count as a significant cost of the internalist program.

So the threat is that internalism is incompatible with vindicating our practice of blaming people even when they apparently have most internal reason to behave in the ways we are blaming. Thus, the threat is that if internalism is correct, such blame cannot be vindicated as it rests on faulty premises. The problem is obviously not that some actual blame would be out of place if internalism were true. Clearly there is plenty of misplaced blame. The problem is that an entire class of perfectly ordinary cases of seemingly well-founded blame would be shown to be out of order. If we are to speak truly, we must accept the truth of internalism and thus accept that some of the people we had hitherto thought were blameworthy are not.²⁶ The threat to internalism (and, more to our point, subjectivism) is that it is forced to accept the view that Foot articulated, namely that such a theory “disallows the possibility of saying that a man ought (free unsubscripted ‘ought’) to have ends other than those he does have.”²⁷

Williams’ Official Solution and Its Problems

Williams hopes to divide up all the relevant cases into three broad categories; 1) the agent has an internal reason to act as we recommend but fails to do so (and so blame is appropriate on internalist grounds), 2) the agent has concerns that we can tap into by the very act of blaming her (and so blame is appropriate on internalist grounds), and 3) the agent is best seen as beyond blame (and so blame is not appropriate on internalist grounds). His goal is to persuade us that these three categories can adequately accommodate all cases and thus to show

²⁶ Internalists can with perfect consistency claim that all or almost all humans will have most reason to behave morally. So the threat need not be understood as being that we cannot blame all the actual people we have been tempted to blame. Of course, just because this claim is consistent with internalism does not make it plausible. The internalist who wanted to rely on such claims would need to provide reasons, such as a common evolutionary history, for believing that humans overwhelmingly are alike in this respect.

²⁷ Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” 320n15.

that we need not choose between accepting external reasons and a radically revisionary account of when it is appropriate to blame someone. Williams' hope is that this division of cases can vindicate continuing to blame people in something like the ways we currently do.

The first category might seem relatively uninteresting in this context and Williams treats it as if it were. After all, in these cases the internalist can point to considerations that are by internalism's lights reason-giving and for which the agent did not act. Thus the blame, it might seem, can be rationalized by the failure to act for the good reasons that internalism recognizes. But things are not so simple. Imagine a case in which one has some reason to stay at home and watch the end of the game but one has more reason to try to arrange a tennis match on this lovely day. Suppose one does arrange the tennis match. Has the agent done anything that it would make sense to blame them for or failed to act as they ought? Could we say that they had a reason to stay at home and watch the game and did not, thus they failed to act for a genuine reason and thus they are worthy of blame because they failed to act as they ought? To say such a thing would be extraordinarily odd. For in this case she has acted exactly as she ought, in compliance with her strongest reasons. There are some who claim that in tragic dilemmas one can be blameworthy whatever one does. But even if that is so, Williams clearly is trying to vindicate the ability of the internalist program to rationalize blame in more than just tragic dilemmas.

Thus, to rationalize blame in a situation in a way compatible with internalism, one must show not merely that the agent has some internal reason to act in the way they are blamed for failing to act. It seems the internalist must show that the agent had most internal reason to act in that way if blame is to be vindicated. Thus for the existence of internalism-friendly reasons to rationalize blame (given The Connection), the reasons must be not merely *pro tanto* but must be what the agent, all things considered, had most reason to do. As we will see below, this general problem for Williams' proposal undermines his position in more than one way.

It complicates matters that Williams' internalism offers only a necessary condition for having a *pro tanto* reason to 0 and not a method of weighing reasons against each other. For to rationalize blame we need to be able to compare the weight of reasons, for we can only

be blamed (assuming The Connection) for failure to act according to our strongest reasons. Williams' merely showing that we have some reason to O does not rationalize blaming the agent for failing to O . Thus we must add important components to the internalism that Williams offered before it could offer any hope of rationalizing blame in cases where the agent has conflicting reasons.

Additionally, for the non-outweighed reasons to rationalize our practice of blame, we must think that the reason we are blaming the person is that they failed to act on their non-outweighed internal reason. It is not enough for the internalist to be able to point to something blameworthy by their lights in cases where blame seems appropriate. The internalist must persuade us that the good thought behind the urge to blame in such cases derives from the presence of this internal reason. Williams does not take up this task.

