Allyn Fives 'Moral obligation as a conclusive reason: On Bernard Williams' critique of *the morality system*,' *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy* (2024)

ABSTRACT: Bernard Williams' critique of *the morality system*, as illustrated in his reading of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, is intended to show both that real moral conflicts can arise, and that a moral obligation is merely one reason among others and can be defeated by the thick concepts of a shared ethical life. In response, I want to advance two lines of argument. First, when Williams argues that a moral obligation can be the locus of moral conflict, a further step is required to explain why one should feel regret for not acting on a defeated reason. Second, Williams presupposes that, when a conflict is resolved, the conclusive reason will be a thick ethical concept, but there is no compelling justification for that assumption.

KEY WORDS: conflict; moral obligation; morality system; necessity; Bernard Williams

The morality system

Bernard Williams' critique of *the morality system* is developed over a number of decades in many different works, but perhaps the most important of these are the essay 'Ethical Consistency' (1965), the collection of essays *Moral Luck* (1981), and two later books: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) and *Shame and Necessity* (1993). The critique is based on a contrast Williams draws between modern moral philosophy, in particular its Kantian and utilitarian versions, and a quite different view of ethics evident in the works of the ancient Greeks, especially the tragedians and historians. The contrast is sharpest, and starkest, in Williams' rendering of the moral dilemma at the heart of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

In Aeschylus' version of the tragedy, we are told how Agamemnon, at the beginning of the expedition to Troy, came to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia. The expedition had been held up at Aulis by bad weather, adverse conditions sent by Artemis, and the crucial point for our purposes is that, as a prophet made it known, only Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia would enable the fleet to sail. We then hear the Chorus tell of how Agamemnon viewed the

two horns of the dilemma on which he was caught. Williams' translation of the text reads as follows: 'on the one hand, the horror of what he was asked to do, and on the other side, his responsibilities to the expedition and his own position as its commander' (Williams 1993, p. 132; see also 1965, p. 111). As Williams puts it, Agamemnon 'decided in favour of sacrifice':

> "May it be well," he desperately said. When he had decided and, as the Chorus says, "put on the harness of necessity," *anangkas edu lepadnon* (218), a violent frenzy overcame him, and he changed to a state of mind in which he could dare anything (221); in this state of mind he carried out the sacrifice, which is described in vivid detail in what follows. (1993, pp. 132–3)

Williams then notes how (modern) critics have approached this passage 'caught up in' what he judges to be 'inappropriate conceptions' (ibid., p. 133). These conceptions are also characteristic of modern moral philosophy, what Williams refers to as *the morality system*, and they explain two commonly made objections to the play. The first is that, while Agamemnon was meant to be responsible for his actions, he is also said to have acted from 'necessity', and these two things are, it is maintained, incompatible (ibid.). Second, in the relevant passage it is assumed that Agamemnon was faced with a genuine, real, moral conflict, where whatever he did he would have done something wrong and he would be left with regret, but, the objection goes, such a conflict cannot in fact arise (ibid.; see also 1965, p. 111).

The task, for Williams, is two-fold. His aim is to explain why it is that modern commentators have approached ancient Greek ideas, including those in *Agamemnon*, with these 'inappropriate conceptions', but also why we should dispense with those very conceptions. The explanation can be found in what Williams refers to as *the morality system*, the four main components of which I set out now.

The first is voluntarism. Modern moral philosophers assume that a moral agent is one who acts autonomously (Williams 1985, p. 7). On this view, a fundamental requirement of moral responsibility is not simply that one 'brought about' a 'state of affairs', as Agamemnon

clearly did when he sacrificed Iphigeneia; but also that one 'intended' the outcome, that one's 'state of mind' was 'normal' when one acted, and that it is one's business to 'make up for it' (Williams 1993, p. 55, p. 63). Williams refers to these as the four 'basic elements of any conception of responsibility', and the real difference between the ancient and modern views, he says, lies in the relative importance they assign each component. Therefore, the ancient Greeks *did* have the ideas needed to make sense of moral responsibility, including the concept of intention. Yes, Agamemnon acted under 'necessity'. However, as Williams points out, the original text of *Agamemnon* (at line 218) uses a verb (*edu*) to describe how Agamemnon 'put on' the harness of necessity (1993, p. 133). The modern view is different because it is assumed voluntariness can be, as Williams puts it, 'metaphysically deepened' (ibid., p. 63). The result is that, for modern moral philosophy, 'the true moral self' is 'characterless' (ibid., p. 94). It is 'rendered immune to luck', given that what alone counts is motive and intention (1981 [1974], pp. 20–21). For *the morality system*, all one needs to obey the moral law, discoverable by reason, is will, whereas other features of personality, such as emotions, threaten to get in the way of the voluntary operation of the will.

