

ABSTRACT: Bernard Williams is a sceptic about the objectivity of moral value, embracing instead a certain qualified moral relativism—the ‘relativism of distance’. His attitude to blame too is in part sceptical (he thought it often involved a certain ‘fantasy’). I will argue that the relativism of distance is unconvincing, even incoherent; but also that it is detachable from the rest of Williams’ moral philosophy. I will then go on to propose an entirely localized thesis I call the *relativism of blame*, which says that when an agent’s moral shortcomings by our lights are a matter of their living according to the moral thinking of their day, judgements of blame are out of order. Finally, I will propose a form of moral judgement we may sometimes quite properly direct towards historically distant agents when blame is inappropriate—*moral-epistemic disappointment*. Together these two proposals may help release us from the grip of the idea that moral appraisal always involves the potential applicability of blame, and so from a key source of the relativist idea that moral appraisal is inappropriate over distance.

## The Relativism of Blame and Williams’ Relativism of Distance

Must I think of myself as visiting in judgement all the reaches of history? Of course, one can imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur, disapproving of its injustices, but exactly what grip does this get on one’s ethical or political thought?<sup>1</sup>

Bernard Williams famously argued for a distinctive brand of moral relativism, which he regarded as capturing the truth in relativism, and which he called *the relativism of distance*. He maintained this position as applied to moral appraisal throughout his life and work, and although he discussed it in more than one place, he only ever offered one account of it.<sup>2</sup> I want to revisit that account; and to examine the apparent philosophical motivations for it deriving from elsewhere in his philosophy. I will argue, first, that Williams’ relativism is unconvincing, indeed less than fully coherent. He provides no satisfactory rationale for drawing the distance line for appropriate moral appraisal where he wants to draw it.

Second, I will argue that, contrary to appearances, the relativism of distance remains an optional, under-motivated commitment from the point of view of the rest of Williams’ philosophy. The residue that remains well-motivated all round, I argue, is only a highly localized relativist thesis specifically concerning judgements of

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, ‘Human Rights and Relativism’, *In The Beginning Was The Deed: Realism and Moralism In Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorne (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Williams, ‘The Truth in Relativism’, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 132-142. In that early statement, Williams is explaining the coherence of a position he also considers to be true, though he is explicit that he is not presenting an argument for it (p. 142). And ‘Relativism and Reflection’, chapter 9, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985). While the discussion in the later work is more developed in terms of its connectedness with other of Williams’ philosophical commitments, and particularly about its motivation from the non-objectivity of value, the basic case for relativism is exactly the same (indeed verbatim in one or two crucial places).

blame. Prompted by one or two hints in Williams' writing on relativism, I will tentatively speculate that an awareness of the relativization that is internal to appropriate blame may have encouraged the relativism of distance. But in any case, I will go on to argue (no longer exegetically, but independently) for a thesis I shall call the *relativism of blame*. This thesis is neutral with respect to moral relativism, except that it may discourage it in so far as it defuses one of its potential motivations. The localized relativity applies exclusively to judgements of blame, and entails that they are properly construed as relative to the moral thinking of the time. Very roughly, if someone for historical reasons was not in a position to grasp the moral status or significance of X, then they cannot be blamed for the relevant action or omission. This is the historical face of the relativism of blame, which is more general, and includes other *structural* forms of moral-epistemic incapacity besides the historical—notably, the cultural. What such forms of structural (as opposed to merely personal) moral-epistemic incapacity have in common is that they generate *epistemically non-culpable moral ignorance*. Where an action or omission is owing to this kind of moral ignorance, the agent is not appropriately blamed.

Finally, and in the anti-moralistic spirit of Williams' deep and compelling commitment to situating moral thinking in history, I shall argue that we may honour this commitment not only by recognizing the historically relativized nature of judgements of blame, but also by making meta-ethical and indeed normative room for a style of critical moral judgement which is still 'focussed' (directed at the individual agent for particular acts or omissions) but which stops short of blame. We should carve out conceptual space for a kind of critical judgement I call *moral-epistemic disappointment*. This style of critical judgement is appropriately directed at an individual agent whose behaviour we regard as morally lacking, but who was not in a historical or cultural position to think the requisite moral thought—it was outside the *routine* moral thinking of their day. Even while there are likely to be people who achieve morally *exceptional* moral thinking on a given subject, thus pushing moral consciousness on into its future, the routine is what sets the standard for the generality. Expressions of moral-epistemic disappointment articulate a style of critical moral thinking that is appropriately inflected by the real constraints (as well as enabling conditions) that historical-cultural location places on moral subjects. We may express such disappointment in respect of figures who continue with merely routine ways of thinking at a historical moment when a new moral insight was, thanks to some exceptional moral thinking by others, beginning to emerge. (Over a lifetime the objects of such disappointment may include our younger selves.) The combination of the idea, firstly, that blame can be inappropriate over historical distance with the recommendation, secondly, that our forms of appraisal should include the use of moral-epistemic disappointment is intended to rescue our practices of appraisal across history from the whiff of moralism that can otherwise attend them, and which for Williams signified a misguided attitude to the past that he found pointless, if not absurd—like playing Kant at the court of King Arthur.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is surely no accident that Williams chose a legendary figure here, for his general critique of moral universalism (addressed particularly in respect of its ahistoricism) includes the complaint that it fails to have a sufficiently concrete and realistic sense of the past.

## 1. Williams' Relativism of Distance

Let us first recall what kind of moral relativism Williams' relativism of distance is. It may be helpful to home in on it by swiftly touching on what it isn't. First, it is of course not 'vulgar relativism'. Vulgar relativism is the view that it is morally wrong to pass moral judgement on other societies, because there is nothing more to moral right and wrong than what counts as such in any given society. Specifically, in Williams' presentation it is the conclusion arrived at by way of the following argument:

'Right' means 'right for a given society';  
'Right for a given society' is to be understood in a functional sense;  
Therefore, it is wrong to judge the values of another society.<sup>4</sup>

But, as Williams says, this argument is self-refuting, involving as it does a non-relative use of 'wrong' in its conclusion.

