Ethical Necessity and Internal Reasons

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Kant lies behind the thought that the concept of obligation marks the only genuine sense of moral requirement. 'I ought' is the central deliberative expression of that sense. Against this, Bernard Williams has sought to remind us of the force of other locutions such as 'I must', 'I have to', 'I cannot'. He speaks of these as able to mark what he variously calls moral necessity, impossibility and incapacity, although he aims to show that the fundamental concept in this territory is that of practical necessity. Williams holds not only that these locutions are able to express a sense of ethical necessity, but also that their use is central to our sense of such necessity and incapacity.[1]

He rightly does not hold that all, or even most, uses of these locutions express such a sense. Some express what could be called a hypothetical necessity: 'I have to go—I'll miss my train.' Then there are what Anscombe called 'stopping modals', which acknowledge or invoke the requirements of institutional practices, including social roles, as necessitating constraints. 'He can't take his bicycle in here'. 'You can't move that piece—you're in check'. 'I have to confiscate that beer can, sir.' Stopping modals can occur in first, second or third person form. Williams is interested in expressions of practical necessity and impossibility which are distinctively first personal, which cannot be understood as expressing 'hypothetical' necessities, and which do not invoke merely institutional norms or the norms attaching to social roles. He does not claim that the boundaries here are all clear-cut.

The uses of these idioms that interest Williams highlight a personal dimension of many occasions of our finding ourselves ethically bound or compelled. Williams thinks—again rightly, in my judgment—that to assume that a certain use of 'ought' expresses the central sense of ethical requirement obscures this personal dimension. When 'ought' is at issue, for example, the first-personal

[1] A number of philosophers including Bernard Williams have sought to distinguish the ethical and the moral. In this essay, however, I use 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably without, I think, begging any of the questions those philosophers suppose to be at issue in the distinction.

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formulation 'I ought' is usually thought to be logically recessive in relation to 'One ought': I am required or bound in a certain way because anyone in such circumstances would be thus required and I am an 'instance' of the universal 'anyone'. (This is a formal 'because', marking the logical relations between 'one ought' and 'I ought'. It need not be, and usually is not, reflected in an explicit deliberative step from 'one ought' to 'I ought'.)

Things are different with 'I must', 'I have to', 'I cannot'. It is strained, to say the least, to regard 'I must', 'I have to', 'I can't' as even implicit derivations from 'one must', 'one has to', 'one can't'. Moreover, the step from 'I (morally) can't do it' to 'nobody can morally do it' seems a bigger step than that from 'I ought not do it' to 'one ought not do it'. It seems to be a morally substantial step. Of course it might be a step which I sometimes—even often—am moved to take, and even which I sometimes find it morally inescapable to take. But that will be because of what is morally at issue, and not because the mere logic of my deliberative conclusion—'I can't do it'—requires the step. We can readily enough recognize the possibility of someone saying 'I morally can't do it—but the moral possibilities may be different for another even in these very circumstances'.[2] It is more difficult (most philosophers say it is impossible[3]) to hear sense in 'I morally ought not to do it—but the moral possibilities may be different for another even in these very circumstances.'

'I must', 'I have to' and 'I can't' also seem in one way stronger than 'I ought'. 'I ought to—but who cares, I am not going to' seems to make good sense as it stands, whereas 'I must (I have to)—but who cares, I am not going to' does not make the same sense. The latter form of words could certainly have a use—for example, by someone who changes his mind between the beginning and end of the sentence. First he thinks 'I have to', and then he changes his mind and thinks 'but who cares, I am not going to'. By the time he thinks the latter thought he no longer thinks 'I have to'. Alternatively, the form of words could be used by someone who is rehearsing (in the first half of the sentence) what he thinks others might think—or what convention dictates—about the requirements

[2] So I think, though many will disagree. (Someone could disagree with me here without disagreeing with the rest of my argument). My only comment here is that such disagreement is not well-founded to the extent to which it is predicated on assumptions about the logic of 'ought' statements.

[3] A notable exception is Peter Winch, 'The Universalisability of Moral Judgments', in Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge, 1972).

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upon him, and who then (in the second half) expresses his rejection of that. But neither of those uses of the sentence expresses the speaker's own conviction that he is under a requirement, along with his simultaneous determination to ignore it. By contrast, 'I ought to—but who cares, I am not going to' can, it seems, express just that.[4] This difference between 'ought', on the one hand, and 'must', 'have to' and 'can't' on the other, reflects a distinctively personal dimension of the sense of ethical requirement that can be registered by the latter terms.

A familiar schema of the moral modalities has it that everything which is not a moral obligation is adequately characterizable as either morally permissible or morally impermissible. The personal locutions mentioned point to the inadequacy of this schema. A mother feels herself morally compelled to give up her job to look after her very sick child even though she could afford to pay for care. If an obligation is an impersonally determinable requirement—a requirement on anyone who is in a certain situation—she need not think there is an obligation on her to do what she does. She may just say: 'this is what *I* have to do; I cannot speak for others'. Of course someone deciding in such a situation may indeed be prepared to universalize the requirement she registers as binding her. I am saying only that in some cases a person may not be prepared to do that, yet still may recognize her situation as authoritatively binding her in ethical response. She finds she morally must do what she does, yet she does not think that 'anyone' in her situation would have to do what she does.[5] Her sense of moral necessitation is essentially personal.

