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Moralism as a Dualism in Ethics and Politics

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What is it that one fundamentally rejects when one criticizes a way of thinking as *moralistic*? Taking my cue from the principal leveller of this charge in philosophy, I argue that the root problem of moralism is the dualism that underlies it. I begin by distinguishing the rejection of moralism from the rejection of the moral/nonmoral distinction: far from being something one should jettison along with moralism, that distinction is something that any human society is bound to develop. But this valuable distinction is transformed into a problematic dualism when it casts the two sides of the distinction as contrasting sharply in nature, value, and structure. In ethics, the resulting dichotomy takes the form of a dualism of morality and prudence. In politics, it takes the form of a dualism of principle and interest. I explain the enduring appeal of such dualisms before laying out the costs of moralism thus conceived: moralism erodes our sensibility to the moral and political costs of value conflicts; it projects an unrealistic conception of agency that sets up scepticism about responsibility; and it limits our ability to appreciate and realize the wider variety of nonmoral values that sustain us, our achievements, and morality itself.

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I. THE PROBLEM AT THE ROOT OF MORALISM

Of the many charges one might level against a way of thinking, one of the more intriguing is the charge of moralism. To call a way of thinking "moralistic" is not to imply that it is false or unjustified. It rather seems, as Stephen Mulhall observes, that the charge "targets a certain spirit or manner in which moral judgement is undertaken."[1] Yet, as Mulhall grants, talking of the "spirit" underlying moralism only acknowledges the difficulty of pinning down the target. What exactly is the problem at the root of moralism?

In elucidating this charge, one might hope to receive some guidance from its principal levellers. Mulhall suggests that "the single most influential leveller"[2] of the charge is Bernard Williams. Julia Driver, Cora Diamond, and Craig Taylor also point to Williams's work in ethics as exemplifying the critique of moralism.[3] But in what sense exactly is Williams a critic of moralism? His declared target is not moralism, but "the morality system." And while he identifies "the important thing" about it as "its spirit,"[4] it requires an interpretative leap to equate that spirit with moralism. What he does explicitly target under the heading of "moralism" is *political* moralism.[5] But is there any connection between his critique of moralism in politics and his critique of the morality system? As David Owen observes, Williams articulated the former critique as if it stood apart from the latter.[6]

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[1] Mulhall 2021, p. 176. See also Diamond 2010, p. 268, and Taylor 2012, p. 15, who argue that understanding moralism requires philosophers to look beyond the aim of arriving at correct moral judgments.

[2] Mulhall 2021, p. 175.

[3] Driver 2005, pp. 140–148, Diamond 1997, 2010, pp. 270–271, and Taylor 2012, pp. 5, 57–81, 138–139. Queloz 2025 argues that criticizing ways of thinking is characteristic of Williams more generally, marking him out as a paradigmatic practitioner of the "ethics of conceptualization."

[4] Williams 1985, p. 193.

[5] For accounts of Williams's critique of political moralism, see Sleat 2013, 2022, Rossi and Sleat 2014, Hall 2014, 2017, 2020, Sagar 2014a, Owen 2018, and Dannenberg 2024.

[6] Owen forthcoming-b. Though both Owen 2018, forthcoming-b, and Harcourt manuscript offer different reasons to think that Williams's reorientation of political philosophy cannot be separated from his reorientation of moral philosophy.

For these seemingly unrelated critiques to elucidate the charge of moralism, one would need to show that they converge on a common target, pointing us towards some root problem underlying both moralism in ethics and moralism in politics. I propose to do just that: by pulling together and connecting various parts of Williams's oeuvre that are not usually considered together, I show that his ostensibly unrelated critiques in ethics and politics do in fact converge on a common target; and on that basis, I argue that moralism, in ethics as in politics, is best understood as a *dualism*: it turns a helpful but hazy distinction between the moral and the nonmoral into a deep divide in nature, value, and structure.

This will lead to several systematic insights into how moralism fundamentally works, what its allure is, and why it should be resisted. Through the distinctive way in which moralism fashions the moral/nonmoral distinction into a dualism, it introduces an assumption of consistency into practical deliberation—obligations or principles cannot really conflict, neither between themselves nor with anything outside themselves; consequently, moralism occludes value conflicts, thereby unburdening one from any unease about the costs of doing what is right. The allure of this immunization against uncomfortable conflicts of values is further amplified by the way moralism caters to the desire to control whether life goes well and the longing for life to be ultimately just. Yet in doing so, moralism blinds us to real moral and political costs. This not only offends against truthfulness, but carries significant moral and political costs of its own.

II. THE POINT OF THE MORAL/NONMORAL DISTINCTION

At first pass, for a way of thinking to be *moralistic* is, as the phrase suggests, for it to place special emphasis on the moral in some way.[7] This already implies some distinction between the moral and the nonmoral. And by Williams's own account, his first book, *Morality*, is concerned precisely with the question of "what the distinction between the 'moral' and the 'nonmoral' is supposed to do for us."[8] Crucially, however, Williams does not reject the moral/nonmoral distinction. Quite the reverse: he winds up extolling its importance and value.

His argument is best reconstructed as involving two steps. First, he argues that any human society needs to encourage actions that take the interests of others into account over actions that only serve the agent's narrow self-interest.[9] In its most primitive

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[7] Moralism has been thought to involve an inflated sense of the extent to which moral criticism is appropriate, for example—see Archer 2018. As I shall argue, however, there is more to it than that.

[8] Williams 2001b, p. xiii.

[9] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

form, the moral/nonmoral distinction thus constitutes an attempt to discriminate, however roughly, between other-regarding and self-interested actions, so as to select the former for special approval. Using the term "morality" in the sense he later reserved for "ethics," Williams even asserts that "it is essential to morality that a distinction is drawn at some level between the moral and the prudential."[10] If no such distinction is made, we lose hold of the sense in which there are moral considerations at all.[11]

The second step is to explain why we take the distinction to be sensitive not just to differences between actions, but to differences in the *motives* from which these actions flow. Thus, "one who gives money to charity merely to improve his reputation with the Rotary Club ... acts no more morally than if he had spent the money on his own pleasures."[12]

The point of selecting certain motives for moral approbation, I take Williams to suggest, is to cultivate in people *robust dispositions* to do things of the other-regarding sort.[13] Though donating to improve one's reputation is "better than that another combined cocktail cabinet and TV set should be bought," we withhold moral approval in such cases, and reserve it for situations where someone acts *out of principle*, or *out of sympathy*, in order to select for special approval those motives that express a "general tendency"[14] to do things of the other-regarding sort—a disposition that is robust across variation in how other-regarding actions align with self-interest. Someone giving to charity out of principle or sympathy can more reasonably be expected to do so again than the donor whose charity is conditional on it improving his reputation.