Williams' relativism of distance is also 'very importantly different from what is standardly called relativism':

Standard relativism says simply that if in culture A, X is favoured, and in culture B, Y is favoured, then X is right for A and Y is right for B; in particular, if 'we' think X right and 'they' think X wrong, then each party is right 'for itself'. This differs from the relativism of distance because this tells people what judgements to make, whereas the relativism of distance tells them about certain *judgements which they need not make*.<sup>5</sup>

The relativism of distance is surely a little closer to standard relativism than this makes it sound, however, for Williams normally formulates his own relativist position in terms of judgements of appraisal beyond a certain historical distance being (not just non-compulsory but) 'inappropriate'. Of course the relativist of distance will not go on positively to assert that the values of the distant others were 'right for them', but still there is inevitably some implication in that direction, given that it is deemed inappropriate to criticize. What really distinguishes the relativism of distance is that normal moral appraisal remains entirely and properly applicable, except in cases where a certain sort of distance separates the two moral systems. That distance is specified in the idea of one moral system's being in merely *notional confrontation* with another, which is equivalent to the latter failing to represent a *real option* from the point of view of the former. What it takes to qualify as a real option, according to Williams, is that a group from one moral system could convert to the other moral system without losing their grip on reality, or losing the ability to make retrospective sense of their decision to convert. If this condition is not met (or not sufficiently

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<sup>4</sup> See Williams, 'Interlude: Relativism', in *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 'Human Rights and Relativism' (2005), p. 68; emphasis added.

met—he acknowledges it will be a matter of degree<sup>6</sup>), then the alternative moral system is to that extent not a real option, and moral appraisal of it would be inappropriate:

A relativist view of a given type of outlook can be understood as saying that for such outlooks it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal—good, bad, right, wrong, and so on—can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as *inappropriate*, and no judgments are made.<sup>7</sup>

Although in the early paper he did not rule out synchronic notional confrontations over cultural distance, it is explicit in the later discussion in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere that in the modern era there can be (almost<sup>8</sup>) no synchronic notional confrontations: ‘Relativism over merely spatial distance is of no interest or application in the modern world. Today all confrontations between cultures must be real confrontations...’<sup>9</sup> The only kind of distance that makes for an application of moral relativism, then, is over historical distance: ‘Many outlooks that human beings have had are not real options for us now. The life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai are not real options for us: there is no way of living them.’<sup>10</sup>

There is a superficial plausibility to this idea that we cannot appropriately appraise the Bronze Age chief or medieval samurai, deriving from that fact that these sound like cases in which people lived by radically alien moral standards, often couched in thick concepts very different from our own, and so one has the impression that we will be in relations of notional confrontation only with such distant past cultures that are thoroughly alien to us. But we must look again at how Williams actually formulates the ideas of real and notional confrontation, for what he offers us to fix the idea of there being ‘no way of living’ such lives is very demanding both socially and psychologically. Having acknowledged real confrontation from the start as basically a ‘social notion’<sup>11</sup>, what emerges from the slightly fuller description in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is that it is not merely a social idea, but a very

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, ‘The Truth in Relativism’, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), p. 161; emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> With the briefly observed exception of those few ‘surviving traditional societies’ that are, for just about everyone else, truly exotic and, one might say, as if from the past. He does not bother to describe our confrontation with such societies as notional, even though we manifestly could not go over to them, but instead notes that we confront them as ‘endangered species’ whose protection from extinction, or not, must be decided upon. (See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 161 and p. 163.)

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., p. 160.

strongly practical idea.<sup>12</sup> For an alternative moral outlook to constitute a real option for a given group of people, they must be able to ‘live inside it in their actual historical circumstances and retain their hold on reality, not engage in extensive self-deception, and so on.’<sup>13</sup> A moral outlook is not a real option unless you could choose to live it out with enough others in an authentically internalized day-to-day way. Members of the group must be able to make it their *own* as a matter of moral psychology. Such a project is to be contrasted with nostalgic or experimental collective projects in alternative living, which are really just an extended piece of theatre, or, as now readily comes to mind, Reality TV. The various artificial forms of living in the past don’t count; a real option is a moral outlook that can be taken up again and lived for real in the present—either it is already is one’s own outlook, or one could truly make it one’s own. With this clarification, two powerful objections are noisily calling for our attention: Why does Williams make the asymmetrical claim that while there are many notional confrontations over historical distance, there can be none over cultural distance in the present? And, more fundamentally, why would anyone suppose that the impossibility of conversion makes moral appraisal inappropriate?

On the question of the asymmetry, given Williams’ concept of notional confrontation, it is thoroughly unconvincing to suggest that there are no notional confrontations across moral difference in the present. I can think of a number of moral cultures, up and running in the world at this time, where I am pretty certain that a group of people like me could not authentically live them out around here as a moral sub-culture, because the social and moral-psychological leap from there to here is too great. (Might a cohort of Western liberals reconstruct the moral outlook of a Yemeni village? It would just be Reality TV minus the TV—which is not reality.) People around here may often have ‘no way of living’ the moral way of life proper to another culture with which we are practically confronted and perhaps actively politically engaged. Indeed this is no accident, for sometimes the occasion of keen political engagement is precisely the marked difference between ways of life that would prevent their outlook being a real option for a group of us. I suggest, therefore, that Williams’ contrast between real and notional confrontation does not serve his purpose. Given the practically demanding nature of a real option, we are forced to allow (contra Williams) that there *are* merely notional confrontations with foreign moral cultures in the present, even while we may be reluctant to infer that moral appraisal is thereby out of order. Williams denies the existence of synchronic notional confrontations, because (unlike the standard relativist) he rightly wants to maintain

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<sup>12</sup> Thus I do not recognize Williams’ idea of a notional confrontation in Carol Rovane’s reconstruction of it as applying only to outlooks ‘that we could not rationally appraise even in the minimal sense of apprehending whether it conflicts with our own, let alone in the more robust ways that go beyond logic; thus, the reason why we couldn’t go over to it while retaining our grip on reality is that it would lie entirely beyond our normative reach’ (‘Did Williams Find the Truth in Relativism?’, ed. Daniel Callcut, *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2009), 43-69; p. 57).

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p. 160-161.

the appropriateness of moral appraisal across cultures in the present. But the real/notional distinction as he presents it cannot serve him in this.