At this point, some philosophers have invoked the concept of supererogation. Several have done so in arguing against Kant—claiming that a Kantian outlook cannot capture the kind of ethical value we recognize in acts of supererogation, since these are (supposedly) acts with a moral worth which owes precisely to their being in excess of what duty required. Well, there is a place for such a thought: 'He was under no obligation to do that. How generous!' But still, the concept may not take us very far, in part because it remains tied to the Kantian logic, by exclusion as it were. It certainly does not help us understand the mother I mentioned. Or

[4] Pace, famously, R. M. Hare.

[5] Some will say that she can resist thinking that only if either she is confused about the character of ethical necessity, or she tacitly assumes that no-one else's situation ever could be just like hers. But the insistence that one or other of these conditions must obtain is simply re-assertion of the point at issue.

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rather: it does not help articulate *her* sense of her ethical situation. She might recognize that she is under no specific obligation such that others could reasonably find fault with her if she were not to give up her job to care for her child. But she does not therefore think of her situation as outside the bounds of moral requirement. She does not think of what she does as merely 'morally permissible'. No, she thinks of herself as morally bound, only not by an impartial obligation. The concept of supererogation gets no purchase on such a thought.[6]

We cannot capture her sense of what she is doing in the language of impartial or impersonal obligation, even if we supplement that with Kantian talk of 'imperfect' obligations. For she did not understand what she did as, merely, 'one permissible way among indefinitely many permissible ways' of fulfilling some impersonally specifiable obligation she was under. (That is the territory of imperfect Kantian duties or obligations.) She may recognize that as the perspective from which others appropriately think of what she is doing. But that perspective leaves out something crucial to her own ethical sense of her situation. For she finds that this and this alone is what she morally must do here and now.

The 'personal modalities', as we may call them, of ethical necessity and impossibility thus seem able to articulate aspects of our ethical experience which are distorted by the picture of obligations and permissions. Even so, philosophers will question whether the registering of genuine ethical necessity can really be essentially personal. (To many it will seem that allowing ethical requirement to be thus personal thereby removes from it all necessitation.) Bernard

[6] I am not sure that there are any deeds of supererogation different in *this* respect from that of the mother. A defender of supererogation might say that some supererogatory deeds can be recognized by us as ethically valuable without their expressing any sense in the doer of being-required, of responding to an ethical claim. I do not think this is true. I suspect that it sounds plausible only because it is assumed that a person's sense of being-required must be a sense of himself as having-an-obligation (where obligations are understood in the way specified in the text). We can certainly recognize ethical worth in deeds that are not done as discharging such an obligation. But that does not mean that those deeds express no sense of necessitation. It means only that the sense of necessitation they express is not captured in the concept of obligation. A deed of (say) generosity that registered no sense of necessitation at all would be merely whimsical. 'I just felt like it; and if I hadn't felt like it I'd perfectly happily have abandoned you there.' While the beneficiary may still be glad the other 'felt like it', it is hard to see the helper's orientation as expressive of any ethical understanding of his situation.

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Williams offers an answer to this question,[7] an answer whose attraction owes to the promise it holds of both acknowledging and explaining the 'phenomenology' of our experience of ethical requirement. Ethical requirement must be (somehow) internal to what I find myself deeply to be—must 'speak to' what goes personally deep in me—if ethical requirements are to have real authoritative weight for me. (What I 'ought' to do does not seem close enough to me, as it were, for that.) Yet, if that authority is not to dissolve into a disposition to act which is *merely* personal, it must also be intelligible as lying in some sense 'outside' or 'beyond' me. Kant made this double-aspectedness of moral requirement perfectly explicit when he spoke of the 'moral law' as both authoritative over us and also lying within us.

But although Kant made this doubleness perfectly explicit, many would say that he left it as paradoxical and puzzling. Williams thinks he has an account of ethical necessity which makes good sense of the doubleness. His account provides for, as he puts it, 'the recognition of a limit which is neither simply external to the self, nor yet a product of the will',[8] while also dissolving the air of paradox which initially seems to attach to that combination. In this way, Williams aims to do more than remind us of the (important) fact that as a matter of fact we very often do speak and think through the personal idioms of moral necessity and impossibility. That is a reminder of how ethical thinking engages with our personal depths. But Williams also aims to explain how the use of such locutions can both register a substantial sense of moral necessity, and also express a deeply personal sense of engagement. If Williams can explain that, it seems he will have shown that we are not confined to the unsatisfactory conception of the alternatives which the Kantian system offers: on the one hand ethical necessity implausibly interpreted as a constraint of pure reason; on the other hand, 'mere' inclination. Williams tries to articulate an understanding of ethical requirement which will reveal a position between what Kant, and many of his attackers and defenders alike, have assumed to be the only options.

