Deliberating from One's Virtues

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Abstract
Bernard Williams says that 'the characteristic and basic expression of a moral disposition in deliberation is not a premise which refers to that disposition'. If this means that we can never properly self-ascribe virtues and deliberate from this, then Williams is wrong. To deny this possibility is to be committed to either of two positions, neither of which is all that attractive (and certainly not attractive to Williams). The first position demands that virtue cannot know itself; while the second rests on the pessimistic view that morality itself can demand of us our moral identity.

In his essay *Utilitarianism and moral self-indulgence*, Bernard Williams asks the question: 'How are we to picture the expression of moral dispositions in an agent's deliberative thought'? He doesn't claim to provide a complete answer, but he does make 'one claim … about the subject'.[1] It … 'is that the characteristic and basic expression of a moral disposition in deliberation is not a premise which refers to that disposition – it is *not* the basic characteristic of a generous man's deliberations that he uses the premise "I am a generous man". Whatever else', he continues, 'one goes on to say about this subject, that negative claim is surely correct. Though the generous man is partly characterised by what goes into his deliberations, it is not that what goes into them are reflections on his generosity.'

It is unclear whether Williams thinks that a virtuous person can *ever* properly deliberate from a premise which 'refers to that disposition', but it is clear that he is dubious about the idea.

I think he should allow for such deliberation.[2] There are cases in which we *can* properly self-ascribe a virtue, and such a self-ascription *may* function as a deliberative premise. To deny this possibility is to

[1] Bernard Williams, 'Utilitarianism and moral self-indulgence', *Moral Luck*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 48. (All Quotations in this paragraph are from this page.)

[2] In fact, elsewhere he himself gives us good reasons for so allowing. (Part of the point of this paper is, as it were, to turn Williams on himself – for I think his dubiousness about deliberating from our virtues reflects a tacit – and unknown – commitment of his to that 'morality system' he otherwise repudiates.)

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be committed to either of two positions, neither of which is all that attractive. The first position demands that virtue cannot know itself; while the second rests on the pessimistic view that morality may demand of us our moral identity.

I

'[I]t is', Williams says, 'a notorious truth that a modest person does not act under the title of modesty',[3] so let me begin with this most notorious of cases.[4]

It is true that there may be something wrong with saying, with evident sincerity, 'I am modest', *eo ipso* with deliberating from this. The problem is that there is a kind of performative self-contradiction involved, akin to saying 'I am not now speaking'. What we are doing is *boasting* about our modesty, showing that far from being modest, we are, in fact, *proud*; and one cannot be proud of one's modesty without not being modest at all.

But if it is true we will not, if modest, be given to boasting about our modesty, must this rule out our properly *describing* ourselves this way?

Consider the following. We encounter St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. We are asked, 'Have you been a modest person?'

It would seem possible for us to think back and say honestly, 'No, I have not been modest, I have been a proud.' But if we can self-ascribe the vice of pride, then *prima facie* seems peculiar to think there is an asymmetry when it comes to its antithesis, the virtue of modesty.

Perhaps, instead, we respond 'I'm not sure…', to which St. Peter replies 'Yes, you have been modest'. Now should or would we reply, 'No! You *must* be wrong about that'? Or 'Well, that's what *you* say'? Or should we not *reply* at all?

The problem with the first two responses is, surely, that we are no longer *being* modest. Contradicting St. Peter, or simply relativizing his judgement involves its own arrogance. But is there a problem with the third response? Why can't we just keep quiet? Perhaps we

[3] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Fontana, 1985), 10.

[4] Is modesty a virtue? Well G. K. Chesterton called it one of the 'very rare and royal human virtues', and on such matters perhaps we should take his word. (G. K. Chesterton, 'The Worship of the Wealthy', in Alberto Manguel (ed.) *Lying in Bed and Other Essays*, (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000), 488.

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can, but then everything is in the hands of St Peter. For if he goes on, 'Oh yes, I *assure* you, you truly are modest!', then our self-effacing strategy is in trouble. To simply continue in silence, without acknowledging St. Peter's claim, now starts to look rude, even smug.[5] It appears that we accept the truth of St. Peter's claim – for we do not deny it – but insist on playing the role of an ingénue, even though we – and certainly St. Peter – know that that is all it is in the circumstances. (I am reminded of my grandmother, who invariably responded to thanks for putting herself out for others with the words *'I can't hear you!'*)

And if it is said that by not replying we are simply *suspending* judgement as to whether St. Peter is right or not to say we are modest, then it has to be asked what, if anything, would lead us to remove the suspension? And if the answer is 'nothing', then in what sense can our judgement be suspended?