If we look beyond his real/notional distinction, perhaps we may find that Williams is implicitly drawing on other resources with which to block relativism's application across cultures in the present. Some of his remarks are obliquely suggestive of the following line of thought: Today we stand in (actual or implied) practical engagement with all moral cultures around the world, for we live in a world that is globalized economically, politically, technologically, and therefore also morally. Indeed a failure to acknowledge this is the principal problem he finds in standard relativism, that concerning cross-cultural distance in the present, it is always 'too late' for relativism:

For standard relativism, one may say, it is always too early or too late. It is too early, when the parties have no contact with each other, and neither can think of itself as "we" and the other as "they". It is too late, when they have encountered one another: the moment that they have done so, there is a new "we" to be negotiated.<sup>14</sup>

He makes this 'too-early or too-late' point in more than one place, and I think it is revealing. The point, as I see it, is that the state of (what I am calling) actual or implied practical engagement with another moral culture already involves one in the business of moral appraisal to some extent, and is therefore incompatible with taking neutralist refuge in the standard relativist's claim that the others' values are *right for them*. Recalling that Williams' view of moral reasons is that they are fundamentally first-personal, we might now tentatively describe his conception of moral appraisal as fundamentally second-personal, at least in the minimal sense that its primary function is a matter of practical engagement with other parties.<sup>15</sup> However, we cannot invoke this as providing implicit support for his relativism of distance as a whole. While it would certainly lend support to the idea that all synchronic confrontations are real confrontations, it would only make things worse in regard to the claim that some past cultures may be appraised and others not. Since we are clearly not in any kind of practical engagement with the dead, all past cultures are on an equal footing when it comes to the implications of the second-personal stance. Williams aims to draw the distance line for appropriate moral appraisal so as to create asymmetries, first, between synchronic and diachronic confrontations, and second, (within the diachronic) between different classes of past culture. But, so drawn, the distance line still lacks a coherent rationale, even now that we have allowed ourselves to look further than the real/notional distinction.

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<sup>14</sup> Williams, 'Human Rights and Relativism', p. 69; see also 'Relativism' section 3.3 in 'Ethics' ch.10 in A. C. Grayling ed. *Philosophy: a guide through the subject* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 566; and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), p. 159.

<sup>15</sup> I borrow this distinctive use of 'second-personal', though in more generically Strawsonian spirit, from Stephen Darwall, for whom the second-personal stance is the vindicatory source of moral obligation. See *The Second-person Standpoint* (Camb. MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Let us address the second, and more fundamental, objection: Why should the possibility of reconstructing and actually living by a given alternative moral outlook in one's own time determine the appropriateness of morally appraising it? As Williams is aware (and I have emphasized), the possibility of such a project would depend on all sorts of contingencies relating to inter-personal co-ordination of various sorts, and leeway in extant social structures. When the strongly practical nature of this requirement is laid bare, it becomes clear not only that, as I have argued above, there must be many extant moral ways of life that are not real options for us around here, but also that we can barely make sense of the possibility of real confrontation with even recent ancestor moral cultures. Never mind medieval samurai and Bronze Age chiefs, could a group of us choose to live even as the Victorians did, internalizing their values? Could we deny women the moral status that supports the right to vote, and could we feel the need to conceal our ankles for shame? Surely not. Could we at least take on the broader Victorian attitudes to the importance of class or social rank, to gender or sexual propriety? Probably not, or not without being a bunch of cranks. Once we pay proper attention to what Williams says a real option requires, it becomes clear that it would in fact rule out going over to just about any past moral outlook. But once again this is not at all what Williams aims to achieve by his real/notional contrast. What he aims to achieve by it is a distance line for moral appraisal which allows appropriate appraisal of some past moral cultures but not others. (Williams doesn't claim we cannot judge the Victorians; he just claims we cannot judge Teutonic Knights, Bronze age chiefs, medieval samurai, and of course, ancient Greeks.) Once again, his real/notional contrast is not doing the job he wants it to do. Real confrontation is far too strong a condition for appropriate moral appraisal.

But why might one believe that *any* condition relating to the possibility of conversion should determine whether or not moral appraisal is in order? I simply do not see that the question of conversion is to the point. Why shouldn't we allow our moral sensibility to range over even the most distant and different of moral cultures? There is the question of historical understanding of course. Obviously, an informed understanding of the society in question is a pre-requisite here, or else we will lack the proper starting conception even of *what they did*—the significance of their actions in their own time. But that is obvious, and no source of moral relativism. (One of the very things we might take a normative view on is the moral significance attributed in the past to certain states or actions—that given, for instance, to non-married pregnancy; or to suicide.) Or again, there is the question of a readily comprehensible kind of moralism, namely the moralism of those who are *judgemental* because they are excessively interested in the moral features of things to the exclusion of all else. (Someone like that might read Aristotle and bang on only about his rationalizations regarding the lesser human status of women and slaves, thereby missing out on all the other aspects of his thinking.) But one does not need to embrace relativism in order to avoid this form of moralism—one just has to avoid being judgemental. Once again it looks 'too late' for relativism, even the relativism of distance. That is to say, by the time we have the sort of informed imaginative historical encounter of which we are at least in principle capable, then there is simply no reason to think it inappropriate to go in for at least some kinds of moral appraisal. Indeed one might argue that Williams himself effectively provides resources to explain how we might do so. For he defends the possibility of judging other cultures in the present in terms of a feature of moral thought that could surely be applied equally well to the past. The feature in question is

our ability to use some of our own (thinner) moral concepts to effect a non-distorted critical grasp of even the most alien moral practices:

Thus members of a culture that does not admit human sacrifice encounter members of another that does. They conceptualize differently the ritual killings, but this does not mean that the first group, if horrified, are labouring under an anthropological misunderstanding. It is, as they might put it, a deliberate killing of a captive, which is enough for their ethically hostile sentiments to extend to it.<sup>16</sup>

Williams was evidently of the view that it cannot work like that across notional confrontation in the past. But why not? Why cannot such expanded moral thinking, whereby we stretch sufficiently elastic concepts to achieve an adequate critical grip on a morally foreign practice, be applied over notionally confronted past outlooks?