The second category, Williams tells us, involves cases in which we issue our blame in the expectation that the agent has some concerns to avoid our blaming them. Thus our blame is connected to internal reasons the agent has, if only thanks to the agent's broad concern to avoid blame. This is Williams' famous "proleptic mechanism." But if the agent lacks any such broad concern, then Williams tells us she falls into the third category above. For "it is precisely people who are regarded as lacking any general disposition to respect the reactions of others that we cease to blame, and regard as hopeless or dangerous characters rather than thinking that blame is appropriate to them."²⁸ Thus, the idea is, if category 2 does not catch them, category 3 necessarily will. So where our blame ceases to be connected to internal reasons that the target agent has, there the blame loses its grip and becomes inappropriate. And this need not be thought to significantly increase the range of cases where blame is seen as inappropriate for it will be a very unusual person who does not care at all to avoid the blame of others.

But there are a variety of problems with Williams' argument above. Let us grant for the sake of argument that a person with no concern to avoid any kind of blame will be "beyond blame." First, consider the person who does have some general concern to avoid the blame of others but who does not always have most reason to avoid doing what

28 "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," 43.

he knows people will blame him for. As so far described, this person does not seem pathological or beyond blame. Indeed, to be otherwise, that is to hope to avoid all blame from anyone, whether the blame is merited or not, and adjust one's behaviour to do so, seems quixotic and pathetic. This non-quixotic person may well lack sufficient reason to avoid what someone will blame her for. So this agent lacks sufficient internal reason to avoid action that we will blame, even taking into account proleptic mechanisms. Again the problem for Williams is that even if he can show that the agent has a *pro tanto* reason to avoid the blame, this will not rationalize the blame unless the agent ends up having most internal reason to not do what they will be blamed for. But the existence of the non-quixotic person shows that, at best, the proleptic mechanism can generate *pro tanto* reasons that will typically not settle what the agent has most reason to do.

One thing Williams might be saying is that there was a reason for the agent to act otherwise (thanks to the proleptic mechanism), even if this reason was outweighed. And it is the existence of this outweighed reason that gives our blame in such cases an internalism-friendly hook. One way in which this outweighed reason might be thought to rationalize blame would be if the criticized agent failed to register and explicitly consider the outweighed reason and is worthy of blame for this reason. That is, we are blaming her decision procedure and not her action in such cases. But it is a poor decision procedure to take time to note and add up all of one's reasons even in cases where it is clear what one has most reason to do or in exigent circumstances. Thus the agent need not have had a reason to explicitly consider and take into account in deliberation the small reason she had to avoid our blame.

Perhaps instead, Williams might say, the agent was not counterfactually sensitive to the outweighed reason. That is, it would not have been given heed even in contexts where it provided the strongest reason. In cases where this is true, the agent is not an ideal responder to her reasons across counterfactual situations and so is criticizable. Thus Williams could say that our blame creates a rationale for itself when the criticized agent would not give such blame its due weight in other situations. This is a rather narrow window for rationalizing blame and it allows that a wide range of people who act morally abominably are nonetheless not blameworthy despite not being beyond blame.

The person being blamed may well have noted and given weight to the consideration the blamer is tapping into with her blame. That is, by internalists lights, the agent may well have acknowledged and responded appropriately to all the reasons that there are in the case. If that is so, what is left to blame this agent for? To blame her for failing to do as her outweighed internal reason suggested she should must, given The Connection, require positing external reasons. She has behaved exactly as her internal reasons suggested she should. If she were to act otherwise, she would be even more subject to blame stemming from her failure to act in accord with her internalism-friendly reasons. Thus there are no grounds from within her subjective motivational set for blaming her. Any blame in this context would have to be connected to an ought that is either an external ought or violates "ought implies can." And in this context Williams was clearly accepting "ought implies can." I conclude that this path, which relies on the existence of outweighed internalism-friendly reasons as the grounds for the blame, is unworkable for Williams' purposes.

The problem we just discussed stemmed from ordinary agents not giving infinite weight to avoiding being blamed. This meant that the reasons the proleptic mechanism generates may often be outweighed. And thus such reasons often will not rationalize blame. Another problem is that ordinary agents who are not "beyond blame" need not care to avoid blame from just anyone. When it comes to blame from people we do not respect, we may welcome their blame without putting ourselves "beyond blame." Additionally, at most, Williams' "proleptic mechanism" could justify overt blame directed at its target, not the more common sort of blame, which is not expressed or not expressed to its target.²⁹ But if this is so, then Williams' strategy will

29 Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 177, interprets Williams as quite generally focused only on expressions of blame, rather than judgments of blame generally. He claims that "Williams throughout understands blame in its performative mode." But when we appreciate that someone can be worthy of blame even if there is no point in directing the blame to the agent, Shafer-Landau tells us, we can see the fault in Williams' thinking. But this claim is too sweeping. Williams does not consistently focus merely on performances of blame. For example, Williams claims that our attitude towards those who are "beyond the pale" is not merely that we cease to blame them but that we cease "thinking that blame is appropriate to them" ("Internal Reasons

fail to avoid being radically revisionist in its understanding of when it is appropriate to blame people. On the resulting view of Williams, blame would be much less commonly appropriate than our current practices allow.³⁰