Would we suspend judgement if, on going through the Pearly Gates, we confronted three signs; the first stating 'Modest People to the Centre', the second 'Proud People to the Left', the third 'Uncertain People to the Right'? Surely we would think along these lines: 'Well, I am modest – I have St. Peter's word for that – so I will go to the centre.' To do anything else seems wilful perverse.

Perhaps it makes all the difference that it is *St. Peter* who is doing the judging – someone whom, because of his relationship to God and position at the Pearly Gates, can be assumed to be infallible – and that it would be different if it were someone less exalted.

Imagine plain Leo Tolstoy, whom we have found to have excellent judgement when it comes to ascertaining people's virtues and vices. Let us say too, that, on the basis of experience with his judgement of others, and all other things being equal, we defer to it when he attributes a virtue or vice to another.

One day, as we go on in our self-effacing way, Leo exclaims 'You know you truly are a modest man!' What are we to think of ourselves now? Consider that if Leo had said this of Drew, we would have been prepared to accept the claim that Drew is a modest man; so why deny Leo's testimony in our own case when we would not think of denying it in the case of someone else? This exceptionalism appears to sit ill with our supposed modesty.

Perhaps the objection to the properness of self-ascribing modesty comes out if, at St. Peter's or Leo's request, we take time and think about our life, and then say 'Yes, looking back, I see I have been a

[5] We are being *precious* about our modesty (and so not modest at all).

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modest man'. Maybe this is something that, because of our modesty, we can't do.

'Can't do' might mean one of two things.

It may be that we can, looking back, come to know we have been a modest person, but can't bring our self to *say* it, so that we must either lie to St. Peter, hedge the issue by relativising the claim, or, in our bashful refusal to 'own up' to St. Peter's judgement, to play at being modest. In these cases the "can't do" seems merely to be a *mannered* 'can't do'.

Or the 'can't do' might be read in a constitutive sense, so that – somehow – the virtue of modesty makes it literally impossible for us to recognise our modesty. But isn't this a possible case? We sit down, at the request of our grandchildren, to write a memoir. When we read it back we are struck – nay, deeply surprised – to see that we have been, and perhaps have always been, a deeply modest person. Why could not we be *struck* by our modesty in this way?

Perhaps we should draw a distinction between *acknowledging* St. Peter's or one's memoir-reading self's claim that we are modest, and *claiming*, or *holding that* we are modest.

The distinction wanted is not merely or barely that between knowing that a proposition states a truth and knowing the truth it states, as in the case in which, knowing Arcardy always speaks the truth, and only ever bothers making assertions, I hear him say something in Russian, which I do not understand, but which, still, I know to express a truth. After all, I know perfectly well what St. Peter, or my memoir reading self, are thinking and saying.

The distinction might turn on the discursive history of the statement 'I am modest'. Perhaps it depends on whether we bluntly assert that we are modest or whether we do so as a consequence of acknowledging *another's* judgement. To hold that we are modest, rather than merely to acknowledge our modesty, is to self-ascribe the virtue off our own bat. And this we can't do without pragmatic self-contradiction. But we can modestly acknowledge the judgement of another.

Still, there is something dubious here. After all, one is supposed to be able to know that the claim 'Tony is modest' is true of 'Tony', and that *I* am 'Tony'; and that it is true because Tony, who it must be admitted is me, is in fact *modest*. At this point it is hard to see what the 'acknowledge but not claim' option might mean, or rather, what it might mean as anything more than the kind of 'mannered' evasion discussed above.[6]

[6] Maybe the modest person is, necessarily, 'modesty blind'? Being modest we just can't *see* modesty at all. But this means that we can't recognise

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Besides, why think such knowledge must originate with another's judgement?

Imagine two agents, Ian and Bill, facing the same situation. Ian determines that he ought to X, Bill, on the other hand, though he sees how Ian can determine this, and how it might even be right that he does determine this, finds that he, Bill, just cannot make that determination. Perhaps both are offered, in turn, a position they are eminently qualified for – say the Papacy. Bill finds he simply cannot, being the person he is, accept such an elevation; Ian, on the other hand, has no problems.