Notably, Williams does allow indefinitely flexible application of one particular ethical concept, namely justice. And he allows it on similar grounds, for his point is that plausibly we can apply the concepts of just and unjust to social structures in notionally confronted past cultures without its being a ‘pun or linguistic error to call them that’.<sup>17</sup> This is partly put down to the fact that we see our own conceptions of social justice as having ‘comprehensible roots in the past’ even if we now reject the legitimations given at the time<sup>18</sup>; where this, in turn, is partly explained by the high level of reflection characteristic of our time, which leads us to go in for critical explanation of past social formations, perhaps rejecting them in favour of others considered to be improvements. But this exception for justice should strike us as *ad hoc*, for it is surely the thin end of the wedge when it comes to appropriate moral appraisal. Observing the trick that Williams plays with the concept of justice, there seems no obstacle to repeating it in relation to many of our other moral concepts. We might emphasize, for instance, our reflective awareness that our present moral concepts are often the descendants of past versions of themselves, the residue of critical reflection (along with other historical forces), so that there is no need to cry linguistic error, anthropological misunderstanding, or indeed historical misunderstanding if we choose to extend our use of those concepts indefinitely into the past. Our unanswered question remains: Why shouldn’t we appraise notionally confronted past cultures?

Two thoughts relating to Williams’ wider meta-ethical commitments are, superficially at least, salient possibilities here. A first thought is that a very general motivation for relativism, and one that Williams is entirely explicit about, is of course his non-objectivism about moral value. But that doesn’t help us with our question. Non-objectivism coheres nicely with relativism, but it does not entail relativism, as Williams acknowledges—it merely encourages us to see ‘how much room’ we can

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<sup>16</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

make for it.<sup>19</sup> More than this, however, it would cohere equally nicely with subjectivist forms of universalism. This means that non-objectivism *per se* can provide no active support for any relativism of distance, let alone provide targeted grounds for the distance line for appraisal as Williams wants to draw it.

The second, more promising possible source for the relativism of distance that may seem to suggest itself from elsewhere in Williams' philosophy is his view that reasons for action all contain an implicit relativization to items in the agent's 'subjective motivational set' (S)—all practical reasons are *internal* in this sense.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, the claim is that there must be a 'sound deliberative route' either from some existing motivation in the agent to the purported reason, or from a motivation the agent *would* have were he not embroiled in errors of fact or reasoning (these are the only strands of deliberation that are conceived as capable of objective error<sup>21</sup>; what an external reasons theorist might be tempted to call error in prudential or moral considerations has no place in the idea of a sound deliberative route—or else there would be no difference between the two rival views).<sup>22</sup> Thus, since we can be ignorant or mistaken not only about what the contents of our S actually are, but also about the worldly facts that would affect the contents of our S, and, further, about what sound deliberative routes might emanate from items in our S, we are capable of forming thoroughly false or confused views of what our reasons are. Moreover, the latter two questions may sometimes be partially indeterminate, generating a correlative indeterminacy in the question of what one has most reason to do. The internal reasons doctrine therefore implicitly offers its own distinctive explanation of why it can be very hard to know what one has most reason to do, and so of the appearance of externality. The business of making our reasons more transparent to us is fraught with difficulty, and so no wonder we often need deliberative discussion and argument to do it. In the correction of errors of fact and reasoning we see that there is a degree of rational idealization in Williams' view, but the idealization is never in respect of ends. It is strictly idealization by the particular agent's own motivational lights, never those of a generalized ideal agent, which Williams considered a phantasm of the morality system.

It might be assumed that in the internal reasons doctrine we find support for the relativism of distance. The thought would be that if a given society of historically distant others did not share our moral reasons, perhaps because they operated with too many thick ethical concepts different from our own, then that would place them

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<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>20</sup> See Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', *Making Sense of Humanity and other philosophical papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Note that even the rationale given for correcting matters of fact and reasoning is very much in the internal mode: at a general level, all agents have a standing interest (represented in their S) in achieving truth in their deliberations.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 36-7.

beyond the proper reach of our moral appraisal. The question of shared reasons is envisaged here as furnishing the distance line for moral appraisal. Now this might be a promising line for another relativist of distance to pursue.<sup>23</sup> But it was not Williams' line. It is clear, for Williams the fact that someone does not share an appraiser's reasons does not render moral appraisal inappropriate. It simply renders it inappropriate to assert that they had the reason. Take the case of the man who is not nice to his wife.<sup>24</sup> He may or may not have a reason (deep down, as we may say) to be nicer to her. If there is no sound deliberative route to such a reason from anything in his S, then on Williams' view he *doesn't have* a reason to be nicer to her. But that does not make it inappropriate to focus the language of moral appraisal on him. On the contrary, according to Williams we may say to him, and others, what a heartless, unfeeling man he is, and in so far as we are personally involved we may morally judge him ill, resent and blame him for it, as may his wife. Thus Williams' conception of appropriate moral appraisal does not depend on shared reasons. And so, once again, we find that on closer inspection his relativism of distance is not supported by an apparently supportive theoretical commitment from elsewhere in his meta-ethics.

Having drawn these two blanks—and I am glad to have drawn them, for I would be glad if it turned out we can accept Williams' other meta-ethical views without accepting his relativism—let us go back to examine once again his early statement, 'The Truth in Relativism'. Looking carefully, we find that Williams does offer us something else to go on, albeit fleeting and allusive. He revealingly remarks of merely notional confrontations that they contain 'so little of what gives *content* to the appraisals in the context of real confrontation', and that they 'lack the relation to our concerns which alone gives any *point or substance* to appraisal'.<sup>25</sup> What sort of relation to our concerns does he have in mind as supplying the content, the point and substance of appraisal? Characteristically, he doesn't say. I have already tentatively suggested that Williams' conception of moral appraisal is fundamentally second-personal, so that the business of practical engagement (such as having to 'decide what to do about' or otherwise respond to the conduct of another person or culture) is its primary function. Perhaps one can now be less tentative. One way of making interpretive sense of Williams' relativism of distance is to see it as driven by an assumption that moral appraisal will retain enough of its point (and so be appropriate) only if a certain style of judgement at the heart of the second-personal stance would be appropriate: blame.