Even by Williams's lights, then, there is nothing inherently moralistic about the moral/nonmoral distinction. Yet already in 1972, he cautions that this vindicatory explanation leaves out "how shaky and problematical" the distinction can become— "above all in its most important employment, to distinguish between different sorts of human excellence."[15] This is where we encounter the charge of moralism.

III. FROM DISTINCTION TO DUALISM

In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams explicitly associates a particular way of elaborating the distinction with moralism:

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[10] Williams 2001b, pp. 65–66.

[11] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

[12] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

[13] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

[14] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

[15] Williams 2001b, p. xxi.

> It is said that we make a lot of the distinction between the moral and the nonmoral and emphasise the importance of the moral. But how far, and in what ways, is this really true of our life, as opposed to what moralists say about our life? Do we even understand what the distinction is, or how deep it really goes?[16]

There is no question "on which an understanding of the Greeks can join more helpfully with reflection on our own experience," he remarks, and we should not follow moralists in taking the distinction to be "at once deep, important, and self-explanatory."[17] How are we to understand this?

The point cannot be that the Greeks *lacked* the moral/nonmoral distinction. For, by Williams's own lights, any society must find it indispensable to draw *something like* that distinction. This need not involve distinguishing "moral" from "nonmoral" senses of words. There need not even be a word corresponding to "moral." A society only needs to recognize some contrast, however vague and gradual, between actions and motives that "take the interests of others into account" and those that "minister to the gratification or safety of the agent at the expense of others."[18] The Greek notion of the virtues plausibly discharges that function.

What the Greeks did not do, however, is draw a *sharp boundary* between moral virtues and other forms of human excellence while insisting that the difference was all-important. Greek ethical thought "lacks words or concepts corresponding at all closely to those of the moral and non-moral," and "basically lacks the concept of *morality* altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand."[19] For the Greeks, ethical considerations were whatever helped one answer the question of how to live. It is only a later elaboration of ethical thought, "the morality system" (or simply "morality"), that enjoins us to answer a narrower question ("What should I do?") solely with *moral* considerations, to be sharply distinguished from nonmoral considerations. Whatever fails to rise to the level of a moral consideration does not count towards an answer. In contrast to *ethics*, which leaves it deliberatively vague what counts as an ethical consideration, "*morality*" thus "demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding 'moral' and 'nonmoral' senses of words, for instance)."[20]

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[16] Williams 1993, p. 92.

[17] Williams 1993, p. 92.

[18] Williams 2001b, p. 66.

[19] Williams 2006b, p. 44.

[20] Williams 1985, p. 7.

In practice, however, the moral/nonmoral distinction is far from clear-cut. It may be "clear in extreme cases," but looking back at the Greeks can remind us just to what extent the distinction also remains "unclear and hazy":[21]

> virtue theory is implicitly opposed to sharp boundaries between the moral and the non-moral, and is likely to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of desirable char-acteristics, and that no firm or helpful line can be drawn round those that are of specially moral significance. Aristotle did not even try to draw such a line: his own terminology distinguishes only between excellences of character and intellectual excellences, and one of the latter, *phronesis*, is itself necessary to the excellences of character. Hume, who was very aware of moralists who wanted to draw such a line, goes out of his way to mock the attempt to draw it ....[22]

The nod to Hume likely refers to Appendix IV of the second *Enquiry*, which Williams admired.[23] What Hume argues there is that many qualities—such as wit, wisdom, diligence, industry, ingenuity, and equanimity—are lauded and prized even though they are not called *moral* virtues. They form borderline cases with respect to the moral/nonmoral distinction. Hume also points out that the ancients did not distinguish between moral and nonmoral excellences and defects: they "treated all alike under the appellation of virtues and vices"; and "even the moderns, where they speak naturally, hold the same language with the ancients"; accordingly, Hume demotes the moral/nonmoral distinction to the rank of the merely "grammatical":[24] it tracks no deep divide, and marks no radical difference in importance. Moralists, by contrast, are cast by Hume and Williams as taking the distinction to articulate not a seamless spectrum, but a deep and important divide.

It is easy to dismiss this as a minor quibble over whether some distinction is hazy or clear-cut. But I want to suggest that this question gets to the heart of moralism. Precisely what constitutes the root problem of moralism is that it turns a superficial but helpful *distinction* into a deeper and problematic *dualism*.

The moral/nonmoral distinction becomes a dualism when it casts the two sides of the distinction as contrasting sharply along three dimensions:

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[21] Williams 1971, p. 163.

[22] Williams 1995a, p. 574.

[23] See Williams 1993, p. 198n141; 1995a, p. 574; 1995b, p. 20n13. On his debt to Hume, see Sagar 2014b, Greco 2007, Blackburn 2019, and Russell 2019, forthcoming.

[24] Hume 1998, App 4.1–18.

1. in *nature*: the moral is fundamentally distinct in nature because it has a distinct metaphysical basis, which ontologically widens the divide;

2. in *value*: the value of the moral entirely eclipses the value of the nonmoral, thereby axiologically widening the divide;

3. in *structure*: the structure of the moral is radically different from that of the nonmoral, in that the moral, properly understood, is free of any inherent tension or conflict, which makes the moral sphere a harmonious counterpart to the struggle of competing interests that marks the nonmoral sphere.

Differentiating the moral from the nonmoral along these three dimensions lends support to the thought that it is always both *possible* and *important* to distinguish between the moral and the nonmoral. Williams himself never explicitly distinguished these three dimensions in this way. But it will become evident that this schema offers a useful way of unifying Williams's disparate remarks on moralism.

IV. THE DUALISM IN ETHICS

For the moral/nonmoral distinction to become a dualism, moral excellences must be cleanly carved off from nonmoral ones. One way to do this is to cast moral excellences as distinct in nature due to their relation to the *will*. This makes sense if the point of the moral/nonmoral distinction is to cultivate certain motives in people, since selecting those motives for special approbation only helps if the motives are *responsive* to such approbation, and they will be responsive to such approbation only to the extent that they are under the control of the will—something that natural talents tend not to be.

This alignment of the moral/nonmoral distinction with the voluntary/involuntary distinction paves the way for a widening of the metaphysical divide, for once moral excellences are understood as being fully under the control of the will, nonmoral excellences can be sharply contrasted with them on the grounds of their being placed within or beyond one's reach by contingent endowments or circumstances. This permits a sharp distinction between, say, conscientiousness and mathematical brilliance: the former is a moral characteristic while the latter is emphatically not.

However, the distinction remains one of degree as long as the agent's will is itself conceived as something that remains conditioned by contingency: my conscientiousness may be a matter of will to a greater degree than my mathematic skill, but as long as my *capacity to try* to be conscientious is itself subject to my contingent endowments, the distinction between moral and nonmoral virtue will not be metaphysically clear-cut.