Williams does want to show that modern moral philosophy has a distinctive, and problematic, conception of voluntariness. Nonetheless, he accepts there is considerable truth to the contention that what matters is what one can freely do. As the 'ought implies can' principle demands, one cannot be obliged to do what one cannot do. The obligatory action 'must be in the agent's power' (Williams 1985, p. 175). However, within *the morality system*, this principle is thought to have a further, controversial, implication: namely, that one cannot be faced with a *real* moral conflict, including a conflict between obligations. That is, it cannot ever be the case that one is obliged to φ and also obliged to ¬φ. For example, it cannot be that Agamemnon was obliged to sacrifice his daughter *and also* obliged not to do so. Such a conflict cannot arise because, according to *the morality system*, it is incompatible with the

'ought implies can' principle. It is a situation of necessity rather than freedom, one where Agamemnon ought to do what he cannot do. However, in order for modern moral philosophers to be able to reach that conclusion, and so reject moral conflicts, they have to introduce a further requirement: namely, the 'agglomeration principle', which states that, if one is obliged to φ and obliged to ¬φ, then one is obliged to φ and ¬φ (Williams 1985, p. 176). If all this is accepted, then moral conflicts are simply inconsistent, as Williams also concedes (1965, p. 109). That is why, according to *the morality system*, Agamemnon was not faced with a real dilemma. One of the moral demands would be defeated, and cancelled, and in that moment what was merely an apparent conflict would be brought to an end (ibid., p. 113). As a result, there will never be a real moral conflict where no matter what one does one does some wrong: the assumption, evident in *the morality system*, is that humanity 'can realise a harmonious identity that involves no real loss' (Williams 1993, p. 162).

It follows, for *the morality system*, 'moral obligations […] cannot conflict, ultimately, really, or at the end of the line' (Williams 1985, p. 176). Conflicts are only apparent rather than real. But *the morality system* goes further than this. The third characteristic assumption of modern moral philosophy is that a moral obligation will always defeat any other kind of conflicting reason. As Elizabeth Anscombe also observes, the idea of moral obligation implies 'some absolute verdict' (1958, p. 5). This is the case in part because, as Williams explains, for *the morality system*, there is no escape from morality: it is not possible to step outside, claiming one does not belong (1985, p. 178). This is clearly illustrated in the Kantian idea that a *moral* demand, including the requirement not to harm others, is compatible with the *categorical imperative*, and that means any autonomous agent can will that it become a *universal* law (Williams 1993, p. 76). But that is not all. For what is at issue here is the question of how to conceptualise deliberation. As Williams says, with respect to 'a conclusion of practical necessity', 'the conclusion not merely that one should do a certain

thing, but that one *must*', the assumption of modern moral philosophers is that a moral obligation cannot be defeated by a non-moral consideration (1985, p. 188; emphasis in original). Indeed, as Williams notes, Kant 'construed this unconditional practical necessity as being peculiar to morality' (1985, p. 189). Hence, it is not just that the requirement not to harm others is, for modern moral philosophy, a universal law. Rather, whatever reasons Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter, they could not defeat the moral obligation to never do such a thing. Any such reasons were merely conditional: that is, they were conditional on the value attached to ensuring the success of the expedition. And, for *the morality system*, an unconditional moral imperative, that is, a moral obligation, will always defeat any such conditional reason for action that it conflicts with. The latter will be, must be, defeated. Modern moral philosophy, as Williams puts it, 'interpreted the *conclusions* of practical reasoning as obligations' (1995, p. 204; emphasis in original).

This brings us to the fourth and final feature of *the morality system*, namely the over-riding importance given to guilt as an ethical reaction. This follows directly from the assumptions, above, that the moral agent acts voluntarily, that real moral conflicts are not possible, and that an obligation cannot be defeated by other conflicting reasons. It is not just that one cannot be blamed (or praised) for what one did involuntarily (Williams 1985, p. 177); if one freely carries out one's obligations one should feel no guilt and should not be blamed, even when acting in this way involves failing to act on some other reason. For *the morality system*, when reasons for action are in conflict, one should feel no guilt for having acted as one ought. One cannot be blamed for failing to act on a reason that has been rejected, say a reason defeated by an obligation (Williams 1985, p. 176). Hence, for modern moral philosophy, not only is it doubtful whether Agamemnon was responsible for his actions (as they were not fully voluntary), and not only should Agamemnon never have sacrificed his daughter in the first place (as the reason for doing so was defeated by his moral obligation).

In addition, if he had acted correctly, that is, if he had refused to sacrifice his daughter, he should have felt no guilt for his omission, even if it had resulted in the failure of the expedition.

Because it gives priority to guilt and blame in this way, *the morality system* also systematically marginalizes all that is non-voluntary and non-moral, and this matters. The assumption here is that the world is harmonious and so no one is ever faced with the 'necessity' of moral conflict, where no matter what one does one does some wrong. But also, the narrow focus characteristic of *the morality system*, the focus on guilt and blame, means that other ethical concepts are given little or no role to play, in particular 'shame', and the idea that one should feel shame for some action, including something that was not intended (Williams 1993, p. 50). What *the morality system* has no place for at all is the idea that, in a situation of moral conflict, when one fails to act on the defeated reason, one has brought about some wrong, and one should, as a result, feel shame, and 'regret', for what one has caused to happen (Williams 1993, p. 133). In addition, *the morality system* cannot appreciate the importance of the shame felt at being seen by, or imagining oneself seen by, an 'other', 'one whose reactions I should respect' (ibid., p. 84). That explains why, for *the morality system*, a moral obligation could never be defeated as a reason by, say, ethical commitments peculiar to one's life, the roles one has played, and the demands others make upon one as part of what Williams calls a 'shared' 'ethical life' (1985, p. 191).