That blame is definitive of the kind of moral appraisal which becomes inappropriate over distance is indeed hinted at in stray remarks made by Williams. For instance, when arguing that the concept of justice is an exception to the rule against appraisal over merely notional confrontation, he says:

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<sup>23</sup> Notably, it is very close to Gilbert Harman's early relativism, which explicitly required sufficient 'shared motivational attitudes' for moral appraisal to be in order. (See Harman, 'Moral Relativism Defended', *Explaining Value* (2000); originally from *Philosophical Review* 1975.)

<sup>24</sup> 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> 'Truth in Relativism', p. 141 and 142; emphases added.

‘Just’ and ‘unjust’ are central terms that can be applied to societies as a whole, and in principle, at least, they can be applied to societies concretely and realistically conceived. Moreover, *an assessment in terms of justice can, more obviously than others, be conducted without involving the unhelpful question of whether anyone was to blame.* The combination of these features makes social justice a special case in relation to relativism.<sup>26</sup>

Or, again, revisiting for a moment his defence of the possibility of cross-cultural appraisal in relation to a society in which there is a practice of human sacrifice, we may note he explicitly adds that while we may appraise, this is not to say that we may blame: ‘It is, as they might put it, a deliberate killing of a captive, which is enough for their ethically hostile sentiments to extend to it. (*It does not follow that they have to blame anyone: that is another question.*)’.<sup>27</sup>

Remarks like these indicate that Williams was keenly conscious of the central role of blame in moral appraisal. Blame is indeed central; it is, after all, a proper part of the second-personal stance as anchored in Strawsonian reactive attitudes.<sup>28</sup> But it is also a powerful force for moralism if not kept in check; the possibility of this style of judgement, and the resentment it typically includes, being writ too large in a moral outlook so that natural resentment degenerates into *ressentiment* is of course a key theme in Williams’ critique of the morality system.<sup>29</sup> I surmise that Williams’ commitment to relativism is driven, at least in part, by the sense that judgements of blame are inappropriate over certain sorts of historical distance and not others. To engage in judgements of blame over no matter what historical distance would indeed be moralistic. Not now in the sense of paying excessive attention to the moral; but rather in the sense of applying a particular style of moral judgement where it does not belong. In a posthumously published paper, ‘Human Rights and Relativism’ from which my epigraph is drawn, he says the following:

Some people do seem to think that if liberalism is a recent idea and people in the past were not liberals, they themselves should lose confidence in liberalism. This is, as Nagel says, a mistake. But why does the queasy liberal make this mistake? I think that it is precisely because he agrees with Nagel’s universalism: he thinks that if a morality is correct, it must apply to everyone. So if liberalism is correct, it must apply to all those past people who were not liberals: they ought to have been liberals, and *since they were not, they were*

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<sup>26</sup> *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), p. 165; emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 158; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (New York: Methuen, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Morality, the Peculiar Institution’, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), ch. 10. Williams’ Nietzschean sympathies are evident in the joke at morality’s expense that is embedded in the chapter title: the morality system would make moral slaves of us all.

*bad, or stupid, or something on those lines. But—the queasy liberal feels, and to this extent he is right—these are foolish things to think about all those past people.* So, he concludes, liberalism cannot be correct. That is the wrong conclusion; *what he should do is give up the universalist belief* he shares with Nagel.<sup>30</sup>

I read this as expressing or at least prompting the thought that blaming people (finding fault with individuals for acts or omissions by deeming them ‘bad, or stupid, or something along those lines’) is inappropriate over certain sorts of historical distance. While I have rejected Williams’ thesis that this sort of distance is successfully captured in the contrast between real and notional confrontations, I would like to pursue the idea—not exegetically now, but independently—that judgements of blame are indeed inappropriate over certain sorts of historical distance. I shall set out this idea as the historical face of a more general condition on appropriate blame, which I am calling the *relativism of blame*.

## 2. The Relativism of Blame

I take it that it is non-controversial to claim it as a condition on appropriate blame that the agent could *reasonably be expected* to have refrained from the action or omission for which she is blamed. This is an instance of the generalization encapsulated in the slogan ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. I am concerned with a particular kind of incapacity—a *structural* (as opposed to personal) moral-epistemic incapacity, such that the agent is not in a cultural or historical position to think a certain moral thought (recognize an obligation, perceive a significance, or make a discrimination) that we now do. For example, imagine a traditional schoolmaster of two or three decades past, who regularly caned boys as punishment. In tune with the general collective moral consciousness of the time, he conceived his practice as a proper part of school discipline, at least for boys—perhaps he even sincerely regarded it as good for them. He was not disproportionate, did not take sadistic pleasure in it, was not engaged in any self-deception, wilful moral blindness, or pre-emptively defensive rationalization. He may or may not have disliked having to do it, but in accordance with the attitudes of his day he ingenuously judged it the morally right thing to do. This schoolmaster was regularly engaged in a practice we now (collectively, and in the eyes of the law) bring under very different concepts: assault, violence, even abuse. The relativization that I contend is internal to judgements of blame entails that while it is entirely appropriate to judge this schoolmaster’s actions as morally bad (he subjected the children to assault, using violence as a disciplinary tool), none the less it would be inappropriate to blame him for what he did. This is because (or in so far as) his behaviour is explained by the fact that he was living at a time when these practices were generally thought a proper part of good discipline. So the *routine* moral thinking of the time deemed it permissible, even morally desirable, to have corporal punishment of this sort in schools. But then at some transitional moment in history, a critical number of people achieved and pushed for an *exceptional* or historically advanced moral insight, namely that this practice was brutalizing and sometimes cruel, an institutionalized disciplinary practice of assault on children.

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Human Rights and Relativism’, p. 67; emphases added.