I endorse the aim. But there is still the matter of the way Williams tries to achieve it. The basic categories of Williams' account are those of practical necessity and practical incapacity. Practical necessity and incapacity in turn he regards as species of psychological necessity and incapacity respectively. Moral

[7] In 'Practical Necessity', B. Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 124–31; and in 'Moral Incapacity', B. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[8] 'Practical Necessity', 131.

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incapacities are psychological incapacities which issue from deliberative reasons. Not all psychological incapacities are like this. I cannot bring myself to eat roast rat; I cannot multiply three-digit numbers in my head. But these incapacities are not conclusions of deliberation. Even if I cannot eat roast rat 'because it is so disgusting' what follows the 'because' is not a consideration for me, even though it explains the incapacity by elaborating it. Likewise, 'because doing so is too complicated for me' explains the arithmetical incapacity, by elaborating it. But it specifies nothing which is a consideration for me in arriving at the conclusion that I cannot do the calculation. Deliberation is not part of what leads me to that conclusion. By contrast, Williams holds, what follows the 'because' in 'I can't tell you because it would be disloyal to A' does register a consideration for me, in this case a 'totally decisive' consideration since my deliberative conclusion on the basis of it is that I can't tell you. 'In the case of moral incapacity, my deliberative conclusion not to do the act, reached on the basis of these totally decisive considerations, just is the conclusion that I cannot do it.'[9]

Thus the registering of a moral incapacity is a decision or conclusion that is arrived at through deliberation. As such a decision or conclusion it is an expression of my will, something I commit myself to, thus something whose origin is 'within me'. On the other hand, Williams' story seems to make sense of moral incapacity as the encountering of a limit to my will, something which binds or compels me from without, from beyond this exercise of my will in drawing the practical conclusion I do. But on his account that limit is a limit of my own character: 'Incapacities can not only set limits to character and provide conditions of it, but can also partly constitute its substance.' As Williams also puts it: 'A moral incapacity ... is one with which the agent is identified.' That identification, (partly) constitutive of his character, marks the limits of his deliberative power. In the example I gave, 'I' am one whose character is (partly) defined or constituted by the fact that 'its being disloyal to A' is a totally decisive consideration for me not to tell you.

The attraction of Williams' picture, then, is that it apparently accommodates both of the seemingly paradoxical features of our experience of moral necessity. On the one hand it expresses the resolution of the will—in the form of a decision or deliberative conclusion—and thus shows ethical necessity or impossibility as the articulating of something deeply within us. On the other hand it expresses an encounter with a limit which lies beyond the will and which presents itself as authoritative over the will. Thus the two

[9] 'Moral Incapacity', 51.

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crucial features of moral incapacity (and necessity) which are conjoined in Kant's formulation—'the moral law within'—seem to be preserved in Williams' account. But Kant resolves the apparent paradox—how can something be a law for me and therefore authoritative over me while also coming from within me?—only by implausibly representing moral necessity as a requirement of pure reason. Williams' account seems to make that conjunction of features much more readily intelligible by representing the limit one encounters in the experience of ethical necessity as the limit of one's character. It seems appropriate to call Williams' account 'psychological', though Williams would claim that it does not reduce the ethical to the psychological since the reasons on which I act may be irreducibly ethical reasons. 'I can't tell you because it would be disloyal to A', for example. As Williams puts it, 'among the constraints, requirements, and impossibilities which an agent recognizes are those that obtain for distinctively moral reasons'.[10]

That is a sketch of the account. Should we accept it? Pik Botha, Foreign Minister in the last National Party Government in South Africa, said to the South African Commission on Truth and Justice that he hoped God would forgive him for his role in administering apartheid. Years earlier he clearly thought that helping sustain that very regime was something he had to do—and apparently for moral reasons. Black people were not the moral equals of whites. They deserved *some* acknowledgment, and there were serious limits on how they could be properly treated. But Botha thought that of his animals too. Blacks could not be equal partners in a conversation with whites, and inter-racial sexual relations are inherently demeaning to whites. Only a parody of a marriage between white and black could be imagined, because blacks could not be full respondents to marriage's meaning. And so on. Justice required a social order which reflected the difference in moral status between blacks and whites, and apartheid sustained that order. On Williams' picture it seems we would have to say that in those earlier years Botha faced a moral impossibility. Putting the point 'positively', we would have to say that he then laboured under a practical necessity to act as he did. Because it was a practical necessity mediated by moral considerations—for example, considerations of justice—it enshrines all that could coherently be meant, on Williams' view, by speaking of 'moral necessity'. Now, years later, the moral necessities and impossibilities confronting Botha have changed. There was a moral incapacity in Botha, and now it has disappeared. As Williams says:

[10] 'Practical Necessity', 127.

