

Would it be Better Without a Moral System?

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Abstract: *Bernard Williams emphasizes that we would be better off without morality, which one conceived as a distinctive system. He argues that even the purest and most rigorous articulation of morality, exemplified by Kant, fails to answer the Socratic question and cannot provide a defense of the ethical life adequately. Some scholars do not share this view of Williams. Some scholars contend that he misinterprets Kant's view, while others maintain that a Kantian moral framework is far more significant than Williams allows. I argue, however, that such criticisms neglect Williams's theoretical intent and practical insights, and therefore biases his project. Through an examination of Williams's critique of Kantian notions of rational being, moral obligation, and universal necessity, I contend that Williams offers a more plausible interpretive understanding of the ethical life, one that invites us to reflect more deliberately on the tension between reflection and practice.*

Keywords: Moral system, Socratic question, Rational being, Moral obligation, Universal necessity.

1. Introduction

“Whether there is a need for a moral system” is one of the central questions in the field of Bernard Williams’s moral philosophy. In Williams’s view, He contends that the universalist perspective presupposed by a moral system is inadequate to capture the complexity of ethical life and that rationalist theoretical reductions obscure rather than illuminate moral reality. Consequently, the standard conception of morality—and its centrality—is open to serious doubt, and we would be better off without it. Williams argues that even the purest and most thoroughgoing kind of morality, as portrayed by Kant, cannot fully account for ethical value, or that Kant’s attempt to construct a set of moral norms through rational abstraction is simply not effective.

Nevertheless, some prominent scholars such as Thomas Nagel, Susan Wolf, and Robert B. Louden are not satisfied with Williams’s position, and they tend to point out that he has misunderstood the theory of Kant and underestimated the significance of the moral system.

But in my view, while these critics do identify some weaknesses in Williams’s reading. Still, they also fail to appreciate his fundamental point: philosophical reflection cannot be detached from historical experience, and that a system cannot completely master human life either. As Williams emphasizes it is possible to replace thin moral concepts by using thick ethical concepts in place of thick ethical ones, and we ought to substitute rigidly rational agent with an ethically engaged form of agency rooted in actual life.

2. Williams’s Critique of Kantian Moral Theory

2.1 The Illusory Conception of Rational Being

In *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that, even if human beings are finite rational beings, they do not need to be overly concerned with their particular inclinations but rather act in accordance with universalizable

principles. In other words, Kant conceptualizes rational being as autonomous entities capable of legislating universal moral law abstracted from contingent circumstances.

However, Williams is not satisfied with Kant’s conception of the rational being, so he criticizes this conception on two grounds: the individuality of moral agents and the irreducible complexity of ethical life.

For one thing, Williams insists that agents are historically situated, embodied individuals whose capacity for rational action cannot be fully captured by abstract theoretical deliberation. To a great extent, rational beings as “abstract citizens” weaken the conditions of existence as individual beings leading a certain kind of life. If the constraints of the conditions of life are excluded, the Kantian “abstract citizen” model can only be an illusory detachment from the real constraints of lived experience. The finite rational being, on the other hand, is an ethically concerned agent. Adopting an unbiased or disinterested perspective on the first-person “I” leaves no room for the ethical life of the agent and ignores the universal concern for and respect for personal commitment.

For another thing, the impartial stance of Kantian rational being ignores the inherent complexity of ethical life. Kant tends to privilege the universality of moral law, which is a more abstract, non-empirical approach to understanding. Williams, however, argues that the rational agent contains within itself the law that practical reason must contend with the particularity of desires, relationships, and circumstances that resist subsumption under a single, impartial framework. Once this is the case, what the agent himself wants to do is unnaturally limited or weakened. Indeed, the complexity of ethical life suggests that if there is a main thrust to life, it is unlikely that it will ascribe supreme importance to that system of impartial morality, i.e., the self-perseverance that Kant looks to the universal moral system for is not as dependable as he would have expected. The complexity of ethical life is such that human behavior cannot be introduced from a single principle, and the natural tendencies in the world of ethical life make it impossible to reach such a conception of the absolute.