Now, even while this exceptional moral perception may have been gaining pace in collective moral consciousness, we should insist that the proper standard for blameworthiness to which we generally hold agents of that time is delivered by the routine moral thinking of the day. So our schoolmaster, who perceives his practice in the routine mould, is not blameworthy. Thus the relativism of blame: Other things equal, agents can only be blameworthy in relation to the forms of moral thinking that were routine in their own time. The condition gives expression to the familiar moral thought that someone is only blameworthy in so far as they *should have known better* by our lights. It must be added, however, that things are not always equal, for some people achieve exceptional moral perceptions, and where they do, they are fully accountable to those moral-epistemic and practical standards. For instance, if we imagine a schoolmaster who did, in the transitional historical moment, perceive the practice of caning in the exceptional way, so that he was personally aware of the brutal nature of the practice, but went ahead anyway, it is clear that he *should have known better* (did know better). This has the consequence that we may appropriately blame him for his brutalizing actions, but not his more brutally minded peers. Exceptional moral insight places an exceptional moral burden. However, it may be we do not in fact blame him very much. For it may be we think there are powerful mitigating circumstances—he was expected to do it as part of the job, he was not that confident in speaking out, or perhaps risked losing his job if he did, and in any case had no training as to how else to keep discipline. All these mitigating circumstances might mean that the level of blame registers low, even at zero; but still his actions fall into the category blameworthy. My proposal about the relativism that is internal to blame is that actions or omissions done from structurally caused moral ignorance are not blameworthy. By contrast, for those actions and omissions that are blameworthy, the presence of mitigating circumstances will determine the proper degree of blame.

We may capture the relativism of blame in the following general condition:

*Blame is inappropriate if the relevant action or omission is owing to a structurally caused inability to form the requisite moral thought.*

Thus if an agent's inability to frame the requisite moral thought was merely personal—owing, for instance, to a form of moral stupidity (such would be a brutish present-day schoolmaster who simply couldn't see the moral point even when all around him could); or owing to an unfortunate set of conditioning experiences in the past (such would be a schoolmaster who had been beaten when he was a child and conditioned to regard it as normal)—then I maintain his conduct stands as blameworthy.<sup>31</sup> These possibilities record an element of moral luck. The degree of blame may be more or less mitigated in the different cases, but still the moral ignorance is in principle blameworthy. This is because personal forms of moral ignorance, from plain moral stupidity or unfortunate conditioning experiences, are

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<sup>31</sup> In this I agree with the line taken by Pamela Hieronymi in 'The Force and Fairness of Blame', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18 (Ethics), 2004, 115-148; see her example of the disrespectful coworker, p. 131. See also her 'Rational Capacity as a Condition on Blame', *Philosophical Books*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 2007), 109-123.

culpable, if potentially tragically so.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, moral ignorance that is owing to one's cultural or historical position is non-culpable. It is a sensitivity to this distinction that I read into our appropriate practices of blame and express in the above condition. I freely acknowledge that the notion of 'structural' (which I take roughly to equate to 'historical or cultural') as contrasted with the merely 'personal' is inevitably vague. Most obviously 'cultural' can be a matter of 'sub-cultural'. If a teenage boy is brought up on an inner city housing estate where there is a powerful gang culture, does that count as a 'culture' in the structural sense that could render certain forms of moral ignorance on his part, plus resulting actions, non-culpable? I regard this as a substantive moral question, and we simply cannot assume such questions to permit clear or settled answers. My point is that our judgement will rest on how far we regard any moral ignorance on his part as structurally caused, and so non-culpable.

Gideon Rosen has written about the exculpatory power of non-culpable ignorance.<sup>33</sup> I agree with him that non-culpable moral ignorance releases the agent from blame for the resulting action or omission. But Rosen casts the net of non-culpable ignorance extraordinarily wide, so that just about any genuine moral ignorance (which includes forms of conscientious moral stupidity) qualify the agent as non-blameworthy in her resultant conduct. His view seems to be that so long as the agent tries earnestly to deliberate, taking suitable care, not ignoring evidence or contradicting herself and so on, then that is sufficient for her moral thinking to count as epistemically responsible, so that whatever her deliberation recommends, she cannot be blameworthy in acting on it.<sup>34</sup> Rosen ultimately pursues a curious scepticism about moral responsibility that I would certainly reject.<sup>35</sup> But we agree on the guiding principle that *if* someone is epistemically non-culpable in their moral ignorance, then they are thereby non-culpable for the resultant actions or omissions. I have been at pains to present a certain historical application of this general insight by distinguishing between structural and merely personal forms of moral ignorance, where the fact that a piece of moral ignorance is structural is sufficient to render it non-culpable. On my view, if someone wasn't in a cultural-historical position to know any different, then they *weren't to know*, as we say, and cannot appropriately be blamed. If, however, someone (whose thinking is not structurally hampered) deliberates as best they can, but arrives at a bad moral judgement, then they remain blameworthy for their resulting conduct. Rosen may be read as effectively aiming to rule out any role for luck in what agents are blameworthy for, by embracing a

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<sup>32</sup> I use the culpable/non-culpable contrast to mean exactly the same as the blameworthy/non-blameworthy contrast.

<sup>33</sup> Gideon Rosen, 'Culpability and Ignorance', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. CIII, Pt. 1 (2003), 61-84.

<sup>34</sup> See his discussion of Truman's decision to bomb Hiroshima, *op. cit.*, p. 69. Rosen allows that Truman is guilty of being 'wrong about how to weigh competing demands', and yet his deliberation and consequent horrifying action still count as non-culpable, since he went in for 'an honest review of the considerations either side'.

<sup>35</sup> See Gideon Rosen, 'Skepticism about Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18 (Ethics), 2004, 295-313.

conception of moral epistemic responsibility that it is almost entirely in one's control to achieve—through sincere deliberative endeavour, checking one's facts, consulting carefully, and so on. For him, such exercise of supposed epistemic responsibility puts the agent beyond blame, whereas my relativism of blame only exonerates the agent if the moral ignorance is owing to cultural-historical factors.

I make my proposal about the relativism of blame in independent spirit from Williams' philosophy, but I believe he may well have been open to something like it. Indeed I have hinted that some such mistrust of blame over certain historical distances may have helped fuel the relativism of distance. Certainly one can find relevant commitments in his writing to a relativist application of 'ought implies can' (even though he of course denied it was an exceptionless principle, as that would rule out dilemmas). He says, for instance, that 'Focussed blame operates in the mode of 'ought to have', which has a famous necessary connection with 'could have'. Focussed blame will go by the board if 'could have' is absent.'<sup>36</sup> My relativism of blame deems blame inappropriate whenever a structural 'could have' is absent. None the less, while the relativism of blame is compatible with the relativism of distance, it does not support it. On the contrary, in itself it is neutral with respect to relativism and realism about moral value, and I advance it partly because I regard it as satisfying all that is ultimately compelling in the amorphous appearances of motivation for the relativism of distance. It is time, however, to look at Williams' own expressed view of blame, in order to see if that may at last provide any decisive support for his relativism.