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> ... an agent may come to see a moral incapacity of his as something with which he is no longer identified ... But so soon as this is really his state of mind ... then he has already lost the moral incapacity.[11]

But this is certainly not how Botha's later way of speaking suggests that he sees things. His language shows him as now convinced that he was at that earlier time under *no* moral necessity to help sustain apartheid. On the contrary, he now recognizes that what he did was morally appalling. And if what he did was morally appalling he cannot have been under a moral necessity to do it. Of course earlier Botha did not think that what he did was morally appalling, but, as he now sees, that is because he was labouring under convictions which expressed racist arrogance.[12] His earlier 'incapacity' to do other than he did was, he now recognizes, not a genuinely moral incapacity, but an expression of his arrogant and racist condescension. He now judges that he was deeply deceived in thinking at that earlier time that he was under a moral necessity to enforce apartheid, and he recognizes that what led him to that mistaken conviction was his own racist arrogance. But that is not just how Botha is wont to describe the business. Not only do we have no trouble understanding this judgment of his. It is very difficult for us not to agree with it.

Williams' account, though, seems to close the conceptual space occupied by the later Botha's thinking. Williams' conditions for Botha earlier having faced just the moral necessity (or impossibility) he then took himself to be facing are satisfied. But Botha comes to judge—in a way we have no trouble understanding, and with which it seems difficult to disagree—that he did not in fact face such a necessity (or impossibility). Only later does Botha come to recognize that earlier he did not in fact face such a necessity or impossibility. And he comes to recognize this only by coming to a very different perspective on his deeds from that which he formerly had. It is possible that his later perspective involves self-deception. But it need not do so, and the example I have in mind is one in which the later Botha is genuinely remorseful. This is surely a possible example, whatever is the case with the actual Botha.

[11] Op. cit., 54.

[12] I do not know that this is precisely what Botha thought. I do not even know that Botha was sincere in what he said to the Commission. But that does not matter, for the interpretation I am giving of what happened clearly enough renders a readily intelligible episode, whether or not it accurately describes what actually happened in this particular case.

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It should be clear that this example is not an isolated one. A husband who grew up forty years ago may have treated his wife like a caged bird, thinking that this was what kindness and consideration for his wife required of him. Later he may come to recognize that his treatment of her was condescending and failed to show her real attention. Not only does he now think he morally cannot treat her as he once thought he morally had to. He also now judges that he laboured under a complacent illusion in ever so much as thinking of himself as under that moral necessity. What he took to be a moral necessity was only a projection of his complacent condescension towards his wife. Again: a woman—perhaps this man's wife—thinks that she cannot allow herself to venture out without make-up and exquisite grooming. To do so would be slovenly and would involve a shameful lack of propriety. She later comes to see this very orientation as trivial and superficial. Yet again: a pro-Communist radical of the sixties may now judge that his resolute discounting of Communist atrocities, in the name of a greater justice, was in fact appallingly and indefensibly callous.

As with Botha, the point in these cases is not that the person did act under a moral necessity or impossibility which no longer obtains. It is rather that what was earlier taken to be action under moral necessity—and which satisfies Williams' criteria for being so—is now judged by the person not to have been so. In each case the person comes to recognize that what he took to be an ethical limit encountered by him in his thinking was not in fact such a limit. He was deeply mistaken in his sincere conviction that he had encountered such a limit.[13] That limit, he now realizes, lay elsewhere than at the limits of his earlier deliberation. Williams identifies ethical limits with the limits of character as encountered in deliberation. The later judgment of Botha (for example) on his earlier self presupposes that this identification is mistaken. It is important to get the temporal indices right here. Botha's later judgment shows not just that he *now* sees things ethically differently—though of course it clearly does show this. It also reveals his recognition that at that earlier time he was acting and thinking in morally terrible ways. That he was unable to acknowledge this at the time reflects, he now sees, only how morally benighted he then was.

[13] Raimond Gaita also seems to exclude this possibility. The characters I mention would sincerely disavow the possibility of their 'trying to do otherwise'. Gaita seems (it is hard to be certain) to suppose that this is sufficient for their 'can't' or 'must' to express a genuinely moral incapacity or necessity. My examples challenge this supposition. See R. Gaita, *Good and Evil* (London: MacMillan, 1991), 110.

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For the sake of simplicity, let us stay with the example of Botha. How might Williams respond to it? He might say that Botha's earlier orientation was not in fact the expression of a real moral incapacity or impossibility—that Botha's later judgment on that score is simply right. Well, I think Botha is right about that, but it is difficult to see how Williams could agree since Botha's earlier orientation seems to satisfy Williams' conditions for expressing a moral incapacity. The strength and depth of his commitment to apartheid were then such as to exclude any deliberative alternatives. Of course he later comes to judge that the strength and depth of that commitment were an expression of his racist arrogance, and as already noted nothing a person sees in that light can he think of as registering a morally compelling conviction. But his coming to see things in that light does nothing to show that at the earlier time he did not satisfy Williams' conditions for having a moral incapacity to do other than he did. He was then wholly 'identified with' the impossibility of doing other than enforcing apartheid. The considerations in favour of doing that were, for him at the time, 'totally decisive', and his sincere deliberative conclusion reached on their basis 'just is', says Williams, a conclusion that he could not do otherwise. (Botha's later judgment that his earlier attitude expressed racist arrogance does not entail that it was insincere.)