Consequently, a certain conception of agency is required to support the possibility of *pure* voluntariness: acts of will that are not in any way conditioned by contingent empirical forces. Only then is there a metaphysical basis for holding that moral and nonmoral forms of excellence are distinct in nature: the former can be fully attributed to the agent's unconditioned will, while the latter reflect contingent influences external to that will.

This in turn requires one's metaphysics to make room for a locus of agency that lies beyond the reach of contingency: not the embodied agent, whose dispositions are subject to genetic and social determination, but some soul-like seat of deliberation deep within, which remains pure of empirical determination, and thereby provides a metaphysical basis for a sharp distinction. The dualism of moral and nonmoral is thus metaphysically grounded in a dualism of soul and body, which one finds in different forms in Platonic, Christian, and Manichean thought, and which receives a sophisticated modern expression in the Kantian dualism of noumenal and phenomenal self.

As a result of this pressure to associate the moral with pure voluntariness, the moral/nonmoral distinction becomes tied up with a "set of beliefs of an ultimately metaphysical and psychological kind which are deeply suspect,"[25] Williams observes. The pressure encourages "a distinctive and false picture of the moral life, according to which the truly moral self is characterless. In this picture, I am provided by reason, or perhaps by religious illumination (the picture owes much to Christianity), with a knowledge of the moral law, and I need only the will to obey it."[26] As we shall see, however, the requirement that the voluntariness in question be "utter voluntariness"[27] renders the resulting moral/nonmoral distinction shaky and problematical.

The moral/nonmoral divide opened up by distinguishing pure will from contingent circumstance can then be *axiologically* widened by stressing the overriding *value* of the moral. The clearest example is the Kantian insistence that the only intrinsically good thing is the *good will*—the will to do one's duty just because it is one's duty. This exploits the moral/nonmoral distinction's sensitivity to the motives from which actions spring to elaborate it into a dualism that opposes not just moral to nonmoral excellences, but *moral* to *nonmoral motives*, insisting that whatever is not a moral motive must be a merely *prudential* motive. At this point, the moral/nonmoral distinction becomes recognizable as the Kantian dualism of *morality and prudence.*

The third dimension along which the contrast is sharpened, finally, is in terms of structure: one side of the dualism is presented as orderly and free of conflict, while the

[25] Williams 1971, p. 163.
[26] Williams 1993, pp. 94–95.
[27] Williams 1985, p. 218.

other is disorderly and full of tensions. Thus, Williams stresses that the morality system makes "a strong assumption about the nature of ethical consistency": "if someone has acted justifiably from a moral point of view, then no-one can justifiably complain, from that point of view, of his so acting."[28]

This assumption of consistency within the moral sphere is built into the system through its special conception of *moral obligation*. It is "a feature of moral obligations in this sense," Williams writes, "that they cannot conflict."[29] This is a result of conceptualizing moral obligations in terms of two principles: the "agglomeration principle," according to which obligations *agglomerate* (i.e. someone who is under an obligation to do *x* and under an obligation to do *y* is under an obligation to do *x and y*); and the principle that "*ought* implies *can*," i.e. one *ought* to fulfil only those obligations that *can* be fulfilled together; what is left over after that must have been an *apparent* or at most a *prima facie* obligation, which ended up being defeated by one's *actual* obligations.

The effect of this structural contrast is that "morality resists the notion of a moral cost."[30] When an agent does what is morally best, this action cannot conflict with a competing moral demand—doing what is morally right cannot produce a moral wrong. It may come at a cost to people's *prudential* concerns, but it cannot carry a *moral* cost. As Williams puts it, "the wrong cannot ultimately be a wrong, the cost cannot really be a moral cost."[31]

If the only complaint that carries any real weight is a complaint in terms of moral costs, then one is beyond reproach as long as one does what one is morally obliged to do. People may incur costs in terms of their interests, and complain on that basis. But these complaints are no threat to one's moral worth. Disappointing people at the level of their interests does not make one morally blameworthy as long as no moral obligation is broken.

With a clear grasp of these three dimensions along which a vague moral/nonmoral distinction can be turned into a stark dualism, we are now equipped to recognize that the various passages in which Williams berates moralism in fact target precisely such a dualism.

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28 Williams 1981a, pp. 36–37.
29 Williams 1985, p. 195.
30 Williams 1995b, p. 246.
31 Williams 1995b, p. 246.

First, Williams castigates moralism for elaborating the moral/nonmoral distinction into an "exhaustive disjunction"[32] between two kinds of reasons or motives, where whatever is not a lofty moral motive must be a lowly prudential one:

> It is a grotesque product of ... strenuous moralism to suppose that "moral" and "prudential" sufficiently divide up the justifiable motives or reasons a man can have for doing something: they leave out, in fact, almost everything.[33]

People are motivated by a variety of considerations—personal aspirations, attachments and loyalties to particular people, passions for wider projects, causes, and intellectual enterprises, aesthetic considerations of beauty or orderliness, or even simply the sense that something is funny. It is Procrustean to press this multifarious array of motives into a binary and exhaustive classification. People constantly do things to their own disadvantage—out of love, admiration, or respect, for instance. These are not prudential reasons; yet they are not *moral* reasons either, "in any exigent or purified sense of that term."[34] As Susan Wolf points out, the mother who stays up all night to finish sewing her son's Halloween costume is moved neither by a sense of moral obligation nor by a sense of self-interest.[35] Her reasons are "reasons of love."[36] Sophie-Grace Chappell has argued that the Greek notion of *to kalon*, the beautiful, noble, or fine, was an important source of reasons for action in antiquity: one did something *because* it was a beautiful, noble, or fine thing to do. Once we have eyes for this distinctively aesthetic normativity, we can recognize that we ourselves are moved not merely by duty and booty, but also by beauty.[37] Indeed, as Cora Diamond points out, the 19th century shows that we are even capable of overdoing the pursuit of beauty:[38] the aestheticism of Walter Pater or Oscar Wilde is to beauty what moralism is to morality—a single-minded overestimation of one dimension of value that threatens to hobble one's appreciation of other dimensions.

This underscores the crucial point that moralism does more than dial up the importance of the moral: it also distorts our understanding of the nonmoral. Insisting that whatever is not a moral consideration must be a prudential consideration flattens the differences *between* nonmoral considerations, grotesquely misrepresenting those

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[32] Williams 2001b, p. 70.

[33] Williams 2001b, p. 71.

[34] Williams 2001b, p. 70.

[35] Wolf 2015, p. 51.

[36] Wolf 2010, p. 4. The phrase is used in much the same sense by Frankfurt 2004.

[37] Chappell 2019, p. 110.