As a result, Kantian universalism risks obscuring the very realities it purports to govern.

2.2 The Inescapability of Conflicting Obligations

Kant introduced the concept of duty to clarify the primacy and necessity of the concept of *good will*. Because of the “sublimity and intrinsic dignity of the commandment in duty”, he did not pay sufficient attention to the conflict of moral duties. In Kant’s view, if there is a conflict between non-moral and moral considerations, the former must give way to the latter; if there is a conflict between two moral obligations, only one moral obligation can stop the other, and only if one acts by the purpose of the universal moral law, there is no conflict of obligations, because we have no conflict of obligations in the world of reason or in the kingdom of freedom.

Williams challenges this claim, or more accurately, he diverges from Kant in his understanding and use of the basic concept of “duty”. For Williams, moral obligations constitute just one kind of consideration among many, and in the actual form of moral obligation, there is often a conflict. It is not true that only one moral obligation can break another; the moral dilemma (it is one’s duty to save others/who to save if one’s wife and others fall into the water) is concerned with my grasp and understanding of the meaning of my own life, which is more important than the requirements of moral obligations, and so an unbiased approach to it is inherently unfeasible.

It should be noted that this criticism of Williams is inseparable from his understanding of morality and ethics. According to him, the difference between the two lies in the fact that morality places more emphasis on social expectations, whereas ethics is more oriented towards individual character. For Williams, morality is a special development of ethics, and a special emphasis on some of the many ethical concepts, with a particular focus on the development of a special concept of duty. At this point, duty is given crucial importance by morality, and morality is unusual in this special sense”. On this basis, Williams continues to develop his critique of the theory of “moral obligation”. He argues that the most characteristic and harmful feature of the Kantian system of normative morality is that it misunderstands duty and closely associates it with morality without considering it as one of the various forms of ethical consideration.

2.3 The Questionable Necessity of Universal Imperatives

In Kant’s theoretical framework, both the discussion of rational beings and moral obligations point to a moral requirement that you ought to do something. The “ought” is present in the practical reason of every rational being and is a requirement on the motivation of the rational agent: if one does what one ought to do, one must not only do it intentionally, but must do it from a particular motivation. Kant’s line of argument is: from universality to universality - the norm of behavior should conform to the universality of the moral law, and this conformity proves the universal necessity of the imperative.

Williams counters that this argument for universal necessity is problematic in two respects. First, the inference from “ought” to moral obligation conflates several distinct senses of “ought”—ranging from prudential advice to moral requirement—without adequately justifying the moral sense. Second, the transition from theoretical rationality to practical rationality remains underdeveloped: the assertion “I must do this” emerges from the agent’s situated self-understanding rather than from pure rational deliberation.

In this way, we are discussing inputs and conclusions in practical reasoning. When an agent concretely grasps his environment, and indeed the state of the world at large, in a practical context, he necessarily has an understanding of what he can or cannot do, an understanding that is clearly more than moral in character. In other words, the deepest problems that would be discussed only under the name of the naturalistic paradox or the is-ought dichotomy cannot be resolved, or even revealed, by linguistic analysis. More than universal necessity, Williams insists that of all the ethically based considerations of practical necessity, moral obligation and even morality itself do not have an absolute priority and that they are not sufficient to justify the exclusion of other considerations.

In short, the notion of morality itself is only one of all ethical considerations, and one’s ultimate decision depends on the agent’s deliberate consideration of concrete reality, of one’s fundamental program.

3. Critiques Faced by Williams

3.1 Misunderstanding Kant’s View

Even though Williams vigorously criticized Kantian moral theory, he did not satisfy the scholarly community with these elements. One of the overarching charges is that Williams’s critics often argue that he misrepresents Kant’s moral philosophy. Martha C. Nussbaum, for example, suggests that Williams adopts a “one-sided” reading of Kant by failing to engage directly with his texts and by neglecting Kant’s nuanced understanding of the relationship between empirical conditions and moral freedom.