Williams might respond in a very different way to my example of Botha. Botha as I imagined him now says that earlier he faced no moral impossibility of the kind he then had taken himself to face. Williams may say that Botha is simply mistaken in this retrospective judgment. Botha did have a moral incapacity, which has now disappeared. (Williams does after all allow, as we saw, that a person can lose a moral incapacity by ceasing to be 'identified' with it.) But taking this view involves flatly rejecting the way Botha understands his situation and himself in it (and rejecting also the understanding of their situation had by the figures in my other examples). That may not necessarily show this view to be mistaken, but it does very seriously call it into question. But we can say more. We can explain away the view's apparent plausibility For that owes to a conflation of two senses of 'moral incapacity'. The later Botha's judgment, remember, is that while he did indeed think at the earlier time that he was morally bound to enforce apartheid, he was in fact under no such ethical necessity and only his arrogance misled him into supposing that he was. That does generate *a* sense in which at the earlier time he laboured under a moral incapacity. But it does not generate the sense of moral incapacity which, at the earlier time, Botha supposed himself to be under. His actual moral incapacity

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was simply a moral lack or inadequacy in him, a moral deficiency informed by his extreme arrogance. That is not the kind of moral incapacity under which at the earlier time he took himself to be labouring. At that time he took his moral incapacity to be expressed by a use of 'cannot' which registered an impassable ethical or moral barrier to what he might do. Botha's own subsequent judgment on his earlier comportment thus implicitly distinguishes two senses of moral incapacity. He says about himself (in effect): 'I was morally blind. In that sense I suffered from a moral incapacity, limitation, deficiency. But that is not the sense of moral incapacity under which, at that earlier time, I took myself to be labouring. Then I took there to be a genuine moral constraint upon me, a genuine moral obstacle in my path. And about that I was quite wrong.'

Williams does indeed conflate what I have just distinguished as two senses of moral incapacity. The effect of doing so is to deny that Botha's retrospective judgment on his earlier comportment expresses any coherent thought. The conflation is not an oversight on Williams' part. It follows from his view that what he calls practical necessity is all that can be rescued from the concept of moral necessity (and impossibility). That view cannot be insulated, however, from being testable by the acceptability of its consequences. The retrospective judgment I ascribed to Botha seems not only perfectly coherent, but a persuasive and even compelling characterization of what happened. Williams adopts a view which implies that Botha's retrospective judgment must be incoherent. If it is in fact perfectly coherent, that puts intolerable pressure on any view denying it could be so. And it must be remembered, as noted before, that my example is far from being an isolated one.

Here I need to note something else forming part of the background to Williams' views about moral necessity. That is Williams' conception of reasons for action as, always, internal reasons. Informally expressed, the idea is that reasons for action for a person must relate to elements in that person's subjective motivational set ('S'). As Williams puts it, the truth of 'A has a reason to ϕ' 'implies, very roughly, that A has some motive which will be served or furthered by his ϕing, and if this turns out not to be so the sentence is false.'[14] The contents of a person's S can include 'such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects ... embodying commitments of the agent'.[15] Williams does not think that a consideration can be a

[14] 'Internal and External Reasons', in *Moral Luck* op. cit., 101.
[15] Op. cit., 105.

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reason for a person only if it directly expresses a present element in S. There are deliberative paths, treadable by practical reason, from one's present motivations to elsewhere, so that one can presently have reasons for action of which one is unaware. As he puts it: 'A has a reason to ϕ only if he could reach the conclusion to ϕ by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has'.[16] Williams wants to extend Hume's picture—of reason as the slave of the passions—from within. But he wants only to extend it, not to supplant it. He thinks that what is of most importance in Hume's view can be preserved even while allowing greater scope to practical reason than to be merely the determination of means to given ends. (That may already describe Hume's actual view too narrowly.) So Williams writes:

> A clear example of practical reasoning is that leading to the conclusion that one has reason to ϕ because ϕing would be the most convenient, economical, pleasant etc. way of satisfying some element of S, and this of course is controlled by other elements in S, if not necessarily in a very clear or determinate way. But there are much wider possibilities for deliberation, such as: thinking how the satisfaction of elements in S can be combined, e.g. by time-ordering; where there is some irresoluble conflict among the elements of S, considering which one attaches most weight to...; or, again, finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment.[17]

Beyond that again, imagination can play a crucial role. By the play of his imagination on something he thinks he wants, a person 'may come to have some more concrete sense of what would be involved, and lose his desire for it'. Conversely, 'the imagination can create new possibilities and new desires', by revealing hitherto unexpected implications of one's current motivations. This enriching of practical reason preserves, Williams thinks, the main spirit of Hume's view. Williams' idea is that the limits of what we have reason to do are provided by whatever motivations can be derived, by deliberation of the above kinds, from our actually existing motivations. Thus there can still be no 'external' reasons—reasons which speak to us from beyond our existing motivations and what can deliberatively be derived from them along the paths Williams

[16] 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', in *Making Sense of Humanity*, 35.

[17] 'Internal and External Reasons', 104.

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describes—though the possibilities of deliberative derivation are more extensive than Humeans have usually allowed.

