Bernard Williams (1929-2003) made significant contributions to ethical theory, moral psychology, personal identity, and the history of philosophy. Though very different from Anscombe and Foot, he shares certain concerns with them. He is skeptical about modern conceptions of duty and obligation in the Kantian and utilitarian traditions, exhibits some anti-rationalist tendencies, and favors an approach to ethics that eschews thin ethical concepts, such as the right and the good, and stresses thick ethical concepts associated with the virtues, such as the courageous and just. Williams take the question “What sort of life should I live?” to be the central question in ethics and tries to answer that question in ways that take the actual emotional lives of agents as an important constraint. We will look briefly at his doubts about impartial morality, his internalism about practical reason, and the way in which internalism can reinforce those doubts.

AGAINST IMPARTIAL MORALITY

In his influential “Critique of Utilitarianism” Williams argues that utilitarian impartiality alienates an agent from the projects and concerns that give her life meaning.

It is absurd to demand from ... a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own projects and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his actions in his own convictions. It is to make him into a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which his actions and his decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions with which he is most closely identified.¹

In "Persons, Character, and Morality" Williams generalizes this concern about alienation from utilitarianism to Kantian and other impartial moral conceptions.² There, he elaborates the significance to agents of the projects in which they are emotionally invested and identified. Though he thinks that Kantian impartiality need not ignore the separateness of persons, the way utilitarianism does, he thinks that it too must sometimes require agents to abandon the projects that give meaning to their lives.

A man who has such a ground project will be required by Utilitarianism to give up what it requires in a given case just if that conflicts with what he is required to do as an impersonal utility-maximizer when all the causally relevant considerations are in.

That is a quite absurd requirement. But the Kantian, who can do rather better than that, still cannot do well enough. For impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win; and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition in his having any interest in being around in that world at all. Once one thinks what is involved in having a character, one can see that the Kantians’ omission of character is a condition of their ultimate insistence on the demands of impartial morality, just as it is a reason for finding inadequate their account of the individual [14].

Part of Williams’s argument is reasonably straightforward.

1. Impartial morality sometimes requires agents to forsake their ground projects.
2. An agent’s ground projects are a condition of the agent having a meaningful life.
3. It is unreasonable to demand that agents forsake meaningful lives for themselves.
4. Hence, impartial morality makes unreasonable demands on agents.

It is less clear what significance Williams attaches to this conclusion. It depends upon whether he identifies morality and impartial morality. If he does, then it seems he is committed to thinking that morality, as such is unreasonable. On this reading, he is an anti-rationalist about morality. Alternatively, he may conclude that it is only impartial morality that makes unreasonable demands. He can still embrace rationalism provided he treats this as reason to reject impartial morality and accept instead some sort of less demanding agent-relative morality that tilts moral requirements toward the agent’s own interests, projects, and loyalties.

It is also unclear whether Williams thinks that the agent’s projects should never yield to impartial moral demands or whether he objects only to impartial morality requiring wholesale sacrifice of the agent’s most fundamental projects.

Of course, in assessing this argument, we need to look at (1). While a utilitarian, such as Sidgwick, acknowledges a prima facie difficulty squaring utilitarian impartiality with special concern, Sidgwick also thinks that the utilitarian can provide a derivative defense of special concern, and so perhaps of the agent’s ground projects (ME 431-39). Williams might well have doubts about the adequacy of this sort of utilitarian defense of special concern, of the sort we discussed earlier. In response, one might consider making the normative significance of special concern fundamental, rather than derivative, as Broad does. Our preferred reading of self-referential altruism treated it as a moral theory with wide scope but variable weight, combining agent-neutrality and agent-relativity. Would

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4 This is the direction in which Samuel Scheffler interprets and develops Williams’s ideas in *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (OUP, 1982) and *Human Morality* (OUP, 1992).

self-referential altruism be a moral theory that avoided William’s worry and, if so, would it constitute a form of impartiality that was immune to Williams’s complaint about other impartial moral theories?

It’s hard to know without knowing the details of self-referential altruism. On the one hand, self-referential altruism would give extra normative significance to the agent’s own projects. On the other hand, self-referential altruism does allow that these more urgent agent-relative demands have to be weighed against agent-neutral duties. It seems quite possible that even self-referential altruism would claim that if I can do enough good for enough other people that may override the moral reasons that I have to pursue my own ground projects.

INTERNALISM ABOUT PRACTICAL REASON

This skepticism about impartial morality claims that it would be unreasonable to require an agent to forsake her ground projects. That seems to make some assumptions about the nature of practical reason. Those assumptions are defended explicitly in Williams’s essay "Internal and External Reasons." He identifies internal reasons as ones that are relative to the agent’s “subjective motivational set” (101-02). External reasons, by contrast, would not depend on the agent’s motivational set. Williams clearly identifies the relevant elements of a person’s motivational set with her desires in a broad sense that encompasses various kinds of pro-attitudes (101, 105).

He is not explicit about the reasons for focusing on desires. But, as we will see, he is interested in reasons that motivate, and he seems to assume that motivation always involves some kind of desire. Presumably, he is attracted to the familiar view of intentional action as the product of representational states, such as belief, and pro-attitudes, such as desire.

On this reconstruction, we can distinguish, at least in principle, between the internalist constraint on practical reason that reasons for action be capable of motivating the agent and a specifically desiderative conception of practical reason that grounds reasons for action in the agent’s desires. Because Williams believes that motivational states involve desires, he concludes that only a desiderative conception of practical reason can satisfy the internalist constraint.