What *the morality system* gives a central place to is, in Williams' terminology, 'thin' rather than 'thick' concepts. Obligation is a thin concept, as it is a reason for action for any moral agent, regardless of the social context in which that agent makes decisions and acts. In contrast, '*coward, lie, brutality, gratitude*' are all thick, or substantive, ethical concepts that, Williams maintains, are 'world-guided and action-guiding': that is, they are concepts that can be rightly or wrongly applied, and concepts that actually guide action in everyday life, and

can do so very often without very much reflection (1985, p. 129–30, p. 140–1; emphasis in original). Thick concepts also are to the fore in any shared ethical life, and so it was for the ancient Greeks. This explains why feelings of shame had real force for them in ethical deliberation. Agamemnon, when faced with his terrible choice, the choice between his daughter's life and the success of the expedition, asked, 'How could I become a deserter' (line 212, in Williams 1993, p. 132). In the ancient Greek world, as evidenced by Homer's *Iliad*, 'running away in battle' was, as Williams points out, one of the breaches of *aidos*, or shame (1993, p. 80). And Williams' argument is that the importance of the shame felt by Agamemnon at such a prospect, and how it might have been the foremost consideration in a conclusion of practical necessity, is something that cannot be appreciated from inside *the morality system.*

Whether a moral obligation is a conclusive reason

Williams has shown that the ethical ideas of the ancient Greeks are very different from those of modern moral philosophy. That was his first task. The second is to show how we can dispense with the assumptions of *the morality system*. What precisely would that entail? Although we cannot return to the time of the ancient Greeks, in search of some lost unity (this Williams dismisses as a mere 'fantasy'), nonetheless, the ideas of the ancient Greeks are, he believes, closer to us, to what we do and what we think, even if they differ from 'what we think we think', as represented by much of modern moral philosophy (1993, p. 91, pp. 166–7). That is why Williams' conclusions about ancient Greece are important, and their importance concerns the 'kinds of reasons people should, or perhaps can, have for their actions' (ibid., p. 41). And his conclusion is that the idea of duty (or obligation) 'in some abstract modern sense' was 'largely unknown' to the ancient Greeks (ibid.). What Williams is objecting to is not moral obligation as such, but the highly voluntarist conception

characteristic of modern moral philosophy. His point is that this conception is at odds with what we (actually) do and think. This is true of legal responsibility, to take just one of Williams' examples. That is why, in a contemporary court of law, one *can* be held responsible for unintended outcomes, as when an accidental release of fireworks in a train station causes injury to others (ibid., p. 63, p. 191, n. 34).

What are we left with, if we jettison *the morality system*? We still have moral obligation as a reason for action. However, it can never be conclusive, or at least, not in the way modern moral philosophers assume. To explain how Williams arrives at that position, let us start with what he says about shame and guilt. It is not just that they are different types of ethical reaction. He places them in hierarchical order, in particular when he says the following: 'Shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself' (1993, p. 93). Guilt has a role to play, but it is limited. It can direct one towards those one has wronged, and who may demand reparations. But, Williams says, guilt 'cannot by itself help one to understand one's relations to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live' (ibid., p. 94). Part of what is at issue here is what one ought to do, all-things-considered, and for Williams, it is shame that guides one to that conclusion. It is shame, not guilt, that is, as he puts it, connected with ideas of who one is and 'how it will be for one's life with others if one acts in one way rather than another' (ibid., p. 102).

Proponents of *the morality system* assume that a moral obligation has priority over non-moral reasons. What Williams does is invert that hierarchical order, insisting that *thick* ethical concepts have greater importance (see Goldie 2009, p. 107). Hence, when one comes to a conclusion (say about what obligations one owes), this is, for Williams, an ethical conclusion that is 'part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others' (1985, p. 191). The point being made here is not simply that it is one's ethical judgement that

determines what moral obligations one is to recognise. Rather, it is that 'obligations are never final practical conclusions, but are an input into practical decision' (Williams 1995, p. 205). As we saw, one's feelings of guilt may make it clear who one has wronged, but it is shame that directs one to act because it is shame that can *rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live*. Therefore, while a moral obligation is a reason, it is merely one input into practical deliberation. It is the thick concepts of a shared ethical life that provide one's conclusion about what one ought to do all-things-considered. Why do thick ethical concepts come first, in this way? Why must they have priority? As others have noted, Williams is here pointing to the importance of character (see Krause 2009, p. 265), and in doing so finds some affinity with those who talk about the importance of strong ethical evaluations in shaping character (see Taylor 1995, p. 133). It is by being a person of a certain character that one makes decisions of a certain kind. A thin moral obligation does not make that decision by itself.

Hence, in these moments, Williams is clear that a moral obligation is never a conclusive reason: it is never a final practical conclusion. However, this is not the only line of argument to be discerned in Williams' work. Although always a critic of *the morality system*, at times, he clearly states not only that a moral obligation is one kind of reason among others, but that, on a given occasion, it may defeat all other reasons.