In finding out that this is not an option for him, Bill finds out something about himself. What does he find out? He finds out, surely, that he is modest (and probably a more modest man than Ian). And knowing this, why can't he deploy this knowledge in deliberation?[7]

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it in others too. Modesty then, becomes the virtue that cannot speak its own name, because it cannot know itself. To have it, then, is to lose the very understanding of the world it is taken to express. But that means it self-annihilates…

[7] A final possibility for resisting the possibility of the proper self-ascription of modesty takes another tack. The idea is that to self-ascribe modesty involves taking a certain *pleasure* in one's modesty – and that the taking of this pleasure shows that one is not modest. A modest person, it will be said, is not modest because of the pleasure it brings them – the pleasures of either or both self-approval and the approval by others – but because they answer the (moral) world's call for modesty.

The first thing to say in response is to point out that there is a difference between doing something for the pleasure it brings, and taking pleasure in what one has (rightly) done. It is a hard thought that that the bearer of true virtue must not even take pleasure in virtue's work well done; and it is probably absurd. After all, if a virtue is that, then it is of value, and if one can know that one has a virtue, then one knows that one has something of value; and it is surely appropriate to take pleasure in possessing something of value.

The second thing to say is that while we might not be able to be truly modest, rather than merely seek to appear modest, in so far as we do the 'modest thing' only because of the pleasure it brings us; still one can take due pleasure in being the sort of person – a modest one – who does modest things because this is what one takes the occasion to call for. And if this is the case, then deliberating from our self-ascribed modesty does not undermine the attribution in so far as the pleasure that might accompany the self-ascription is a pleasure at being the kind of person who can be

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II

If there is a distinction here, it will have to be drawn another way. We need to distinguish between (*self*)*ascriptive* and *deliberative* judgments.

On this view the self-ascription of modesty is, as the knowledge that we bear the virtue, certainly possible – we can come to *know* that we are modest; but we can't *act* on this knowledge. We can ascribe the virtue to ourselves, just as a spectator might, but we cannot as an *agent*, move from this to action.

Obviously the psychology is troubling. For how are we supposed to partition off the ascriptive from the deliberative, particularly when both perspectives are our own? It seems we must act on the basis of not knowing something about ourselves that we do in fact know…

And there are, surely, cases in which to insist on such a bifurcation of the ascriptive and deliberative would limit unnecessarily the possibilities of expressing that virtue we undoubtedly have.

Consider cases in which 'the chips are down'. These are situations where we confront a situation in which, after our best efforts at appreciating how things are, we simply cannot (as yet) see what morally is to be done. It may be that we have failed to discern a relevant feature of the situation, but in the case we are imagining, this is not so. We are confident – and rightly so – that we have all the features in view; the problem is that we cannot get them to 'hang together' in a way which gives a clear direction for decision and action. What is inappropriate in such a case, with us thinking 'Look, I am a modest person, and what would a modest person do in these circumstances?' It might be precisely by asking this question – perhaps because it allows us a certain 'cooling' distance from the heat of pressing immediacies – that the otherwise indecisive or bewildering moral features assume a form from which right action flows.

If this is what happens, then the idea of our modesty has played a role in our deliberations, but perhaps not a properly *deliberative* role. After all, the part it has played is the part a *spectator's* ascriptive judgement might have played (hence, perhaps, the 'cooling distance' it opens up). Thus we are perplexed, and St. Peter says, 'Well, this is what a modest man would do', and then perhaps we can see things in a certain way, and so resolve our perplexity in appropriate action. But we still have to *decide* to act as a modest man would, so are not

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genuinely modest, whether it happens to bring further, incidental pleasures or not.

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reasoning from our modesty to the decision. Rather we are deciding to act *as if* we are modest.[8]

But why does it have to be true of us that if we ask 'what would a modest person do here?' that we are merely asking how we might act *as if* we were modest? There does not have to be a gap between the conclusion 'A modest person would X', and our doing X – certainly there is no such gap for the truly modest ('Look, I am a modest man…') – and there seems no reason for denying that we might not ask, in the sorts of situations we are considering, what, being a modest, we ought do, and find ourselves arriving at the deliberative conclusion that we ought to X.