Williams makes clear that his preferred desiderative conception of internalism will not simply appeal to an agent’s actual desires but will instead recognize idealizations of her desires. An agent does not have an internal reason, according to Williams, to satisfy derived desires that are based on false beliefs about the instrumental means to and necessary conditions of satisfying her more ultimate desires (102-03). Because an agent may be mistaken about what will be most conducive to satisfying her ultimate desires, she can be mistaken about what her internal reasons are (103). Williams is willing to countenance internal reasons that are relative to the desires that an agent would have after suitable deliberation on and from her initial (pre-deliberative) desires (104-05).

Unfortunately, Williams is frustratingly vague about what he will count as suitable deliberation (105, 110). If internalism is to avoid vacuity, then motivation and desire must play the ultimate role in the justification of action. But this precludes appeal to desires that are produced by forms of deliberation that track truths about practical reason or the good.

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6 Reprinted in Moral Luck.
For if the new desires depend upon deliberation about practical reason or the good, the agent would have them regardless of the desires with which she began. But this would violate the demand that practical reason be traceable to the agent’s initial motivational set. Presumably, Williams has in mind content-neutral forms of deliberation, such as means-ends reasoning and imaginative and vivid appreciation of the causes, nature, and consequences of one’s alternatives.

This gives us a better idea of how Williams understands his preferred desiderative conception of internalism. But why should we accept such an account of practical reason? Williams appeals to connections between motivation and possible explanation.

If something can be a reason for action, then it could be someone’s reason for acting on a particular occasion, and it would then figure in an explanation of that action. Now no external reason statement could by itself offer an explanation of anyone’s action. ... The whole point of external reasons statements is that they can be true independently of the agent’s motivations. But nothing can explain an agent’s (intentional) actions except something that motivates him to act [106-07].

These materials provide Williams with a defense of internalism about practical reason with something like the following structure.

1. For an agent to have a reason to ø, that must (itself) provide a possible explanation of her behavior.
2. For a reason to explain an agent’s behavior, it must motivate her.
3. All motivation involves desire.
4. External reasons would not be grounded in the agent’s desires.
5. Hence, there are no external reasons.
6. Internal reasons are grounded in an agent’s desires.
7. Hence, all reasons must be internal reasons.

The crucial premise here is (1). The externalist should put his foot in the door here.

On the one hand, it cannot be that reasons for action must actually motivate and explain the agent's actual behavior. Conceptions of practical reason are concerned with reasons that would justify, rather than explain, action. So we want to allow that an agent’s justifying reasons -- what she ought to do -- may not be the reasons that motivate her or explain her behavior. Moreover, the idealization contained in Williams’s own desiderative conception means that internal reasons often fail to motivate and explain an agent’s actions. If my desire to drink the substance in this glass, which is petrol, is based on the false belief that it is whiskey, then Williams thinks that the internalist should recognize no reason to drink the stuff in the glass and a reason not to drink it. But then the agent’s internal reason not to drink the stuff in the glass will not explain his actual drinking of the stuff in the glass.

On the other hand, we might loosen the link between reasons for action and motivation and explanation, as Williams allows, requiring only that an agent’s practical reasons must be potentially explanatory. One way to see an agent’s reasons for action as potentially explanatory is to recognize that her reasons explain her action just insofar as she is behaving rationally. But this threatens to become a trivial or vacuous requirement. But that means that this looser version of the explanatory rationale provides no constraint
at all on the content of reasons for action. The externalist can also claim that external reasons can become explanatory if and when the agent recognizes them. For it is plausible that we normally desire to do that which we recognize would be rational to do. Now Williams will insist that this won’t satisfy his demand that the reason itself be potentially explanatory -- independently of its recognition by the agent. But it’s not clear why we should accept that constraint on the connection between justifying and motivating reasons. It does not seem especially plausible, and it begs the question against the externalist.

FROM INTERNALISM TO ANTI-RATIONALISM

Whatever the actual merits of Williams’s internalism about practical realism, it provides the foundation for the defense of an anti-rationalist position about morality, reminiscent in some ways of Foot’s anti-rationalism.

1. Moral requirements include impartial other-regarding duties.
2. Complying with impartial other-regarding duties sometimes requires agents to forsake their own personal aims and desires.
3. Practical reason is a matter of satisfying the agent’s aims and desires.
4. Hence, agents sometimes lack reason to comply with moral requirements.

The conclusion of this argument is an anti-rationalist claim. Whether this is the best way to understand Williams depends upon whether he thinks that morality is committed to the relevant kind of impartiality. If so, then he is an anti-rationalist not just about impartial morality but also about morality. Alternatively, he could be an anti-rationalist about impartial morality without being an anti-rationalist about morality if he takes the problems with impartial morality to be reason to defend an alternative and less demanding agent-relative conception of morality. Either way, the argument is only as plausible as the internalist conception of practical reason on which it rests. Though Williams does more by way of defending his conception of practical reason than Foot did by way of defending hers, the case for internalism remains problematic. Rationalist friends of impartial morality can try to defend the possibility of impartial practical reason.

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7 I’m not sure Williams ever resolves the question about whether his position is best understood as anti-rationalism or as an agent-relative form of rationalism. In Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Harvard University Press, 1985) he continues his internalist assault on impartial morality. Here, he seems to associate morality with impartiality and thin moral concepts, which might suggest that he is an anti-rationalist about morality. But he defends a less demanding agent-relative ethical theory grounded in human flourishing and the virtues, which may well be a kind of rationalist view. Being an anti-rationalist about (impartial) morality and a rationalist about (agent-relative) ethics seems to be a way of relabeling the ambiguity.