But if Williams cannot make such use of outweighed internal reasons to vindicate blame, where can he turn. It might seem that the key is that the reasons created by the proleptic mechanism must not be outweighed. So perhaps Williams could try saying that the proleptic mechanism vindicates blame only in those cases in which the proleptic reason does not conflict with what one has most reason to do, all things considered. This could happen either by the proleptic reason providing the reason that when added to the status quo shifts the balance of what she has most reason to do or it could happen because the proleptic reason points in the direction that the agent already had most reason to do prior to the proleptic reason. On this view, the proleptic mechanism vindicates blame only in those cases in which it is thought that the blame itself will alter what the agent has most reason to do. This latter move would radically diminish the cases in which Williams' proleptic mechanism justifies blaming someone and so, it seems to me, would not keep Williams' view from being radically revisionary.

Another problem with Williams' proleptic mechanism is that it is too useful. The way Williams sees the proleptic mechanism as generating internal reasons is via broad concerns to avoid blame from others. To the extent that Williams is right about the existence of such broad concerns they can be taken advantage of via the proleptic mechanism for a variety of reasons, not all of them involving the kind of blame we are concerned with. The kinds of act that trigger the proleptic mechanism are expressions of blame to the person blamed.

and the Obscurity of Blame," 43). I think the claim that sticks is that in key places Williams' arguments can only hope to vindicate performative blame directed towards the person being blamed and that this is not sufficient for his purposes.

30 Could Williams say that our blame that is not directed towards its target is potentially justified in that it signals to others that they have an internal reason to not act in such ways if they care to avoid our blaming them? Even if so, private blame would lack such a rationale and such indirectly justified blame would still be making assertions that Williams must allow to be "incoherent or false."

But one can express such blame without judging that the person is blameworthy. One might express blame insincerely precisely so as to take advantage of a person's broad concern to avoid blame. So the mechanism cannot vindicate blame that is not expressed to the person blamed and it can vindicate (in the sense that it can generate internal reasons) insincere and cynical blame that is divorced from judgments of blameworthiness.

Further, it is not true that we think that all such sincere judgments of blame are connected to reasons. Indeed, Williams relied on this in saying that even if others blame Owen Wingrave for failing to join the army, still Owen may well have no reason to join. The apparent truism is that legitimate or appropriate blame is connected to reasons, not that all blame is.

Williams has misidentified the problematic for the internalist position. The problem is not that *X*'s blame of *Y* is necessarily connected to a reason of *Y*'s and the internalist must find such an internal reason. Some blame, even if directed at blame-susceptible people, is out of order and not connected to reasons. Further, to rationalize blame we need to tie it to more than weak *pro tanto* reasons. Rather the real issue is about the apparent tension in maintaining that *X* has no reason to behave otherwise yet claiming *X* ought not to do what they have most reason to do by one's own lights. The real task for the internalist is to explain why we so frequently think people are not acting as they ought even in cases where we think they are acting according to their subjectively determined reasons.

I conclude, not only that is Williams' actual proposal seriously flawed, but also that the general strategy he offers for solving the issue for the internalist/subjectivist is not promising. We need to look elsewhere.

The two most obvious options that remain for subjectivists to pursue in responding to this challenge are: 1) to bite the bullet and abandon all things considered criticism of an agent who acts as she has most reason to act, regardless of how awful her actions are, or 2) to deny The Connection between blame (and ought judgments) and reasons.

It is worth pointing out that it is not only the subjectivist in hot water here. Any account of reasons that allows that there can be rational agents with little or no reason to behave morally will face the

same issues. The *neo-Aristotelian* theory of reasons offered by Foot and Hursthouse, for example, would seem to allow that other species or life forms, despite being rational, may have little or no reason to behave morally.³¹ If this is so, then according to such theories such people will be acting as they ought when they do awful things. Seemingly only theories that maintain that one always has most reason to behave morally can avoid the problem under consideration.

Unfortunately I lack the space here to investigate the plausibility of the remaining options for subjectivism. I hope to address this issue in future work. For now it seems safe to say that this issue remains a serious unresolved issue for anti-rationalist theories of reasons for action such as subjectivism. It also seems safe to say that, while Williams did us a service in calling attention to the tensions between internalism and our ordinary practices of blaming, he did not offer a promising strategy for overcoming the problem.

31 Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999). For an assessment of their program, see David Copp and David Sobel, "Morality and Virtue," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 514–54.