Williams supposes that this picture helps explain something which plays a part in making it seem as if the ethical limit lies beyond the deliberative limits set by character. Williams notes that personal expressions of practical necessity seem to bridge the boundary between decisions and discoveries. Remember Will Kane in 'High Noon'. When his deputy offers to help Kane if Kane will nominate him as Marshall, Kane says 'I can't'. The deputy says: 'You mean you won't'. Kane's reply is: 'Have it your way.' 'Can't' and 'won't' can both be appropriate forms of expression in this context. 'Can't' reflects the sense of discovering a barrier to the will, while 'won't' reflects the resolution of the will—what Williams calls the element of 'decision'. Williams thinks the sense we sometimes have of making a discovery about what we must do—the sense of encountering a limit to the will—is generated by the fact that our dispositions can be made determinate by being focused on concrete circumstances. The concrete circumstances can be provided directly by experience, or envisaged through the exercise of imagination. Then I can discover what was, unbeknowns to me, implicit in a particular disposition of mine. That my friendship for him would mean I have to do *this* is something I might never have envisaged. For all that, the deliberative limit registered by my 'have to' here is then still a limit derived from the materials of my actual motivational 'S'. '(I)f the deliberation is sound and convincing, it is because it is the best expression of dispositions that were there already.' And this is true, Williams claims (mistakenly, I later suggest), of every occurrence of a sense of ethical necessity or impossibility. Any sense of an ethical limit as lying beyond the limits of my character is therefore an illusion, encouraged if not generated by a misguided belief in the existence of external reasons for action. There is no ethical limit beyond the limits of my character, and an appreciation that the only reasons for action are internal reasons helps dispel the illusion of such a limit.

I said that my examples imply the inadequacy of Williams' account of moral necessity and incapacity or impossibility. We can get clearer on why the examples have the force they do if we reflect further on the precise scope of the thesis about internal reasons on which that account draws. The following two questions are distinct. First, what limits are there on the reasons for acting that a person at a particular time can truly be said to have? Secondly, what are the limits on the reasons for acting that a person might come in the future to have? Williams' thesis about internal reasons provides an

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answer only to the first of these questions. It has *no implications at all* for any answer to the second question. Williams does not seem to be altogether clear about this. Let me try to clarify what is at issue here by reference to an example of Williams' own, that of the husband who treats his wife abominably. Of this man Williams writes:

> I say 'You have a reason to be nicer to her'. He says, 'What reason?' I say, 'Because she is your wife.' He says—and he is a very hard case—'I don't care. Don't you understand? I really do not care.' I try various things on him, and try to involve him in the business; and I find that he really is a hard case: there is nothing in his motivational set that gives him a reason to be nicer to his wife as things are.[18]

This man cannot get, by practical reasoning as Williams understands it, from where he is to the conclusion that he should be decent to his wife. Does Williams want to say that this man therefore cannot ever become someone motivated to be decent to his wife? Or to say that if such a man ever did show himself to be so motivated then it follows that all along there must really have been, contrary to all appearances, something in his S from which that motivation derived? If Williams does want to say either of these things, it is very important to recognize that nothing in his thesis about internal reasons lends any support to his doing so. That thesis says only that this man cannot come to be so motivated by deliberating. That is wholly compatible with allowing that he can come to be so motivated by (for example) 'conversion' as Williams himself calls it. Any debarring of that as a possibility will have to be on the basis of considerations outside the thesis that reasons for action are always internal.[19]

In more than one place Williams does allow that 'conversion' might occasion a motivational change. But he says no more about such conversion than that it constitutes a 'non-rational' change. It is less than clear what Williams supposes to be built into this description. Let me explain. My earlier examples were of changes in which a person comes to be motivated other than by Williams-type

[18] 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', 39.

[19] Some may find the following thought tempting. If this man can be changed to be decent towards his wife then some seed of that disposition must already have been present in him. But there is no reason to suppose this. All that need be assumed is the possibility of his coming to have that disposition. And, substantially, that amounts to no more than: if he comes so to change, then we can say with certainty that it was indeed possible for him to come to have the disposition. The possibility of a disposition does not entail its (so to speak) minutely actual existence.

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deliberation. And more than that, these are changes in motivation which those who undergo them seriously take to reflect compelling new understandings of their situation. The question here for Williams is whether he allows that a change coming about through conversion can express a new understanding of the situation that the convert finds compellingly better than his previous understanding, and which we can endorse as such. For this manifestly happens—all of my examples are examples of it. As I said, there is nothing in the thesis of internal reasons to preclude the possibility of such examples. If in describing changes by conversion as 'non-rational' Williams means *simply* that they do not come about by practical reason as he understands that, then he could allow that such changes may have the character they have in my examples. The trouble then is that the examples contradict—in the ways described earlier—the conditions of his account of moral necessity and impossibility. But if he means that changes by conversion cannot give rise to compellingly better understandings and actions then he claims something for which his thesis about internal reasons provides no justification, and which anyway seems evidently false.[20]

One way of resisting my examples is to say that if the figures in them really do change in the respects I described that must be because all along there was some element in their S from which the new motivations derived. (That thought lay behind one response to the examples that I mooted earlier.) Well, in any particular case there may be such an element. But I have just now argued that the thesis about internal reasons provides no warrant for saying it *must* be so. If that is right, then (unless another argument is offered) we need to 'look and see' whether in any particular case it is so. And I have given several examples in which it seems evidently not so.