### 3. Williams on Blame: 'Fantasy' or 'Proleptic Mechanism'

Williams' view of blame is marvellously suggestive, indeed indicative of his whole moral philosophical outlook, even while it is presented in only a few dense paragraphs found here and there in his writing.<sup>37</sup> Imagining a case in which one party blames another for failing to act on a given reason (for instance, the blamed party failed to 'acknowledge' the other), Williams argues that one of two main possibilities will obtain: either the blamed party had the reason he is now being blamed for failing to act on; or he didn't. If he had it, then the blame reminds him of his reason and expresses resentment that it was 'not brought to bear in the right way'.<sup>38</sup> If he did not have the reason, then either:

- i) the expression of blame is an expression of sheer fantasy, namely the fantasy 'that I, now, might change the agent from one who did not acknowledge me to one who did. This fantasied, magical, change does not

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<sup>36</sup> 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', *Making Sense of Humanity* (1995), p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> See 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame' and 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology', both in *Making Sense of Humanity* (1995). Origins of the short discussions there are found in extremely condensed form in two paragraphs on p. 193 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985).

<sup>38</sup> 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 41.

involve actually changing anything, and it therefore has nothing to do with what, if anything, might actually have changed things.<sup>39</sup>

or, alternatively,

ii) the expression of blame functions as a ‘proleptic mechanism’. Here the blamed party is treated *as if* they possessed the reason when they didn’t (or at least failed to give it appropriate deliberative priority); *but* they do possess a more general reason to be the sort of person you respect. This latter reason on their part has the result that your expression of blame causes them to *come to have* the reason, or more nearly to have it.<sup>40</sup>

This latter function of blame can be seen, among other things, as a social constructive mechanism by which fellow agents exert a certain pressure on each other to come to share reasons. The pressure derives from something which is itself a moral attitude, namely caring about being respected by those one respects.<sup>41</sup> We might say blame has a personal expressive function where what is expressed is that the speaker finds fault with the other for not being guided by a certain reason, where the presumption that the reason applied to them in the first place is either a ‘sheer fantasy’ or part of a socially useful dialogical mechanism that helps introduce or augment the reason in the psychology of the blamed party. We should see Williams’ view as compatible with the idea that there are other functions of blame—including, notably, that which is central to Tim Scanlon’s account.<sup>42</sup> Scanlon casts blame as a rupture in a relationship (including the relationship that all fellow rational beings are said to bear to one another), where the rupture is the registering by one party that the other’s relation to them is morally impaired. Even though the moral philosophical orientation of Scanlon’s account is of course at 180 degrees to that of Williams, still they are both engaged in illuminating aspects of blame as a basic form of second-personal moral engagement, and in a realistically diachronic frame. The bare idea that blame is a rupture in a relationship, together with the idea that the expression of blame can cause the blamed party to internalize the reason, thanks to a baseline commitment to mutual respect, would make a convincing (if deliberately equivocal) conjunction. In a nutshell, Williams’ proleptic mechanism would help explain how Scanlon’s ruptures get mended, and this imagined conjunction of key features of their views would reveal blame in its more positive aspect. It is indeed neither pointless ‘grading’, nor moralistic finger wagging. It is a both disruptive and constructive mechanism that helps human relations to recover over time from their various let-downs. We should

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology’, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Internal Reasons and The Obscurity of Blame’, p. 40-43.

<sup>41</sup> This baseline ethical attitude is discussed in connection with shame in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press; 1993); ch. 4.

<sup>42</sup> T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimension: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Camb. MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

not think this exhausts the purposes or functions of blame, but something along these lines is surely its most basic function.

So what bearing, if any, does Williams' account of blame have on his relativism of distance? One immediate connection is that the proleptic mechanism is future directed, and obviously, you cannot apply a future directed mechanism retrospectively. The question of moral appraisal's 'causal reach' in relation to its objects is evidently important for Williams, and we have nonesuch in relation to the past:

[The relativism of distance] applies to the past (to the extent that it does)...because the past is *not within our causal reach*. So far as human rights are concerned, what matters is what presents itself in our world, now. In this sense, the past is not another country: if it were just another country, we might have to wonder what to do about it.<sup>43</sup>

This remark is as puzzling as it is illuminating, however, because it contains or implies the increasingly familiar inconsistent claims: (a) the relativism of distance applies to only *some* past cultures, and (b) this is so because of X, where X is some feature that applies to *all* past cultures. Furthermore, even granted that the proleptic mechanism captures the primary function of blame, the operation of blame need not be limited to its primary function, for it may have other important functions that could be applied over any distance. Indeed I would suggest that focussed blame has a significant function that can often apply as a proper part of how we interpret even notionally confronted past outlooks, making sense of them as part of, or in relation to, our own cultural history. Understanding the moral outlook of, say, the Tudors in the context of the historical-cultural pressures of the time is obviously, and uncontroversially, a crucial part of making moral sense of our own heritage. But more than this, appraising their practices is a proper part of understanding them, regardless of whether we could reconstruct their outlook and live it out in the now (which, surely, we could not). And if I can appraise the morality of the practices of royal heredity that demanded a male heir to the throne, why may I not blame Henry VIII for putting Anne Boleyn to death? I do not violate the relativism of blame in so doing, for many in his time would have blamed him for it too, since the resources for thinking there is something wrong with killing even the most disappointing of spouses were abundantly routine at the time. From my distance, I judge him to be at moral fault for what he did, and I may even feel a pang of resentful outrage in sisterly solidarity (though I do not regard the emotions that are characteristic of blame as a necessary feature, albeit the normal mode for its basic second-personal function in the present).<sup>44</sup> Thus the relativism of blame permits a significant role for blame as part and parcel of our historically intelligent attempts to make moral sense of the past.

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, 'Human Rights and Relativism', p. 69; emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> In this I differ from the account given by George Sher in his book *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) in which he presents blame as a belief-desire pair such that one believes that the blamed party has acted badly or has a bad character, plus one has a desire that they should not have. I favour approaching blame by exploring its different (basic and less basic) functions; and there is simply no reason to expect it to have exactly the same form throughout.