To begin with, Williams insists that the ancient Greeks *could* make sense of the idea of moral obligation, even if, as we have seen, the abstract (modern) idea of duty was largely unknown to them. Hence, although the Greeks had 'no direct equivalent' for 'guilt', Williams is not one of those who thinks *this* difference between ourselves and the Greeks is especially important (1993, p. 88). Indeed, it is not that the ancient Greeks 'failed to recognise any of the reactions we associate with guilt, but that they did not make of those reactions the special thing that they became when they are separately recognised as guilt' (ibid., p. 91). In fact, the

Greek term *aidos*, which Williams translates as 'shame' for most of *Shame and Necessity*, 'cannot', he at one point clarifies, 'merely mean "shame," but must cover something like guilt as well' (ibid., p. 90). This is because *nemesis*, the reaction appropriate to breaches of *aidos*, can include 'anger, indignation, and resentment', as well as calls for 'reparation', all of which would, in the eyes of modern moral philosophers, belong to the realm of guilt and moral obligation (ibid.).

What Williams is querying, therefore, is not the idea of guilt as an ethical reaction, but what modern moral philosophy has come to 'make of' it. Similarly, it seems Williams has no objection to the idea of moral obligation, but again what modern moral philosophers 'make of' it. For a start, he criticizes the attempts made to replace all other ethical concepts with that of obligation (by Kant) or duty (by David Ross) (Williams 1985, p. 176). These reductive enterprises are bound to fail, for Williams, in part because of the distinction between thick and thin concepts. For instance, we cannot reduce a thick concept like cowardice to the thin concept of obligation without losing a considerable amount of what makes our concept of cowardice meaningful in the first place (Goldie 2009, p. 95). Williams also criticizes the way in which modern moral philosophy provides a reductive account of moral obligation itself, focusing as it does on the voluntarily-incurred. In response, Williams points to the real differences between obligations of promises, which are indeed voluntarily-incurred, and those of gratitude and of justice, which very often are not (1985, p. 7, p. 179). In making these points, Williams is not casting doubt on the validity or reality of such obligations. It is more that he is insisting on the irreducible plurality of ethical commitments, including the irreducible plurality of obligations as just one element of our ethical life.

Williams, unsurprisingly, also rejects the further assumption that a moral obligation cannot be defeated by any other kind of reason (1981 [1979], p. 73). At issue is the relative importance of a moral obligation. Williams says his aim is to give 'an account of what

obligations are when they are rightly seen as merely one kind of ethical consideration among others' (1985, p. 182). He explicitly acknowledges that obligations have their own importance, largely because they secure reliability, and reliability serves important human interests (ibid., p. 187), ones that relate to 'needs that are very everyday' (1995, p. 205). At the same time, there are other kinds of importance, including those represented by supererogatory ethical demands, as well as non-ethical kinds. And, he concludes, 'we can also see how they [moral obligations] need not always command the highest priority', and hence, on a given occasion, 'an agent can reasonably conclude that the obligation may be broken' (1985, p. 187; see also 1981 [1982], p. 125). He is, in Susan Wolf's terms, objecting not to the idea that morality will guide and constrain behaviour, but to 'an *absolute and unconditional* commitment to morality' (2012, p. 80; emphasis in original). This is compelling if, as Judith Shklar once put it, the morality of obligation is one source of ethical principles but clearly not the only one (1964, p. 57). As an aside, it should be noted that, in places, Williams goes further than this, holding that non-ethical considerations may very well trump those that are ethical. 'Someone may conclude', Williams says, 'that he or she unconditionally must do a certain thing, for reasons of prudence, self-protection, aesthetic or artistic concern, or sheer self-assertion' (1985, p. 188). Although this entails that non-ethical reasons may well be conclusive for an individual, much of the time the claim he wants to make is the less controversial one that ethical reasons (i.e. thick ethical concepts) can be conclusive, and hence can defeat a conflicting thin moral reason (see 1995, p. 205ff), and it is this aspect of his argument I am focusing on here.

But his argument is not simply that a moral obligation *can* be defeated by other kinds of reason. As we have already seen, Williams goes on to conclude that *obligations are never final practical conclusions*. Nonetheless, at other moments, Williams seems to reach a very different conclusion. He states that, 'in the deliberations of an agent who is morally

motivated, or in advice given to such an agent, an *ought* of moral obligation and the practical *ought* will coincide' (1981, p. 120; emphasis in original). This way of putting things is a reflection of Williams' account of 'internal reasons', according to which one has 'a reason to φ' if one has 'some motive which will be served or furthered by [one's] φ-ing' (1981 [1980], p. 101). Again, what Williams rejects is not moral obligation, but what is 'made of' it, which is, among other things, to turn it into an 'external reason', such that the person who refuses to recognise the reason, and does so because it does not come from their motivational set, is said to be acting irrationally (1981, p. 122). At the same time, and putting to one side the wider question of whether Williams can defend this account of internal reasons (see McDowell 1995; Gert 2009), what he is clearly saying here is that a moral obligation *can* be a conclusive reason for action: that is, it *can* be the 'practical must' for the person who has moral obligations among their motivational set.