We can say a little more about what leads Williams astray here. His shaping of the issue is heavily influenced by his conception of what he is chiefly opposing. He wants to show the emptiness of 'the' doctrine of external reasons, and he takes it that this doctrine is wedded to the thought that deliberation (in the form of the exercise of pure reason) can generate reasons for action from no existing motivations at all. He is right to want to oppose a doctrine committed to that thought. (It is another matter, as others have argued,[21]

[20] This is the territory of John McDowell's 'Might there be external reasons?', in *World, Mind, and Ethics*, J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison (eds) (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68–85.

[21] E.g. Elijah Millgram, 'Williams' Argument Against External Reasons', *Nous* 30:2 (1996), 197–220.

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whether anything recognizable as a doctrine of external reasons is indeed committed to that thought.) A natural way of opposing that thought is to argue that reasons for action can be generated only by deliberation beginning from already existing motivation. But that is in fact a much stronger claim than is needed. The strongest claim needed to oppose the doctrine of external reasons as Williams characterizes it is that any *deliberative* generation of reasons has to begin from some existing motivation. And that claim leaves it open, as I have argued, that a person may come to have new and compellingly good reasons other than *via* deliberation.

There is a risk of conceding too much here to the terms in which Williams frames what is at issue. I described my examples as instances of 'conversion' because they fall outside what Williams specifies as the range of practical reason. But we should not be misled by the label 'conversion'. First, the character and number of the examples make it clear that conversion does not have to be thought of as anything very exotic. But beyond that, the examples shade into cases which even on the broadest use of the term are not well-described as involving conversion. It is important to appreciate this, lest it be thought that the critique of Williams' views here trades on what are after all rather peripheral phenomena which cannot be expected to bear much philosophical weight. Go back to Williams' remarks about why conclusions of moral necessity present themselves to us as, jointly, decisions and discoveries:

> It is a decision, as being indeed the conclusion of a deliberation whether to do that thing. But it presents itself to the agent also as a discovery, because the underlying dispositions have not before been focused through and on to that very conjunction of features. The incapacity to do this thing is an expression of those dispositions as applied to this situation *through this very deliberation*. In one sense, the highly specific incapacity comes about through the deliberation … But this … is not unequivocally true … (I)f the deliberation is sound and convincing, it is so because it is the best expression of dispositions that were there already. In creating an application, the deliberation reveals a potentiality.[22]

No doubt those last two sentences are *sometimes* true, but Williams gives us no reason to think they *must* be true. Earlier I mentioned the person who had not realized, until this situation arose, that friendship with Harry would require *this* of him. Sometimes it may be most implausible to regard a person's resolution to (say) keep

[22] 'Moral Incapacity', 52.

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faith in *these* circumstances as simply the best expression of dispositions he already has. Perhaps the unforeseen situation *deepens* his sense of friendship and its requirements. Then the disposition he had is not 'best expressed' by his deliberative conclusion, but is *creatively developed* in this new encounter. What newly motivates is then not wholly 'external' to his previous S, to be sure, but neither is it internal in Williams' sense. The pressure to think it must be internal seems to rest on a conflation. This person begins, in his thinking, from his existing 'disposition' of friendship with Harry. But that does not mean, and provides no reason for thinking, that wherever he gets to from there must be only a function of where he started from. Appreciating that frees us up to acknowledge the significance of this simple example. If a new encounter seriously deepens a disposition someone has, then he may act from a creatively transformed understanding which cannot plausibly be described as just the 'best expression' of what was 'there already'. And we can then recognize that it is not only phenomena of 'conversion' that resist being understood in terms of Williams' model. Conversion phenomena lie at one end of a continuum of cases of compelling new motivation that do not fit the model of internal reasons. At the other end of the continuum lie cases like that of Harry's friend, which it seems plausible to say involve deliberation, yet of a kind that Williams' model does not fit.[23]

I shall end by considering further the implications of an important feature of my examples. Recall that they involve people articulating, from the new moral standpoint to which they come, a certain compelling critical judgment on their earlier standpoint. Botha (for example) does not take it that at the earlier time he found himself constrained by a moral impossibility, and that now he is constrained by a very different moral impossibility. It is not a question of his 'ceasing to be identified with' what was, earlier, a genuine moral impossibility. Rather, Botha takes it that his earlier orientation involved no genuine moral impossibility at all, even though he had earlier sincerely taken it to do so, and even though all of Williams' conditions for it constituting a genuine moral impossibility were satisfied.

[23] If Botha's new conviction is the issue of conversion it would seem necessarily to be not deliberatively mediated. (That seems to be an element of the concept of conversion.) So the example runs counter to Williams' claim that moral necessity (and impossibility) have to be understood as the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning. In this I concur with the burden of Craig Taylor's paper 'Moral Incapacity', *Philosophy* **70** (1995), 273–85.