I conclude from this discussion of blame that, while it is interpretively plausible to see Williams' relativism of distance as encouraged by the idea that blame is the principle business of moral appraisal and that the basic function of blame can find no application to the past, still we once again find no specific support for the relativism of distance. Firstly, for all Williams gives us, blame surely has at least one function besides its most basic one—an interpretive function that can apply over notional confrontation, so long as the relativism of blame allows. Secondly, Williams' remarks about blame simply do not include anything that could furnish the distinction he wants to make between some past outlooks and others, since they imply a contrast only between the present and the past. Once again, the relativism of distance emerges as detachable from the rest of Williams' moral philosophy. Nothing in his view of blame requires it, or even lends any targeted support. This is a happy result for those who are open to his brand of non-objectivism about the metaphysical status of value, but not open to his relativism about moral appraisal; open to his attempt to situate our forms of moral thought in history, but not open to the idea that our moral appraisal switches itself off *en bloc* at a certain line of distance. I have advertised the relativism of blame as doing the job of acknowledging the influence of historical location in our forms of moral thinking, by acknowledging that sometimes an agent's historical location produces non-culpable moral ignorance and so renders blame out of order in relation to the resulting conduct. But let me now finish with a proposal about a style of critical moral thinking that may help us better acknowledge the sometimes ambiguous historical location of the agent. The importance of achieving styles of moral thinking that are appropriately inflected by an awareness of history is a commitment from Williams we can honour without having to make any room for the relativism of distance. I have been arguing that, contrary to what Williams says, it turns out that we cannot make reflective room for the relativism of distance, but that we can and should make room for the relativism of blame. Let me now end by proposing that we should also make room for a style of focussed moral judgement that stops short of blame: *moral-epistemic disappointment*.

#### **4. Moral-epistemic Disappointment**

Sometimes an agent may be living at a time of transition with respect to a certain area of moral consciousness, so that the routine thinking of the time is fracturing and shifting. Perhaps sufficient dissenting voices making exceptional moral interpretive moves are beginning to be heard, so that a new form of collective moral interpretation is, historically speaking, just around the corner. There is a form of critical moral judgement we may adopt towards distant others who are slow to pick up on such dawning moral-epistemic innovation: moral-epistemic disappointment. Imagine a schoolmaster, just like our previous one, but a few years down the line and pictured now as holding on complacently to his routine ways of thinking about the moral status of corporal punishment at a time when the exceptional, historically more advanced, moral view of the matter is becoming more widely available. I have already argued that we should withhold blame from those whose conduct is the product of the routine moral thinking of their day, but now I would like to add that there is no need to think this exhausts our repertoire of moral appraisal. We need not be struck dumb as regards the expression of focussed judgement whenever the relativism of blame applies. Think of our schoolmaster. In his interpretive complacency he is seen to have

exhibited a certain moral-epistemic failing—more particularly, a failure of moral imagination—that we may regard as sufficiently marked to warrant moral-epistemic disappointment. Thus we can picture past agents, at no matter how great a distance from ourselves, as responding well or badly to the changing moral consciousness in which they were situated, and which they either helped push forward into its future, or dragged behind. (This is on the assumption that we regard its future in a positive light. In a case where we consider the new style of thinking to be morally retrograde, then we might feel disappointment at the *readiness* with which someone took it up. In such a case the innovators' novel moral thinking would be exceptional for its time, but not in a way we find admirable. There is no guarantee that moral history is progressive, even by our own lights.)

When blame is inappropriate, then, because the agent was acting according to the routine moral thinking of the time, still disappointment may yet be appropriate—depending on whether the form of moral thought to which we would hold them was sufficiently available, despite not yet qualifying as routine. We can direct moral-epistemic disappointment not only towards past others, however, but also towards our past selves. Later in his long career, or after retirement, our schoolmaster might feel moral-epistemic disappointment in relation to himself, for being slow to see corporal punishment in the newer and, as it now seems to him, more enlightened perspective. In this sense, we can see this kind of disappointment as located somewhere between agent-regret and self-blame. Agent-regret acknowledges the ethical significance of having done something bad, even terrible, through no fault of one's own; whereas self-directed moral-epistemic disappointment acknowledges responsibility for a certain non-blameworthy failure of imagination in the critical progress of one's ethical sensibility.

There is inevitably some vagueness in the notion of what it takes for a given moral interpretation to be 'sufficiently available' to the agent for him to be held accountable in this way for failure to adjust his moral outlook. Taking the example of our schoolmaster, would it be enough if one (or five, or ten...) schoolboy says 'What are you doing, Sir? You've got no right to beat me!?' Would that be enough to transform the exceptional moral thought into a sufficiently available moral thought for a failure to take it on to count as disappointing, or even blameworthy? This can only be a matter of judgement, and I doubt we should hope for any unanimous or clearly regulated answer to such questions. Instead we should embrace once again the fact that such judgements will remain largely substantive questions. The appropriateness of both moral-epistemic disappointment and blame must remain, like moral judgement in general, essentially contested. We will no doubt disagree over many an example, for they are intrinsically controversial with regard to the question at what point either form of judgement should kick in. But my proposal is only that what our disagreement will turn on is questions of *how far the moral thought was historically-culturally available to the agent* so that he may reasonably be held accountable to it in one or another mode. This question of the degree of availability to the agent of a given moral thought governs the appropriateness of both moral-epistemic disappointment and blame, though the thresholds for each are different. In the case of blame we judge whether the requisite moral thought was sufficiently routine in the collective moral repertoire; in the case of disappointment we must judge whether it was sufficiently close to becoming part of a newly emerging routine. Interestingly, any time we engage in discussion and disagreement over either mode of appraisal, we

will find ourselves at a new outer limit of philosophy where it hands over to history. For the substantive question of a moral thought's degree of availability will depend crucially upon the historical details of the situation. With this thought, we touch down once again upon a signature theme from Williams—the question of the limits of philosophy in relation to history. His work and memory remain ever an inspiration, and philosophical spur.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> I presented earlier versions of this paper at the University of Oxford Ethics Seminar, at the University of Sussex, at a seminar in Sydney, hosted by the Catholic University of Australia, a colloquium at MIT, and our Departmental Seminar at Birkbeck. I am very grateful for helpful critical discussions on all those occasions.