On this important point, there is, in Williams' argument, at the very least ambivalence and even the suggestion of incoherence. Williams is saying that a moral obligation both can be and can never be a conclusive reason. However, the incoherence, it turns out, is only apparent rather than real. Indeed, when Williams talks of an obligation being a conclusive reason, what he has in mind is a thick ethical concept, and not the thin concept of obligation characteristic of modern moral philosophy. For example, Agamemnon concluded that he ought all-things-considered sacrifice his daughter, and this might be interpreted as him giving priority to an obligation (namely, his obligation as a commander). For Williams, however, this is an ethical conclusion, arrived at from within a shared ethical life, based on its thick ethical concepts: in particular, he stresses Agamemnon's 'responsibilities to the expedition', and that refusing to carry out the sacrifice would have been a 'desertion' (1993, p. 132, p. 209, n. 11). Just as it is a 'philosophical illusion' to think that 'what is wrong with breaking a promise is that promises ought to be kept' (Hollis 1995, p. 176), similarly, Agamemnon was

simply doing what was demanded of him by his world-guided and action-guiding thick ethical commitments.

This reading frees Williams from the charge of incoherence, but it opens him up to a different objection, namely that of begging the question. He is offering an argument purporting to show why a thin concept, such as moral obligation, can never be a conclusive reason, but the argument seems to presume what it is meant to show, namely that a conclusive reason will be a thick ethical concept. He thus contends that, although a moral obligation can be a conclusive reason, this is the case only when it is in fact a thick ethical concept, as was the case, on Williams' reading, for Agamemnon, when he did what was demanded of him in his role as commander. But is this the only way to read that tragedy, and is this the only way to understand moral obligation? In the remaining sections, I want to examine whether, in contrast, an obligation of the thin sort can be a conclusive reason. But I first consider Williams' argument defending the reality of moral conflict, and show both that there is a gap in his argument, and how it can be filled. I then take that account of moral conflict, and what it says about necessity, as the basis for the argument I want to make about moral obligation as a conclusive reason.

Moral conflict, consistency, and moral obligation

To start with, let us go back to *the morality system*. A crucial feature of the argument rejecting the reality of moral conflict is the distinction made between a prima facie and an all-things-considered ought. As per the oft-used example, if one has promised to meet a friend for a social occasion, one prima facie ought to do so. However, it is not the all-things-considered ought if it is defeated by a more important reason: here, the duty to aid the victim of a serious accident (Ross 2002 [1930], p. 18, n. 1). That seems like a justified conclusion to reach in this situation, even when one's friend has not freed one from the promise in question.

However, David Ross (and others) go on to make the further claim that, in this situation, the prima facie ought is not binding: only the all-things-considered ought is binding (Ross 2002 [1930], p. 18, n. 1; Donagan 1993, p. 19; Foot 2002 [1995], p. 177; de Haan 2001, p. 283). That is why, the argument goes, there is no real conflict here; one should feel no regret for failing to meet one's friend as promised.

According to the argument against moral conflict, the requirement to meet one's friend is no longer binding. Why is that the case? It follows from the 'ought implies can' principle, the argument goes. The contention here is that an ought judgement commits one to the performance of an act, as well as the non-performance of other (conflicting) acts (Kant 1965 [1797], p. 24; de Haan 2001, p. 272). If, in the example above, one acts as one ought all-things-considered, then one cannot meet one's friend as promised: one cannot commit to the performance of *that* act. But then it cannot be true, the argument goes, that one ought to meet one's friend (see Nebel 2019, p. 462). That also explains why, it is argued, a defeated reason is not binding. If each defeated reason *were* binding, this would create an inconsistent set of binding reasons: a set of ought statements that cannot all be acted upon (Horty 2003, p. 565; see also Finlay 2016, p. 29; Cf. Marino 2015, pp. 29–31).

Why does Williams object to this line of thought? His argument is that inconsistency need not follow from our accepting the reality of moral conflicts. And it is not the 'ought implies can' principle that is the problem here, he says, but how it has been combined with the 'agglomeration principle'. According to Williams, the 'ought implies can' principle should be applied to *each* ought statement in a moral conflict rather than to *both*. It is, of course, inconsistent to say one ought to do both and cannot do both. But it is not inconsistent to say one ought to do each, one can do either, and one cannot do both. And that is all Williams assumes here (Williams 1965, p. 120). In a moral conflict, one *can* either φ or $\neg\varphi$ (see Marcus 1980, p. 134). Hence, it is the 'agglomeration principle' that needs to be rejected.

The existence of separate, conflicting oughts need not create a conjunctive ought, where one ought to do both (Cf. Brink 1994, p. 230). This seems to be correct. In the dilemma faced by Agamemnon, for instance, there were reasons for each course of action; he could do either; and the problem was that he could not do both. He *could* have decided not to sacrifice his daughter, but that would mean turning down the only available route to save the expedition.