We still might have doubts – for in the case described the self-ascription is *brought to* the deliberation, rather than emerging *in and through* it; and (perhaps because my previous remarks have not fully quietened the as-if worries associated with the former) we might think that the real deliberative potency of self-ascription demands the latter. So let me describe a case where the self-ascription emerges in and through the deliberative process, so as to determine our course of action. Take the virtue of justice, and consider that we are reflecting on whether or not to accept nomination to be a Judge in the High Court. Our initial concern is a fear that we might harbour biases which would get in the way of our appropriately discharging such duties (perhaps we have only dealt so far in our career with criminal cases, never divorces or commercial suits or civil cases of slander), and so we engage in self-examination (perhaps aided by our friends). After judicious reflection we conclude that we are fair-minded, or fair-minded enough, to be a judge, and accept the position…[9]

I conclude that there are agents and occasions when the deliberatively potent self-ascription of a virtue is both possible and morally unobjectionable. (Perhaps Williams would allow this – after all what he says is 'that the characteristic and basic expression of a moral disposition in deliberation is not a premise which refers to that disposition – it is *not* the basic characteristic of a generous

[8] Thus Sartre writes: 'the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.' *Existentialism and Humanism*, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm

[9] The first – 'chips are down' – case is one in which right action involves us in being clear on who we are; while the second case is one in which such action involves our need to discover who we are.

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man's deliberations that they use the premise 'I am a generous man'. And it may well be true that in most cases 'the chips' are *not* 'down', and nor do we face the kinds of difficult decision faced by our prospective judge. Normally then – and so, perhaps, 'characteristically' and 'basically' – a virtuous man does not deliberate from a self-ascribed virtue; rather their possession of the virtue leads them to take certain things as morally relevant to the determination of their action.)

III

So, is this the end of the story: Generally virtuous people do not deliberate from their virtue, but there are occasions when they may well, and properly, reason in this way? No, it is not. For there is one area – that of deliberation directed at *hypothetical* situations – where we might be tempted to deny that we can *ever* reason to or from our possession of a virtue to what we would have, or perhaps would do, in certain new or novel circumstances.

The idea is that in these cases the self-ascription of a virtue has a necessarily *predictive* element, and so is *risky* in a way that undermines the appropriateness of full-bloodedly self-ascribing the virtue.

Lloyd Reinhardt made this point by claiming that the following two propositions are – *contra* Plato and Hare – perfectly consistent, and tentatively suggests that to hold otherwise might involve an ultimately speculative – so ungrounded – confidence. Here are the propositions:

A. If I had been in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, I ought to have taken steps to prevent the wanton destruction of innocent people; ought to have joined the underground at least, perhaps even have confronted people who came to my neighbour's house and took him and his family away.
B. But I do not know if, had I been there, I would have had the courage to do such things. I hope I would have had. But I might not have had.[10]

Many find it obvious that a claim like A can only be honestly co-joined to a disclaimer like B, and certainly I would not like to claim – as do Plato and Hare – that if we have a virtue we must be

[10] Lloyd Reinhardt, 'Desire, Evil and Grace', *Philosophy*, Vol. 53, No. 205 (Jul., 1978), 325–333. (In the final analysis I do not think Reinhardt's position is contrary to my own.)

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certain, and rightly so, that we would act on it if such situations eventuated; and that if we did not, then we never truly had the virtue in the first place. Such a strong claim is absurd (and especially when, as in Hare's case, it is based on a claim about the meaning of 'ought'), but I do think that there are some people whose virtue is such that they can have of themselves such certainty. Such possession of a virtue might be heroic, but it can be real, and being real it has a certain lesson for how we understand the demands morality may, and may not make, on us.

Consider the case of Lord Nelson when, in writing to Lady Hamilton, he said that he was sure that he would have been Brave Nelson still, *even if in other, and humbler, circumstances* ('…I feel, if I had been in an humbler sphere, that Nelson would have been Nelson still'[11]). He holds that – whatever the circumstances he might have encountered, or, indeed, might still encounter – he would have, and he will, indeed act courageously. Clearly the kind of certainty here is not of an inductive or probabilistic kind. Nelson was not saying to Lady Hamilton that, on the basis of a review of his past actions, he felt it *likely* that he would, or would have, acted bravely if he had been in other circumstances than those he had been in. He is saying that insofar as he remains the Nelson he is, then he will do as such a man would – he will *be* courageous.