[38] Diamond 2010.

that are unlike considerations of self-interest. Moralism is not simply a "distortion of moral thought," as Diamond and Taylor emphasize,[39] but a distortion of *non*moral thought *by* a distortion of moral thought.

This distortion of nonmoral thought can happen in two directions, each corresponding to one of the dualism's two poles. When nonmoral considerations form powerful reasons for behaving well, the dualism tries to absorb these into its conception of the moral: it attempts to represent them as a species of moral thought—for instance, by recasting a consideration external to morality, such as "It's my wife!," as the consideration that in certain situations (in a shipwreck, for example), it is *morally permissible* to give preference to one's wife over a stranger, all else being equal. Yet this is to absorb into the moral sphere a thought that can only be properly articulated *outside* that sphere. The thought "It's my wife!" registers a personal affection not under its moral aspect, but *simply as a personal affection*, and that should be reason enough. To draw one's motivation instead from the further thought that it is morally permissible to give preference to one's wife is to take what Williams calls a "richly moralistic"[40] view of personal affection. Such a moralistic wife-rescuer has "one thought too many."[41] For, as Williams quips, "it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife."[42]

But nonmoral considerations can equally be distorted when they yield reasons for behaving badly. This comes out when Williams asks: "How does 'morality' deal with the many reasons for behaving badly that lie in the desire to be loved? As another of its 'temptations', no doubt, like a craving for marmalade."[43] The dualism inherent in moralism robs us of the nuances required to differentiate the lowliest temptations, which merit nothing but reprimand, from such powerful drivers of human action as the desire to be loved, which merit a more complex reaction.

It is in this connection that Williams explicitly associates his critique of "morality" with the critique of moralism:

> When the ethical takes the special form of *morality*, it is connected with a particular deformation, *moralism*. The insistence that a given person is wrong, disconnected

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[39] Diamond 1997, p. 198; 2010, pp. 270, 276, and Taylor 2012, p. 1.

[40] Williams 1981b, p. 16.

[41] Williams 1981b, p. 18. I am indebted to the perceptive discussion of this example in Taylor 2012, pp. 63–71.

[42] Williams 1981b, p. 18.

[43] Williams 2014, p. 246.

> from any possible understanding of how it comes about that he is wrong, tends to leave the commentator entirely outside that person, preaching at him.[44]

Across his oeuvre, Williams is interested in the aetiology of human mistakes, or what he calls the "theory of error":[45] *why is it* that people believe or do wrong things? Blankly asserting that they are wrong without understanding *how they came to be* wrong results in a form of preaching at others that is disrespectful of their experience. As Williams argues in his essay on the idea of equality, "each person is owed an effort at identification and should not be regarded as the surface to which a certain label can be applied; rather, one should try to see the world … from that person's point of view."[46] In making the effort to trace a person's morally regrettable action to nonmoral considerations, and to discriminate between brazen egoism and motives that merit more sympathy, one no longer stands "entirely outside" that person, but imaginatively occupies their perspective to better understand what led them astray.

Taylor, in his critique of moralism, stresses the need for moral judgment to be accompanied by emotional responses such as pity, as a way of recognizing others' humanity.[47] But Williams aims at more than the recruitment of the sentiments. The failing of the moralist preaching at the sinner is that of being disconnected from *any possible understanding of how it comes about* that someone does a morally deplorable thing.

Once we move beyond mere moralizing and look at the pressures acting on people in certain roles, for example, we begin to appreciate that there are structural reasons why certain professions *need* to select for morally questionable dispositions.[48] We cannot afford for professionals in the military, the law, or medicine to be too squeamish: soldiers cannot question every order, just as doctors cannot afford to be empathetic all the time, and lawyers must be capable of ruthlessly pressuring a witness if justice is to be done. This leads to various professional adaptations that are hard to confine to the professional context. Once one makes the effort of understanding what pressures act on professionals in those roles, one will be more disposed to recognize that the rest of

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[44] Williams 1985, pp. 264n216.

[45] See Williams 1985, p. 49; 1995b, p. 188; 1995c, p. 199; 2005, p. 11; 2006a, p. 75. As argued in Queloz 2017 and Cueni and Queloz 2022, Williams regards the unmet obligation to provide a theory of error as the fatal flaw in many kinds of accounts—in ethics, politics, or philosophy—which flatter themselves that they have made real progress over earlier views.

[46] Williams 2005, p. 103. This is connected with Williams's internalism, which, as I argue in Queloz 2024b, forms the philosophical underpinning of his liberalism.

[47] Taylor 2012, pp. 15, 25, 78.

[48] Williams 1995b, pp. 192–202.

us *need* these roles to be performed; what is more, we need the people performing them to have characteristics that diverge from those recommended by morality, and even to go against moral norms when the demands of the job render it absolutely necessary.

At the same time, a sense of "conflict, qualms, and moral unease"[49] in people confronting a divergence between morality and the demands of the job is not a weakness to be eliminated, but an appropriate reaction registering a real conflict of values. We should not want professionals to lose that reluctance and become blind to the moral costs of their behaviour. For it is precisely that reluctance which encourages them to ask whether the morally questionable thing really is necessary.

This is why Williams took issue with the "spirit" underlying the morality system and with "the general picture of ethical life it implies."[50] On this picture, no serious value conflicts can arise, because morality makes no conflicting claims and nonmoral claims can be discounted. Correcting this picture, Williams reminds us of the reality of moral and nonmoral costs.

On the one hand, even morally impeccable behaviour can carry real costs, and render appropriate reactions such as agent-regret, contempt, disgust, or shame. Yet the dualism encourages one to brush off these costs and reactions on the grounds that they are not *moral*. Williams resists these attempts to overrule ethical experience by invoking the category of the "moral."[51] Only "a glib moralist" would say of Agamemnon that he "must be irrational to lie awake at night, having killed his daughter."[52] Williams confesses himself unable to see "what comfort it is supposed to give to me … if I am shunned, hated, unloved and despised, not least by myself, but am told that these reactions do not belong to morality."[53]

On the other hand, morality itself is not as internally harmonious as moral philosophers make it out to be. The notion of a *moral* cost is "deeply entrenched in many people's moral consciousness," even if "many moral philosophers learn to forget it."[54] To remind them of how deeply entrenched that notion is, Williams draws on literature, from Homer through Greek tragedy to Tolstoy, "to denounce the impulse to moralize,

[49] Williams 1995b, p. 199.

[50] Williams 1985, p. 193.

[51] Williams 1995b, p. 244.

[52] Williams 1973, p. 173. Although, as Chappell forthcoming argues, this is an imperfect example of a true dilemma, since we now find it hard to accept its assumptions. On Williams on blame and agent-regret, see Fricker 2010, 2016a, b; on shame, see Murata 2024.

[53] Williams 1995b, p. 244.