Human beings, as rational beings, do not stop after the transition from the common knowledge of moral reason to the metaphysics of morality, but then the transition from the metaphysics of morality to the critique of pure practical reason, which is the only way to be truly free from all empirical things, and to live a free and dignified life in accordance with the free will of the rational being alone.

3.2 Undervaluing the Moral System

In addition to the first general criticism, Williams’s complete rejection of the moral system by casting doubt on concepts such as moral obligation has also been questioned. Susan Wolf takes a conciliatory view, pointing out that the problem with the moral system is not that it is wrong, but that it is “incomplete”. For example, in response to Williams’s discussion of “moral luck”, she argues that rationalism fails to capture some of the deeper moral significance of the

phenomenon of moral luck and that it is in moral luck that the core of morality can be found. Thomas Nagel similarly defends the universality and rationality of moral systems as essential to ensuring reasons that are acceptable to all. In this sense, we find that there is a clear division in modern moral philosophy's understanding of the moral system between those who insist on rationality and universality, as represented by Kant, Nagel, and others, and those who recognize contingency, individuality, and oppose the universal authority of moral understanding, as represented by Williams.

3.3 Overstating Ethical Considerations

Williams is always skeptical when confronted with discussions of moral philosophy as represented by Kantian theories. Thus, Williams keeps telling us that ethics and philosophy cannot be too pure and must be integrated with other kinds of understanding. However, Robert B. Louden, by examining Williams's and Kant's discussions of moral obligation, practical necessity, and so on, suggests that a pure conception of morality based on free will will not disappear and that ethical considerations based on character will not prevail. After all, once one accepts Williams's setting of an ethical conception of thick, the image of human beings as creatures simply molded by various combinations of natural and cultural forces will replace the contrasting image of human beings as authors, at least sometimes, of their actions.

Not everyone will accept, as Williams presupposes, that their cognitive selves are mere slaves to the "I" of their desires, which means that the power of practical reason is much stronger in human life than Williams is willing to admit.

4. Is It Better Not to Have a Moral System?

Throughout this discussion, Williams argues that in the realm of modern moral philosophical discourse, "the moral understanding that is uniquely Kant's" has manifested itself in an obsessive exaggeration, especially in practical life, where it is simply not possible, nor is it necessary, to exalt the authority of reason without regard to it, or to embrace a moral system without thinking about it. Kant and his followers, on the other hand, argue that adherence to the conclusions of moral reasoning should take the form of obligations and that we should precisely follow the authority of reason and defend our lives by universal moral principles. On this basis, we find that the crux of the matter, or the more central consideration, is "how we should understand the concept of morality", in other words, "how we should treat the moral system"?

For an examination of this central issue, let's return to the discussion of the three criticisms in the previous section.

In response to his critics, Williams clarifies in his French Preface that he is not offering a direct exposition of Kant's thought but rather engaging with its central themes as they have shaped modern moral philosophy. Wolf and Nagel maintain that the moral system's aspiration to rational necessity fails to account for the irreducible contingency of human life. Through his concept of moral luck, Williams

exposes the tension between the universality of moral law and the unpredictability of ethical practice.

Admittedly, Williams does not fully articulate an alternative normative framework. Yet this omission underscores his broader point: attempts to dissolve contingency into necessity undermine the very complexity of ethical life. A moral system that denies the role of luck and uncertainty in moral agency not only fails descriptively but also distorts our normative understanding of responsibility, obligation, and value.

In short, Williams invites us to question whether morality, as conventionally understood, adequately accounts for the realities of moral life. The subject of ethics must be human beings, and the structure of ethical inquiry cannot mirror that of the natural sciences. This does not entail skepticism about ethical knowledge but rather demands a reconciliation of ideals with the lived realities of moral agents.

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