Williams is claiming that the 'ought implies can' principle is no bar to the reality of moral conflict. Williams also wants to explain why the reaction of regret, and even guilt, can be appropriate when a conflict is resolved. It is appropriate, the argument goes, because even when a reason is defeated, it may still be binding. What Williams calls 'agent-regret' is felt towards one's own past actions, where the thought is one 'might have acted otherwise' (1981 [1976a], p. 27; see Marcus 1980, p. 130). Arguments against moral conflicts, Williams says, 'do not do justice to the facts of regret and related considerations: basically because they eliminate from the scene the "ought" that is not acted upon' (1965, p. 113). The problem with doing so, the problem with assuming that a defeated reason is also eliminated, is two-fold: one thereby 'retreats from moral conflict to moral indifference'; and one cannot do so 'and at the same time admit that those conflicts were what, at the time, [one] took them to be, viz. conflicts of moral claims' (ibid., p. 117).

Is Williams' defence of moral conflict successful? We should recall what is at stake. Opponents of moral conflict are saying that if one ought all-things-considered φ, and if one acts as one ought all-things-considered, there can be no reason to feel regret, or guilt, for a reason not acted upon. Williams' response does not attempt to throw into doubt that, in the given situation, one ought all-things-considered to φ. His aim instead is to address the status of the reason that has been defeated. And I think he has offered a convincing argument as to why, *if* a moral reason is binding, one is not free to eliminate that claim simply because it is in conflict with a more weighty reason. Nonetheless, something is missing from Williams'

argument. He does not explain *when*, or *how*, a reason that is defeated is nonetheless still a binding reason. But we can, I think, fill that gap in his argument.

Those who reject the reality of moral conflict assume that a defeated reason is also cancelled. The argument is that a reason either is or is not 'triggered' in a given context; that among the class of triggered reasons, a reason is either 'binding' or it is not; and that a reason is no longer binding (it is cancelled) if it is defeated by a conflicting reason (Horty 2003, p. 565). It is undoubtedly true that, in some situations, the defeated reason *is* cancelled. When that happens, one does nothing wrong, and it is inappropriate to feel regret, when one acts on the more important reason. This is the case when one lies to the killer who comes knocking at the door, where the lie is the only option available to help prevent a murder. While that is true, the objection to moral conflicts does not hold up. For it is not the case that a reason is cancelled whenever it is defeated. For instance, in some situations where one ought all-things-considered to tell a lie, one should feel guilt in doing so. This is where one lies to someone who *does* deserve the truth (Williams 2002, p. 115).

According to those who reject moral conflicts, the mere fact a reason is triggered is not sufficient for it to be binding. They introduce an extra step, where the reason in question must be shown to be undefeated as well. A lot is riding on this. If they are right to insist on this second step, then moral conflicts are not real. Regarding Agamemnon, for example, the implication would be that, if he ought all-things-considered to have sacrificed his daughter, then the reason not to sacrifice was no longer a reason for him. However, that seems wrong: as Williams puts it, it seems false to the facts (1965, p. 119). Indeed, it is not what we have seen in the two examples above. Just as the requirement not to lie is binding regarding those who deserve the truth, the requirement to meet a friend as promised is binding regarding the friend who has not released one from that promise.

This objection to moral conflict requires some compelling rationale, but in fact it relies on the original, already rejected, argument from 'ought implies can' (combined with the 'agglomeration principle'). If a defeated reason can be binding, the argument goes, there will be a class of binding reasons that cannot all be acted upon, but that means there will be a class of contradictory reasons, and this, it is claimed, is not possible (Horty 2003, p. 565; Finlay 2016, p. 29). However, we have already seen how we can retain the 'ought implies can' principle and yet accept the reality of moral conflict (namely, by uncoupling 'ought implies can' from the 'agglomeration principle'). As the charge of inconsistency by itself does not justify rejecting the reality of moral conflicts, nor does it justify insisting that every defeated reason is also cancelled. Absent that rationale, there is no explanation why a defeated reason cannot be binding.

This fills the gap in Williams' argument, explaining why, under certain circumstances, it is rational to feel regret when one fails to act on the reason defeated in a moral conflict. What are the implications for moral obligation? Williams shows how a moral obligation can be defeated by other kinds of reason (1981, p. 120). However, it also follows that when an obligation is defeated, one should feel regret if the obligation is still binding. This point needs emphasising in part because Williams is sometimes characterised as offering a way out of such conflicts (and hence also associated feelings of regret), as part of 'a phantasmatic yearning for a clear and central principle' of subjectivity (Honig 1996, p. 271). In one sense, such a reading is not satisfactory. As we have seen, Williams insists there is no way to safeguard one's life from moral conflict. The ideal of a harmonious life is false, illusory, he says. Nonetheless, what he says at other moments gives some support to Bonnie Honig's critique. As we saw, he insists the conclusive reason will come from one's thick ethical concepts, and that suggests ethical agents derive a clear sense of identity from their shared ethical life, one that is tied in with their personal integrity (Williams 1973, p. 108ff).

And, if it is true that, as Williams says, a thick ethical concept will always defeat a conflicting thin concept, such as a moral obligation, then there would be little at stake in any such conflict. There is little to regret when one fails to act on a binding reason that, as claimed here, could never be the conclusive reason. In one sense, therefore, it is true that Williams is assuming harmony: he is assuming one always knows one has done the right thing, all-things-considered, when one has followed one's thick ethical concepts. And it is this idea I want to challenge, namely that, in any moral conflict, one *must* give priority to one's thick ethical concepts.