[54] Williams 1981a, p. 63.

to break down comforting moral dualisms by emphasizing complexity and ambiguity, to make the point that even when it's clear that there's a better thing to be done, the costs—indeed the moral costs—of doing it may be high."[55] All these various passages in which Williams explicitly berates some form of moralism can thus be unified by regarding them as targeting moralism as a dualism.

V. THE DUALISM IN POLITICS

But what, if anything, does Williams's critique of *political* moralism have in common with his critique of ethical moralism? At first glance, they seem almost entirely different. As I shall argue in this section, however, political moralism is likewise fuelled by a dualism that turns out to be the political extension of the same dualism that underlies moralism in ethics.

Williams's critique of political moralism is sometimes presented as adverting to the existence of distinctively political as opposed to moral normativity. Yet, as Jorah Dannenberg observes,[56] this incites one to draw and police a sharp boundary between the moral and the political—something which we can now see runs counter to Williams's approach to ethics.

A more promising entry-point is Williams's own presentation of political moralism as representing "the priority of the moral over the political":[57] it treats politics either as a mere instrument for implementing the moral (the "*enactment* model") or as constrained by moral principles that take precedence over political considerations (the "*structural* model"). What Williams does not explain there, however, is that these features of political moralism are themselves the products of an underlying *dualism of principle and interest*, which, like its analogue in ethics, sharply differentiates the moral principles it proposes to apply to politics from the mere interests that different factions pursue through politics.

We are given a hint of this when Williams characterizes his own, "realistic" conception of politics as being

a reaction to the intense moralism of much American political and indeed legal the-
ory, which is predictably matched by the concentration of American political science
on the coordination of private or group interests: a division of labour which is replic-
ated institutionally, between the 'politics' of Congress and the principled arguments

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[55] Williams 2003, p. 40.

[56] Dannenberg 2024, p. 3.

[57] Williams 2005, p. 2.

of the Supreme Court …. That view of the practice of politics, and the moralistic view of political theory, are made for each other. They represent a Manichaean dualism of soul and body, high-mindedness and the pork barrel, and the existence of each helps to explain how anyone could have accepted the other.[58]

It is easy to skid over Williams's reference to a "Manichean dualism of soul and body" and dismiss it as a mere rhetorical flourish. Whether intentionally or not, however, it effectively marks the link between his twin critiques of ethical and political moralism. It indicates that political moralism, too, is fuelled by a dualistic structure.

This becomes apparent once one takes a closer look at Williams's remarks on the two exponents of political moralism he identifies by name: John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin.[59] Williams associates both of them with a dualism he regards as the continuation of the dualism of morality and prudence:

Rawls contrasts 'a mere *modus vivendi*' with the principled basis of his own pluralism, and he takes it to cover, not only a Hobbesian standoff of equal fear, but also equilibria based on perceptions of mutual advantage. That these options are grouped together implies a contrast between principle and interest, or morality and prudence, which signifies the continuation of a (Kantian) morality as the framework of the system.[60]

The way Rawls conceives of the task and options for political theory already betrays a commitment to a dualism of principle and interest, because Rawls sees a deep and important divide between political arrangements based on people's interests and those resting on a set of high-minded and consistent moral principles. That principled basis is altogether different in nature, value, and structure from the low-minded and tension-ridden basis formed by people's interests. While political arrangements that possess a principled basis draw on our "highest moral powers," such as our "sense of fairness," those that lack a principled basis draw on nothing but our sense of prudence, constituting "a mere *modus vivendi*"—a phrase that, particularly in international relations, carries the connotation of being the exact opposite of an agreement on principles, suggesting instead a pragmatic compromise reached *faute de mieux*.

It is in this sense that the contrast between principle and interest marks a continuation of the contrast between morality and prudence. Just as the latter implies

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[58] Williams 2005, p. 12.

[59] For Rawls, see Williams 2005, p. 2; for Dworkin, see Williams 2005, p. 12.

[60] Williams 2005, p. 2.

that people who do not act out of moral motives act merely out of prudence when it is moral motives that matter, the former implies that if political arrangements are not based on principles drawing on our highest moral powers, they are based on nothing but the prudential coordination of interests; but *for political theory*, it is having a principled basis that matters—understanding the coordination of individual and group interests can be left to the political scientists. And of course, from the perspective of Williams's basically Hobbesian outlook,[61] that amounts to a moralistic view of political theory that overstates the importance of moral principles and understates the vast *differences* between the political arrangements grouped together as amounting to no more than a "mere *modus vivendi.*" To a political realist, all the worthwhile and achievable options lie between the two extremes that this overly stark contrast presents us with.[62] Good politics cannot just be a matter of adhering to moral principles.

This is evident in Williams's discussion of the problem of "dirty hands," i.e. that politicians must sometimes do morally deplorable things for good reasons that even the morally outraged who preach at those politicians would acknowledge if they were less out of touch with the political realities *that bring it about* that morally condemnable things need to be done. There are structural reasons why holders of high office systematically end up having to compromise on their moral principles and endorse forms of dishonesty, bullying, blackmail, or violence that they would consider beyond the pale in their personal lives. Once we abandon the dualism of principle and interest, we can recognize that there is an uncomfortable tension between the kinds of people we would ideally *want* to be politicians and those we actually *need* to be politicians. We need people who are willing to do morally dubious things when they are politically necessary. The best we can hope for, under these conditions, are people who are as scrupulous as they can be while being as ruthless as they need to be—for only those who are appropriately reluctant to do the morally deplorable thing when it is necessary can be relied upon *not* to do it when it is not.[63] Again, that reluctance truthfully registers the moral costs of what needs to be done.

Yet the dualism of principle and interest obfuscates these complexities insofar as it offers us, as the only contrast to upholding one's principles, the prudential pursuit of one's own interests through some combination of careerism and clientelism. This incites a facile moral outrage that is out of touch with the pressures faced by people in the hot seat. The demands of high office sometimes *require* office-holders to act *in the*

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[61] See Sleat 2018, p. 5, and Cozzaglio and Greene 2019.

[62] I elaborate on the conception of political realism that falls out of this in Queloz 2024a.

[63] Williams 1981a, p. 62.

interest of the state, even if it means flouting moral principles.[64] Such "*raison d'état*"-type situations are importantly different from careerism or clientelism. But, as Williams notes, the public and the media often take "a moralised view by which politicians are supposed not to do the acts required for what they are supposed to achieve."[65] This expression of political moralism betrays a lack of political realism in the most basic sense: a failure to appreciate the harsh realities of politics.