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Williams thinks of the ethical limit, as we have seen, as a limit of character encountered in deliberation. But Botha's later judgment reveals his acknowledgment of a gap between the limits of his character as then revealed in his deliberation, and the genuine ethical limits that all along were binding him. He comes to see that he failed, at that earlier time, to acknowledge those limits, and to see, moreover, that this was because of a fault or faults in his character that were expressed in his thinking. His arrogance was, we might say, the *form* of his blindness to the genuine ethical requirements of his situation as it then was. The particular intensity and resoluteness of his arrogance was crucial to his single-minded determination to prosecute that path which he now remorsefully repudiates and which then led him to reject all entreaties to do otherwise.[24]

The example of Botha is intended to reveal a gap between the limits of Botha's character as it then was, and the limits marked by moral necessity and impossibility. This is just the gap Williams aims to deny. The example—like my other examples—exploits the passage of time between Botha's earlier and later orientations. Only from his later standpoint is Botha able to appreciate that gap. But it is very important that the gap itself is appreciated by him as having obtained at the earlier time. The passage of time does not constitute the gap but makes it visible. What Botha appreciates—across time—is a *conceptual* gap between the psychological limits of his thinking at that earlier time and its ethical limits at that time. But it is not a conceptual gap that obtains only between the psychological limits and the ethical limits of his *earlier* thinking. It is rather a general conceptual gap between the psychological limits of his thinking and its ethical limits. But the implication of this is that there is in general a conceptual gap between the psychological limits of thinking and its ethical limits. The two kinds of limit are conceptually distinct even if one who sincerely takes himself to have encountered an ethical limit cannot *at that time* epistemically distinguish this from a limit of his character arrived at in deliberation.

A familiar consideration in epistemology may help to clarify the issue here. Perhaps I cannot epistemically distinguish my now

[24] Cf. Millgram on 'Archie's insensitivity', op. cit., 203–4. In another context, of course, the particular intensity and resoluteness of someone's truthfulness (say) might be what informs his finding that he cannot lie to another. Botha's orientation registers no moral impossibility or necessity (as we saw, Botha himself came to acknowledge that it did not). The orientation of truthfulness may do so. This shows that moral necessity and impossibility cannot be specified in the merely formal terms Williams proposes (or for that matter in any other formal terms).

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believing P from my knowing it. But the concepts of belief and knowledge—and the complex indexical concepts of my believing and my knowing—are distinct. Part of the background to their distinctness is the possibility of coming to recognize, from a different vantage point, that the claim to knowledge one made has not stood up. But then one can also appreciate the possibility that one *here and now* only believes and does not know, even though one cannot recognize that possibility as actually obtaining—which it does if one's belief is in fact false. Only from a different critical perspective can I epistemically distinguish between my actually knowing something and my mistakenly believing it. But the possibility enshrined by that different critical perspective points to the conceptual distinctness of believing and knowing, a conceptual distinctness we can appreciate even when in a particular case we are in no position to apply one concept without applying the other. Mastery of that conceptual distinctness enables us to think of our use of 'I know' as containing an aspiration, so to speak, beyond whatever is sufficient to generate even confident belief. The conceptual horizon of a claim to knowledge lies beyond the epistemic encounters which shape my beliefs. Similarly, aspects of certain uses of 'can't', 'must', and 'have to' reveal an aspiration in those uses of the terms towards an ethical limit which cannot be understood in the (broadly psychological) terms Williams employs—that is, as a limit of character encountered in deliberation.

Caution is needed here. First, what I say about the conceptual horizon of a claim to knowledge does not tie me to any particular philosophical 'account'—'realist' or 'anti-realist', for example—of truth or knowledge. But beyond that, the epistemic 'case' is not a direct parallel to the moral one. There is no direct epistemic parallel to the personal dimension of moral necessity that I said Williams rightly highlights. My remarks about belief and knowledge should not be taken even to suggest, let alone to warrant, a 'realist' view of moral necessity and impossibility—a view of them as obtaining 'independently' of people's realizing of them. Here, at least, 'realist' and its contrast terms obscure more than they reveal, as, incidentally, does that adverb 'independently'. (One thing they obscure is that 'personal' dimension of moral necessity. Conversely, however, the account Williams develops to reflect that personal dimension gives us only a reductively distorted picture of moral necessity.) More broadly, my opposition to Williams' account of ethical necessity and impossibility does not commit me to any particular 'account' of those limits. In addition to resisting a 'realist' account of them, I do not have to say—and I do not think—

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that they are, for example, limits of pure reason nor that they are constituted by what a notional *phronimos* would do.[25] I do not in fact see the need for any further 'account' at all. I think we discover all we need to discover about ethical necessity and impossibility, and indeed all we *can* discover about them, by seeing the ways in which a sense of these things informs our lives. (It is a different question whether that will dispel their mystery.) But of course that is itself a claim requiring further argument.

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[25] Or, relatedly, by what I would do under advice from my 'fully rational' self. See Michael Smith 'Internal Reasons', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **55**, 109–31.

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