Necessity, moral freedom, and guilt

To make headway on this point requires giving further consideration to the question of necessity. As we saw above, Williams wants to show how moral obligation can be uncoupled from the voluntarist conception of moral responsibility characteristic of *the morality system*. As he says, the fact a moral obligation has validity is no guarantee one will not be faced with the necessity of having to violate that obligation in a situation of moral conflict. But is Williams justified in assuming there is a certain necessity to how such a conflict is resolved?

We have been considering the kind of conflict where one ought to φ, one ought to ¬φ, one can φ, one can ¬φ, but one cannot *both* φ and ¬φ. In this type of conflict, the kind faced by Agamemnon, doing some wrong is unavoidable. So far, we have focused on the reasons Agamemnon gave to sacrifice his daughter. But Aeschylus also highlighted the reasons *not* to act in this way. At a later date, in revenge for Iphigeneia's death, Agamemnon was murdered by his wife Clytaemnestra, who justified her actions to the Chorus in the following terms:

> he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,
> the agony I laboured into love
> to charm away the savage winds of Thrace.
>
> Didn't the law demand you banish him? –
> hunt him from the land for all his guilt? (lines 1142–6)

Here, in these lines, is the second horn of Agamemnon's dilemma. It is not just 'the horror' of what he was asked to do for the sake of the expedition, but also that it was against 'the law', something for which his 'guilt' was clear.

How should we understand 'law' and 'guilt' here? One way to approach this question is to see it as a matter of discerning what meaning Aeschylus intended, or what meaning these terms had for his first audience. But we can also step back, and consider how we might approach such a situation, here and now: or 'now and around here', to borrow a phrase from Williams (2005, p. 8). When we do ask that question, it seems clear that one of the 'laws' broken by anyone sacrificing a human being, their own child, in this way is a thin moral obligation, and more precisely the Kantian obligation not to harm others; and one reason to feel guilt is the fact of having failed to act as one was obliged to. Hence, it could be said that one of the horns of a dilemma of this kind, of the kind Agamemnon faced, was a thin moral obligation. What is more, it is informative to see how such a line of thought will be received both by proponents of *the morality system* and by Williams himself. For *the morality system*, the moral obligation in question will always defeat any conflicting reason, so there is no real conflict here. Williams will of course insist that, whatever way the conflict is resolved, there may be regret, but he too assumes one of the arms of the dilemma will always triumph, namely whatever it is one's thick ethical concepts demand.

As I said, what is at issue here is necessity, and how it should be understood. And there are a number of ways in which the idea of necessity plays a part in Williams' argument, each one nicely illustrated in Agamemnon's dilemma. It could be argued that Agamemnon could not avoid sacrificing his daughter, and this is because it was what he ought to do all-things-considered. This is the point Williams has emphasised. In addition, perhaps the fact he could not avoid acting in this way means he could offer an excuse for his actions, rather than a justification (Walzer 1973, p. 170; Marcus 1980, p. 130). That is, insofar as Agamemnon

ought, all-things-considered, to have sacrificed his daughter, he could claim he was not *fully* responsible for doing so (see Austin 1979 [1956–7], p. 191; Franklin 2013). And this has important implications for our discussion of moral obligation. As we have seen, Williams has shown that a moral obligation is inconclusive and can be defeated. Some of those who fail to act as an obligation demands are simply guilty of a wrong. But others can rightly offer an excuse for what they have done, the excuse of having to act in a situation of moral conflict. It is true that some situations can be altered, so that what initially appeared to be a necessity can be removed. And whether or not it is true that Williams failed to fully appreciate this possibility, and was as a result guilty of being 'at some deep level without hope' (Nussbaum 2009, p. 236), nonetheless, the fact remains there is nothing illogical in the idea of acting under necessity.

There are two types of necessity here. While it can be said that Agamemnon had to sacrifice his daughter because it was what he ought to do, all-things-considered (the first kind of necessity), it is also true that he could not avoid doing some wrong, by failing to act on the defeated prima facie ought (the second kind of necessity). That is why, for Williams, one can be blamed even when one has acted as one ought all-things-considered (Cf Gert 2009, p. 76). The agent-regret felt in such a situation 'necessarily involves a wish that things had been otherwise', as one would rather not have faced such a conflict, and yet, as Williams says, this kind of regret 'does not necessarily involve the wish, all things taken together, that one had acted otherwise', given that one has acted as one ought, all-things-considered (1981 [1976a], p. 31).