The idea that political moralism is fuelled by a dualism of principle and interest is most clearly articulated by Williams in his critique of Dworkin, however.[66] Williams objects to Dworkin's tendency to conceive of politics in dualistic terms—as involving either high-minded principled arguments, emblematized by the US Supreme Court, which interprets lofty values and ideals like equality and liberty in terms of non-conflicting rights, or else the tug of war between mere interests, emblematized by the US Congress, which determines whose interests win out:

> I suspect that in [Dworkin's conception] of politics there is lurking a Kantian dualism, to the effect that there is one world of interests which consists of winning and losing, and another world of principle, which is expressed in being right or wrong.[67]

Dworkin's understanding of politics betrays a dualism of principle and interest in suggesting that if politics does not take the form of principled interpretations of our political values as implying non-conflicting rights, it must be an unprincipled sphere of opportunism and clientelism, devoid of loftier political values and ideals. The result is the division of politics into two starkly contrasting spheres: high-mindedness and the pork barrel.

Again, however, resisting this dualism allows one to locate most political business somewhere between these extremes. One can take "a broader view" of the content of politics outside the courts, on which that content is "not confined to interest," and "all the considerations that bear on political action—both ideals and, for example, political survival—can come to one focus of decision."[68] We then draw the contrast between principle and interest *within* the spectrum of what actually goes on in politics, as a gradual contrast allowing for all sorts of combinations of principled high-mindedness and pork barrel politics. Even outside the courts, politics emerges as being to some

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[64] Williams 1981a, p. 69.

[65] Williams 1981a, p. 41.

[66] For further discussion of the Dworkin–Williams debate, see Queloz 2024a and Cueni 2024.

[67] Williams 2001a, p. 101.

[68] Williams 2005, p. 12.

extent a principled space. As Williams insists, there is such a thing as the *politics of principle*. In this regard, political realism encourages a *less* cynical view of politics—recognizing the extent to which politics is a principled space stops "the sores of realism forming the self-protective crust of cynicism."[69]

The resulting admixture defies dualism's neat alignment of debates over interests with winning or losing and debates over principles with being right or wrong. Politics may be a principled space, but it is not one in which a decision going against one entails that one was wrong; all it entails is that one lost.[70]

Accordingly, the politics of principle still need to be understood in distinctively political terms, and not assimilated to principled argument in constitutional law. Relations between political opponents, Williams stresses in response to Dworkin, are quite unlike relations between judges—political opponents "are not all interpreting the same text," and they are not beholden to the juridical demand to articulate values in terms of non-conflicting rights.[71] Overlooking this difference is Dworkin's key mistake, on Williams's account. If Dworkin ends up with a distorted view of principled argument, it is because

> he models political decisions that involve principle—as opposed to those that merely involve interests—on the pattern of decisions of constitutional law. Moreover, decisions of constitutional law are themselves understood in such a way that, first, if the case is rightly decided, no one will have been wronged; and, second, the only complaint about the decision that could carry any real or ultimate ethical weight would be a complaint that someone had been wronged.[72]

This exactly mirrors the dualism of morality and prudence, which understands decisions in such a way that, first, if one does what one is morally obliged to do, no moral obligation will have been broken; and second, the only complaint that could carry any real or ultimate weight would be a complaint that someone had broken a moral obligation.

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[69] Williams 1995b, p. 201. There is of course more to being a political realist than avoiding moralism. One needs, more positively, to think in genuinely political terms about the problems of order and the legitimation of public power, for instance—political terms that moralism occludes. But I shall not pursue the complex question of how best to characterize Williams's political realism here.

[70] Williams 2005, p. 13.

[71] These aspects of Williams's critique of Dworkin are illuminatingly discussed by Cueni 2024, forthcoming.

[72] Williams 2001a, pp. 97–98.

In both ethical and political moralism, we thus find the same assumption of consistency: obligations or principles cannot really conflict, neither *between* nor with anything *outside* themselves.[73] Whatever cannot be interpreted as reflecting a moral obligation must be a merely prudential claim; and whatever does not rise to the level of principle must be demoted to the level of mere interest.

Accordingly, political moralism, like ethical moralism, is fuelled by a dualism—a dualism of principle and interest, whose workings mirror those of the dualism of morality and prudence. Indeed, the two dualisms are so closely related that Williams himself treats them as near-equivalents ("a contrast between principle and interest, or morality and prudence"). We might accordingly want to regard them as different expressions of *one and the same* underlying dualism. After all, "interest" is to politics what "prudence" is to morality, and Rawls and Dworkin think of the principles in question primarily as *moral* principles. That is why both dualisms remain forms of *moralism.*

This answers the question of how the critique of political moralism relates to the critique of ethical moralism: the former is a direct extension of the latter. By Williams's own lights, however, a nonmoralist should not rest content to condemn these dualisms, but should take an interest in *how it comes about* that people go in for them. What is the appeal of moralism? We need a theory of error for moralism.

VI. A THEORY OF ERROR FOR MORALISM

To understand how it comes about that people go in for moralism, one first needs to distinguish the allure of *individual instances* of moralism from that of the *dualism* that underpins them. The allure of individual instances of moralism might simply be the satisfaction of feeling morally superior and occupying the moral high ground. In more complex cases, as Taylor shows,[74] moralists' quickness to condemn others may also be a convenient way of evading uncomfortable truths about themselves—as in cases where someone "doth protest too much." But these remain psychological dynamics confined to particular judgements. What we seek is a theory of error *for the very structures of thought* that render moralistic judgements available to individuals in the first place.

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[73] It is worth emphasizing that Williams only questions this assumption of consistency *across the entire range* of practical deliberation; as argued in Cueni and Queloz 2021, Williams has room for more restricted assumptions of consistency—he holds that practical deliberation by public authorities in liberal democratic societies is rightly subjected to a demand for a certain degree of consistency, for example.

[74] Taylor 2012, p. 102.

The most immediate appeal of the dualistic structure is that it holds out the promise of immunization against painful conflicts of values. Thinking in terms of the dualism of morality and prudence means that moral obligations cannot truly conflict—neither between themselves nor with claims of other kinds. Similarly, the dualism of principle and interest makes it a criterion of the successful interpretation of our principles that they be explicable in terms of non-conflicting rights, demoting anything that might conflict with them to the rank of mere interests, which can be disappointed, but not wronged.

The allure of this promise of conflict avoidance derives from the inherent discomfort of conflicts of values. In extreme cases, such conflicts form the stuff of tragedy, presenting one with situations where, no matter what one does, unpalatable costs will be suffered. But even quotidian conflicts of values constitute a form of "ill-being," as Valerie Tiberius argues,[75] because they prevent value fulfilment without remainder and require uncomfortable trade-offs.

The political equivalent of such personal value conflicts would be for the principles and values of some citizens to conflict with those of other citizens. Anything the state does will then come at a cost to some people, not merely in terms of their interests, but in terms of their principles and values—their liberty to send their children to private schools may have to be curtailed in the name of equality of education, for example.[76] And the uncomfortable truth is that this also holds for other values—they cannot all be realized without remainder, and the realization of one will come at the expense of the realization of others.