If there is an objection his self-ascription, it must be directed at this identity-claim. How, it might be said, can Nelson possibly *know* that he *will*, in fact, remain the Nelson he now is? No matter how courageous one is, it is possible surely that the world throws up, or might have thrown up, circumstances in which one is no longer brave?

One might think this, but Nelson certainly did not. Here is his account of that epiphanic moment when he determined on his identity.

> A sudden glow of patriotism was kindled within me, and presented my King and Country as my patron. My mind exulted in the idea. "Well then", I exclaimed, "I will be a hero, and confiding in Providence, I will brave every danger".[12]

Notice that Nelson says I will *be* a hero, I *will* brave every danger. There is here no sense of contingency, no fear or worry about failure, no sense that his being courageous is in any sense a hostage

[11] Quoted in Oliver Warner, *A Portrait of Nelson*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 269.
[12] *Ibid*., 32.

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to fate. 'Nelson' is, as Nelson says, a hero, and so a brave and courageous man. He deliberates, and will always deliberate, from his securely self-ascribed virtue.

Obviously, in one sense, Nelson's identity *is* a 'hostage to fate'. He might, for instance, suffer a terrible head injury in battle, and come out of it a quite different person – disabled, timid, fearful, etc. But this 'external' possibility is not to the point. Nelson's courageousness is *internal* to his sense of himself as a moral agent. He is saying that there is no deliberative route by which he might lose his identity, not that he mightn't suffer from a terrible injury and its consequences. Nelson is sure that he will never succumb to cowardice, not that he might not have his identity so compromised from something outside morality, that he becomes cowardly. Achilles makes the same point in the *Iliad* when he promises the supplicant priest Calchas that so long as he, Achilles, 'is in possession of his senses' no one shall hurt him, not even Agamemnon himself.[13] The modality of necessity here is not physical or empirical – it is the necessity ('ontological', if you like) of a certain (moral) identity. *Being* such a person this is what one *will* do. As Alexander Pope said of Achilles' 'manners': – 'They are well mark'd; and *discover before-hand* what Resolutions the Hero will make.'[14]

To deny this is to be committed to holding that there is a deep contingency Achilles and Nelson miss *within* morality itself. On this view the demands of morality as they bear on an agent, even a virtuous agent, might be such as they can 'pull the moral rug out from under our legs'. Morality, that is to say, may demand of us our moral identity.

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The view that our identity may have to be sacrificed on the cross of morality is not, of course, Nelson's (and certainly not Achilles'). He was morally secure as a brave and courageous hero. As we might expect, given his time and background (his Father was a clergyman) he tended to express this security in terms of a simple and absolute trust in Providence:[15]

[13] Homer, *The Iliad*, I, 100–110.

[14] Quoted in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, (University of California Press, 1984), 81. (My italics.)

[15] Achilles' time and background were, of course, very different from Nelson's. There was, for Achilles no question of his *determining* to be a hero – a hero is simply what he was. Nor, in his unreflective era, did

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> When I lay me down to sleep I recommend myself to the Care of Almighty God, when I awake I give myself up to His direction, amidst all the evils that threaten me, I will look up to Him for help, and question not but that He will either avert them or turn them to my advantage though I know neither the time nor the manner of my death, I am not at all solicitous about it because I am sure that He knows them both, and that He will not fail to support and comfort me.[16]

Such passages may incline us to doubt the security of his moral identity, but this is to miss the certainty or surety he has that God will not fail to 'support and comfort me'. As we might say, his belief in Providence is of a distinctly Nelsonian and 'manly' kind. But there is, in Judeo-Christianity (and not only there) a different, less secure, conception of Providential Authority; and this conception is, I suggest, one deep root of the propensity many have, to deny the Nelsonian possibility.

Consider the *Old Testament* story of Abraham and Isaac.

> After these events, God tested and proved Abraham…
>
> God said, Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love … and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you.
>
> So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took … his son Isaac.
>
> Then Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took the firepot in his own hand and a knife; and the two of them went off together.
>
> And Isaac said to Abraham, My father! And he said, Here I am, my son. Isaac said, See, here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt sacrifice?
>
> Abraham said, My son, God himself will provide a lamb for the burnt offering. So the two went off together.
>
> When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there; then he laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him upon the altar on the wood.
>
> And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took hold of the knife to slay his son.

Achilles feel the need or pressure to expressly formulate his heroic status, or to connect it to any broader conception of the world.