It is possible to read Agamemnon's dilemma in this way. As Martha Nussbaum says, Agamemnon's necessity is that of facing a decision, a decision between X and Y, where neither alternative is desirable (1986, p. 34). And it is telling that Williams objects to Nussbaum's reading at precisely this point and on precisely this issue. Of course, he too

speaks of the necessity of moral conflicts. However, in response to Nussbaum, he maintains that 'The necessity at which Agamemnon arrives is that of having to choose X' (i.e. having to sacrifice Iphigeneia) (1993, p. 208, n.10). He points to the wording of the play to support that reading: necessity is referred to *after* the decision is made, as Williams points out. Agamemnon decided, and *then* put on the harness of necessity (ibid., p. 132). But when Williams offers further support for this position, we notice that he is introducing a third kind of necessity: the necessity of one's character, or identity. Not only is Williams saying that necessity is simply, or primarily, a matter of what one ought to do all-things-considered. It is also that the latter is determined by one's thick ethical concepts. Elsewhere, Williams observes that, in a situation where one must choose whether to save a loved one or a stranger, modern moral philosophy provides 'one thought too many' when it requires that one consider whether saving a loved one would be justified by the demands of impartial morality (1981 [1976b], p. 18; 1973, p. 96; see also Wolf 1982, p. 430). Saving *this* loved one is what I must do; but also, I must do it because of who *I* am. He is also assuming that, regarding Agamemnon's case, we are introducing 'one thought too many' if we ask whether what was demanded of him by the thick ethical concepts of his role and his shared ethical life may have clashed with, and be defeated by, the (thin) requirement to perform one's moral obligations. Rather, his thick concepts, his 'character', required the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, and it was when Agamemnon recognised this reality that he put on the harness of necessity.

I said earlier that Williams is open to the charge of begging the question. He is offering an argument purporting to show why a thin concept can never be a conclusive reason, but the argument seems to presume what it is meant to show, namely that a conclusive reason will be a thick ethical concept. And what we have just seen leads to the same conclusion. Arguably, Williams is too hasty when dismissing Nussbaum's reading of Agamemnon. Nussbaum is right that, insofar as Agamemnon was faced with a moral conflict,

then one feature of his necessity was having to choose between conflicting requirements, where no matter what Agamemnon did, he did some wrong. As Aeschylus puts it: 'Pain both ways and what is worse?' (line 212). Williams is of course right when he says, one must do what one ought to do all-things-considered. However, he also presumes that the all-things-considered ought, what one must do, comes from one's thick ethical concepts. And the closest we get to an explanation for that claim is one that draws on a third kind of necessity, the necessity of one's identity. It is an idea of necessity that has no place in *the morality system*, but it had disappeared in later Greek thought as well, in particular with the 'Platonic idea of the moral self as characterless', one where reason dominates pleasure, and the mind is structured by normative categories (Williams 1993, p. 159–61). Because the ancient Greeks did not have this idea of a characterless self, what was important for them was what Williams calls the thick concepts that made sense for them of an individual's identify, their place in the world. However, these thoughts about identity are not enough to show that a practical conclusion must come from one's thick ethical concepts. Indeed, as Williams himself reminds us, there is a 'gap' between 'the tragic character' and 'the ways in which the world acts upon him' (ibid., p. 165). It is true that no one else could have faced Agamemnon's dilemma, because no one else was both commander of the fleet and father to Iphigeneia. But it is also true there was no guarantee that he could live in harmony with his world, as proven by the reality of the moral conflict he faced. And it is the implication of this last point that I am interested in. In particular, what if one's thick ethical concepts clash with a thin concept, such as moral obligation, and if the moral obligation has considerable weight in the given situation? Then, it is not introducing 'one thought too many' to stop and deliberate, and perhaps conclude one's thick concepts have been defeated.

I have tried to show how we can read *Agamemnon* as presenting us with a moral conflict, where at least one of the demands was, or could be interpreted as being, a (thin)

moral obligation, and the necessity arose from the dilemmatic choice itself. In one sense, this is not controversial. Williams' own reading also permits us to conclude that Agamemnon was guilty, and rightly open to blame. At one point Williams does insist the text does *not* 'beckon us towards blame', for, as he says, a 'sense of the work requires a suspension of moral comment at this point' (1993, p. 134; see also 1981 [1976b], p. 18). But Williams then goes on to observe that moral comment *is* appropriate in other situations of moral conflict, namely when the decision is 'part of a practice, where there is something to be *learned* from the case' (1993, p. 135; emphasis in original). It is not that, in Agamemnon's dilemma, there was no wrong, no moral remainder, and in particular no guilt. Rather, it would be pointless to press this home, because *this* is not a practice. The question then is, what was that moral remainder? I have argued that it is at least possible to interpret the reason not acted upon as a (thin) moral obligation. If Williams' work allows us to come to this conclusion, it is because he does not reject moral obligation as a reason. He is merely 'dubious' about the possibility that it could provide a conclusive reason in a given case (Wolf 2012, p. 83). What I have tried to show is that his dubiousness on this point lacks any compelling justification.

It is not justified by his argument rejecting *the morality system*. Williams shows that the concept of moral obligation can be uncoupled from *the morality system*. Then, moral obligation is one reason among others, it can be the locus of moral conflict, and it can be defeated by other kinds of reason. However, nothing in that argument shows that a moral obligation will always be defeated by conflicting reasons. There remains the possibility that, in a given situation, what one ought to do all-things-considered is act as demanded by a thin moral obligation. Williams tries to reject that possibility by equating necessity with the demands of character but his doing so simply begs the question. If we conceptualise character as Williams has done, then it does seem that what one's character demands will be what

one's thick ethical concepts demand. It does not follow that such a demand will defeat any conflicting reason, and in particular, that it will defeat a thin moral obligation.

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