The dualism of principle and interest promises relief from this uncomfortable situation. If, on a principled interpretation, liberty and equality do not really conflict at the end of the line, then whatever the state rightfully prevents people from doing must be something they did not have a right to in the first place, and any remaining frustrations must be understood in terms of people being disappointed in their interests, but not wronged. Those on the winning side of a political decision accordingly need feel no compunction about the coercive power of the state being deployed against those on the losing side. As long as the decision accords with moral principles, those on the receiving end of some coercive measure have not merely lost, but *deservingly* lost.[77] No reason for the winners to lose sleep over this, therefore, or to reflect that there but for

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[75] Tiberius 2018.

[76] I use this example because both Dworkin and Williams discuss it in this connection; see Williams 2001a, p. 100, and Dworkin 2001, p. 78.

[77] Here I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer who urged me to make this Nietzschean thought more explicit. On Williams's alignment with Nietzsche, see Owen forthcoming-a; on Williams's divergence from Nietzsche, see Queloz 2021a and Leiter 2022.

the grace of God go they. The winners get to feel that they have all the moral principles on their side and are unambiguously in the right. This tendency of the dualism of principle and interest to shield one from value conflicts and the difficulty of living with the trade-offs they produce is deeply psychologically comforting. It offers the security of self-righteousness.

Structures of thought that promise to shield one from discomfort in this way possess an enduring appeal. That appeal need not be conscious; it can operate subliminally, like most forms of wishful thinking. But once we make that appeal explicit, it helps us explain the historical persistence of moralism. Its presence is no mere accident reflecting the contingent influence of Christianity. Moralism has a staying power of its own due to how it caters to the human yearning to reduce the uncomfortably conflictual character of practical deliberation. This yields not just a causal explanation, but a rationale for its adoption. Moralism acts as a device for conflict evasion, and thereby unburdens one from any unease about the losses incurred by those on the other side of a conflict.

If that is its function, or at least a systematic effect explaining its appeal, then it is no surprise that the moralistic way of thinking would not *present* itself to the moralist as involving anything like conflict evasion—that would defeat the point. If the device is to work, it must render moralists blind to the very presence of the conflict that the dualistic structure helps them evade. This leaves moralists specially ill-placed to pick up on the fact that their self-righteousness is self-serving.

But we can also glean from Williams's work the seeds of a theory of error that goes deeper than that, explaining the aspiration to reduce value conflicts in terms of two more basic human desires.

One is the desire for control over whether life goes well. The possibility of the things we value coming into conflict deprives us of that control and exposes us to luck—to empirical determination by contingent forces beyond the control of the will, where this contrasts primarily with agential determination by the will of the agent. We might, through sheer misfortune, end up in situations where one of our deepest commitments can only be satisfied at the expense of another, equally deep commitment—resulting, in extreme cases, in life-wrecking tragedy. By immunizing one's conception of what matters against such conflicts, one extricates the moral shape of one's life from contingent external forces, gaining back control over whether life goes well by one's own lights.

The other desire is the longing for life to be ultimately just. As Williams notes, "most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that, if not unjust, are at any rate not just."[78] By insisting that the moral shape of a life is both supremely

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[78] Williams 1985, p. 217.

important and immune to luck, morality "tries to cleave to an ultimate justice," promising "solace to a sense of the world's unfairness."[79] If what matters morally can be categorically separated from the nonmoral through its metaphysical basis in an unconditioned will; and if it eclipses everything else in importance and remains free of inherent conflict; then morality can offer effective protection from the vicissitudes of contingency. It can provide "a shelter against luck" by providing "one realm of value (indeed, of supreme value) that is defended against contingency."[80]

The attractions of "a dualism ... by which the most essential characteristics and interests of people transcend the empirical social world and its misfortunes"[81] thus plausibly lie, at a deeper level, in the desire to control whether life goes well and the longing for life to be ultimately just.

VII. THE COSTS OF MORALISM

With its attractions thus laid out, moralism begins to sound like a good idea. But buying into these promises of total control and total justice carries a steep price.

In light of the above, what emerges as the principal problem with moralism is that it blinds us to real moral and political costs. By laying over ethical experience a conceptual scheme on which moral considerations cannot conflict, moralism renders us conceptually insensitive to conflicts of values that are there nonetheless, entrenched in our ethical experience and emotions.

This offends against truthfulness—it distorts our perception of the ethical landscape by presenting it as more harmonious and conducive to value fulfilment than it really is. Moralism then looks like "a cowardly evasion, a refusal to see what is there to be seen."[82] This goes against philosophy's constitutive commitment to truthfulness—certainly if one thinks, as Williams does, that philosophy ought "to honour the existence of genuine and deep and ... irresoluble conflict."[83]

Besides offending against truthfulness, however, being blind to moral and political costs also carries moral and political costs of its own: it renders moralists insensitive,

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[79] Williams 1981a, p. 21.

[80] Williams 1995b, p. 241. In Queloz 2022b, I lay out exactly what a concatenation of moral ideas needs to be able to do in order to shelter life from luck.

[81] Williams 1993, p. 116.

[82] Williams 2001b, p. 86.

[83] Williams 1971, p. 165. For a detailed account of the pivotal role of truthfulness in Williams's outlook, see Queloz 2018, 2021b, pp. 187−192, and Krishnan and Queloz 2023.

uncharitable, and uncompassionate in their judgements. Blindsided by a dualism that leaves them ill-equipped to appreciate the costs of doing what is morally best, they are correspondingly ill-equipped to appreciate what moved people *not* to do what is morally best. The consequent lack of sympathetic understanding is what produces the impression that moralism involves nothing but preaching at people. If moralists come across as uncharitable, it is not out of a lack of kindness, but out of a kind of blindness—a blindness they owe to their dualistic outlook. This explains what Robert Fullinwider calls the "*judgementalism*" of moralists—their "habit of uncharitably and officiously passing judgement on other people."[84]

As a result of this blindness to costs, moreover, moralists are led to feel that they *know better* than the people who feel certain that they have incurred a loss. If there was no real conflict to begin with, there cannot have been a loss either. Those complaining must therefore have misunderstood something, or have a confused conception of the values involved. Consequently, their complaints can safely be brushed aside. What they need is moral instruction to help them see the situation aright.