[16] Warner, op. cit., 87.

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> But the Angel of the Lord called to him from Heaven and said, Abraham! Abraham! He answered, here I am.
>
> And he said, Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know you fear and revere God, since you have not held back from Me, or begrudged giving me your son, your only son….
>
> …in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed and by Him bless themselves, because you have heard and obeyed My voice.

However you might look at this story, the moral (if that's quite the right word) is clear: For God, for morality, one must be prepared to abandon one's self as anything over and above one's willingness to do as God or it demands. And as the story further makes clear – morality or God owes no loyalty at all to one's attachments (including – or so it seems – one's moral(ised) attachments), either to others – here to one's (trusting) son – or to oneself – here as a (loving) father.

Just the same demand can be found in the New Testament. Consider the famous injunction:

> But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what the right hand doeth. (Matthew, 6:3)

What is recommended here is that troubling psychology I pointed to earlier. It isn't just that we can't properly – modestly – give alms if we are trying to impress an external audience – this is the point of the previous verse:

> Therefore when thou doest thine alms do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men.

It is that we must be modest even in and before our *inner* self, where this means that we cannot see or recognise that what we do is modest (and so see that such modesty might be a ground of (self)worth or merit).

One reason for insisting on this involves certain – mistaken – views about the place, or lack of it, of pleasure in (pursuing) virtue of the kind I have discussed – and dismissed – in footnote 7. Another, deeper, more problematic, but more illuminating, source of so insisting can be found in the following explication of this passage in a modern commentary:

> …man must come to realize that he is almost nothing as he is, and that all his vanity, merit, conceit, self-esteem, self-liking, self-satisfaction and self-love, and all his imagination of himself, is

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> practically an illusion. It is indeed only possible to understand that harsh teaching of Christ in view of its aim, which is to break up a man's whole psychology, the man as life has made him, the man he regards himself as, and make him think and feel and act in a new way, so that he begins to move towards a higher level, towards another state of himself that exists within him as a possibility.[17]

On this view to lay claim to a security in our identity of the kind Nelson or Achilles claims is delusional. There is no real 'necessity' here but rather a possessive attitude towards one's virtue; a kind of morally misguided 'higher selfishness'. What one is to do is to be 'reborn' as an entirely 'new man'. As our commentator continues:

> everything must be rearranged and altered. All a man's ordinary relations with different sides of himself must alter. The whole setting of his being must change. The whole man must change.[18]

As I have said, the psychology is troubling, perhaps even incomprehensible, but even if it is not, still, given examples like Nelson and Achilles, why should we consider this anything more than a prejudice? Why *should* we accept this picture of morality, with its demand we be willing to abandon all that it is we have been and are? Why *must* we be prepared to accept the demand that we abandon ourselves, sacrifice ourselves and all that is good and virtuous in us, in order to honour the demands of something – God or morality – which refuses to honour us in its turn?

Williams himself gives us reason to question this when he speaks of a man's 'ground projects' which 'provide the motive force which propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living', and objects to utilitarianism that it is 'quite an absurd requirement' that a man must give this up if it 'conflicts with' what 'impersonal utility-maximization requires'.[19] And he objects in a similar way to the Kantian's demand that if 'impartial morality' conflicts with such a ground project, 'impartial morality must be required to win.' This, he says, 'is quite unreasonable'.[20] And surely this is right. It was an absurd and unreasonable demand God placed on Abraham, and Abraham ought not to have complied. That he did is no mark of his virtue or even his humility. It was a case, and a

[17] Maurice Nicoll, *The New Man*, (Taylor & Francis, 1984), 62.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, Morality", *Moral Luck, op. cit.*, 13.
[20] *Ibid*., 14.

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reprehensible one, of identity failure. Abraham became as plasticine in the hands of an alienated morality, and so became no father at all to his son, who in turn had lost his father.

The arguments of those hostile to the possibility of the truthful self-ascription of virtue, and so of its deployment in deliberation, rest ultimately on this view of the relationship of moral agency to morality. You may, of course, embrace such a view (as Williams – rightly, in my view – suggests that in their own ways, Utilitarians and Kantians do), but if so then an important consequence follows. It is that you have lumbered yourself with a view of morality which makes it hard to see why, on any sane view of things, it ought to matter to us any more than we, apparently, matter to it.

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