This patronizing attitude is as problematic in ethics as in politics. In ethics, it falls foul of our ideals of attentive, caring, and compassionate engagement with others' complaints. In politics, it flouts our liberal democratic ideal of respectful political discourse. When people complain that they have incurred a loss in terms of one political value as a result of a decision in the name of another political value, Williams points out against Dworkin, telling people "that they had better wise up and revise their definition of the values involved is not in many cases prudent, or citizenly, or respectful of their experience."[85] The appeal to prudence also reminds us that disregarding the costs of inflexible adherence to moral principles can be politically *irresponsible* in much the same sense in which Max Weber thought that a rigid *Gesinnungsethik*, an ethic of conviction, could be politically irresponsible.[86]

Instead, we expect from our interlocutors a *sensibility to the costs* of doing what is right—both when we have done the right thing and when we have done the wrong thing. This sensibility to costs is the foundation of compassionate, respectful, and responsible discourse. Indeed, the range of reactions that *express* this sensibility— such as sympathy, commiseration, a willingness to apologize, make amends, or even offer compensation—are the only reactions that are truly fitting when confronted

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[84] Fullinwider 2005, p. 109.

[85] Williams 2001a, p. 102.

[86] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this connection. For Williams's endorsement of a Weberian ethic of responsibility that is sensitive to costs, see Williams 2005, pp. 12, 72; see also Cozzaglio and Greene 2019.

with irresoluble conflicts of values, because only they acknowledge the painful trade-off involved.

The same demand to express a sensibility to moral and political costs also applies to the agent performing the costly act. If we want politicians to exhibit profound reluctance in "dirty hands" situations, it is not just because only someone who reluctantly resorts to the morally questionable thing when necessary can be relied upon to eschew it otherwise; the reluctance also "embodies a sensibility to moral costs" which makes it the "correct reaction."[87] Just as sympathy or commiseration acknowledge, from the second-personal standpoint, that real costs were incurred by someone else, the agent's reluctance acknowledges, from the first-personal standpoint, that the action involves significant moral costs.

Let me conclude by gesturing towards two rather different types of costs, a thorough examination of which must be left for another occasion.[88] One is that the dualism inherent in moralism commits us to an unrealistic conception of agency, thereby setting us up for an indiscriminate scepticism about responsibility. By insisting that the moral is different in nature, value, and structure from the nonmoral, the dualism hopes to render the moral shape of a life impervious to luck. But "the aim of making morality immune to luck is bound to be disappointed," Williams asserts, because "the dispositions of morality, however far back they are placed in the direction of motive and intention, are as 'conditioned' as anything else."[89] Absent a soul-like seat of agency that lies beyond the reach of empirical determination, even the purest intention will still reflect the influence of some contingent forces. A conception of ethics such as the Homeric one can accommodate this, for it distinguishes acts for which agents are responsible from acts for which they are not responsible *within* a spectrum of actions and motives that are *all* externally conditioned to some degree. But in making "utter voluntariness" a condition of moral responsibility, moralism paves the way for an indiscriminate scepticism about responsibility. It leaves us, as the only contrast to utter voluntariness, a flattened picture on which everything is coercion by forces external to the will.[90]

And finally, by screening out or distorting the variety of values, reasons, and motives that do not fit its dualistic outlook, moralism bars us from understanding much of

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[87] Williams 1981a, p. 63.

[88] For a fuller articulation of the first line of critique, see Queloz 2022b and Queloz and van Ackeren 2024.

[89] Williams 1981a, p. 21.

[90] As I lay out in Queloz 2022a, this line of critique ties in with Williams's insistence that the notion of the voluntary is "essentially superficial"—see Williams 1993, p. 67; 1995b, p. 243; 1995d, p. 495. See also Russell 2013, 2019, 2022.

what sustains a meaningful individual life and drives humanity's greatest collective achievements: reasons arising from personal attachments or passions for projects; from a sense of beauty, humour, or political purpose; or from the manifold relations that people can stand in to one another, from admiration or devotion to loyalty or rivalry. Again, the dualism leaves us, as the only contrast to motivation by lofty moral principles, the conclusion that people must be motivated by lowly self-interest.[91]

If we fail to appreciate the power of these motives that are as nonprudential as they are nonmoral, we cannot understand people's "ground projects," which give people reasons to live at all and thus form a precondition of their having any reasons to live *morally*.[92] But equally, conceptualizing motivations through this dualistic lens prevents us from understanding what incited humanity's greatest achievements in architecture, art, philosophy, literature, or science. Had people over the ages consistently taken such a moralistic view of things, their legacy would be incomparably poorer. It appears to have been this Nietzschean consideration, as much as anything else, that underpinned Williams's instinctive resistance to moralism. Asked in an interview whether his critique of moralism was motivated by personal animus, Williams replied: "I've always been impressed by the thought that if you took morality absolutely as seriously as it demands, almost nothing that we value would exist."[93]

That thought applies even to morality itself. As Williams takes Nietzsche to have reminded us, "morality owes a great deal, including its own existence, to the fact that it is not obeyed," because "the space in which it operates is created, historically, socially, and psychologically, by kinds of impulse that it rejects."[94] I take him to mean that nonmoral motives are implicated, first, in the historical formation of moral motives; second, in sustaining the wider society in which moral motives can be cultivated; and third, in animating the psychological processes whereby moral motives come to be learned and reaffirmed. The evolution of sociality, the production and distribution of

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[91] This comes out in the critique of moralism offered by Dannenberg 2024, p. 3.

[92] On the importance of ground projects to sustaining a meaningful life, see Williams 1981a, pp. 1–19, Wolf 2010, and Taylor 2012, pp. 59–61. This is a point where Williams's critique of moralism links up with his internalism. For an account of internalism along these lines, see Queloz 2024b.

[93] Williams 1999, p. 159.

[94] Williams 1995b, p. 245. For a discussion of this theme and how Nietzsche wants us to react to that fact, see Queloz and Cueni 2019. It is worth noting that Williams made an analogous point about liberalism: "The circumstances in which liberal thought is possible have been created in part by actions that violate liberal ideals and human rights, as was recognized by Hegel and Marx, and, in a less encouraging spirit, by Nietzsche" (Williams 2005, p. 25). On this theme, see Krishnan and Queloz 2023.

material goods and services, and the educational system cannot be understood solely in terms of moral motives. Hence, even "moralists have to face the question whether or not they are relieved that the values which they think should prevail have not always done so."[95] There is a *pragmatic inconsistency* involved in moralism's insistence that moral value eclipse the nonmoral forms of value on which morality's own cultivation depends. It is as though moralism were sawing off the branch it is sitting on.

In view of these costs of moralism, we have reason to resist the allure of its comforting dualism. We need the moral/nonmoral distinction. But we also need the distinction to preserve our sensibility to the real costs of value conflicts, remain compatible with a realistic conception of agency, and attune us to the variety of human motivations that enable and sustain most of what we value, including moral motivations themselves. There would seem to be little gained and much lost by a retreat into moralism. We are better off embracing the prospect of a life that, though more exposed to value conflicts and more vulnerable to contingency, is also rather more of a life.

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The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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[95] Williams 1998, §5.

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