Ethical self-cultivation and the morality system

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1. *Self-cultivation, Ethics and the Morality System*

My main question is whether there is a tension between an *ethics of self-cultivation* and a *morality of duty and obligation,* specifically within what Bernard Williams (1929-2003) called 'the Morality System'. I take this to be a question that bears directly on a number of debates about the place of freedom and the virtues in ethical life that have recently taken place both in philosophy and social anthropology (see e.g. Foucault 1997; Keane 2016; Korsgaard 1996; Laidlaw 2013; Williams 1985).

My suggestion is that an ethics of self-cultivation is not only *consistent* with the Morality System, it may even be *recommended* or *required* by it, at least in certain circumstances. Yet I also suggest that regardless of whether the relationship between an ethics of self-cultivation and the Morality System is one of consistency, recommendation or requirement, the Morality System (as understood by Williams) claims an *explanatory and justificatory privilege* for itself in *licensing* an ethics of self-cultivation that it may not, in fact, possess.

1.a. The idea of Virtuous Self-Cultivation

The idea of self-cultivation, and virtuous manifestations thereof, has played an increasingly important role in social interpretation and criticism in recent decades, both inside and outside philosophy. From the growth of 'virtue ethics' in Anglophone moral philosophy (e.g. Hursthouse 1999), through Foucault's 'biopolitics' and its 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1997), to the anthropology of ethics and freedom (e.g. Laidlaw 2013), the idea of making the ethical subject and its development of individual excellences and character traits (whether in the form of sexual liberation, religious renunciation or just finding a way to 'muddle through' a complex and unpredictable social world) the central target of descriptive and ethical investigation has by now come to present philosophers and social scientists with what may look like a distinctive theoretical paradigm, and thus a theoretical alternative to the study of ethical life in terms of traditional models such as social forces, or '*homo economicus*' (see e.g. Durkheim 1972; Sen 1997). From the perspective of moral philosophy in particular, these developments present an obvious challenge. The question is whether, and to what extent, the critical models of virtuous self-cultivation currently being developed are consistent with the ways in which the evaluation and criticism of ethical agency has traditionally been theorized in modern moral theories such as Utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. The discussion that follows can be read as a highly schematic attempt at reconciling what may initially look like mutually inhospitable currents of thought; or at least as laying down the basic terms on which such a reconciliation depends.

1.b. <u>Williams on Ethics and the Morality System</u>

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985)*,* Williams contrasts what he calls 'the Ethical' with a 'peculiar institution' he calls 'the Morality System' (or 'sub-system'), and complains that modern moral philosophy has mistakenly allowed the former (i.e. Ethics) to be 'enslaved' by the latter (the Morality System), with perverse effects not only on moral philosophy, but also on moral and political thought more widely.

<u>The Morality System</u>: Williams thinks of the Morality System as a *highly organized* body of practical thought according to which the *fundamental basis* for the ethical evaluation of human agency and character consists in measuring them up against a set of *obligations* (or 'duties') that are *impartial*; that *cannot conflict*; that are *accessible to* and *inescapable fo*r *rational agents* who act *voluntarily*; and any failures to comply with of which provide justified cause for *blame* and other punitive attitudes. Williams complains that the Morality System 'misunderstands obligations, not seeing how they form just one type of ethical consideration' among others (Williams 1985, 196); and also misunderstands the Ethical; not seeing how it forms just one type of *practical* consideration among others. [1]

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[1] Williams writes: 'Simply not to accept anything as valuable except the ethical dispositions… would be a reversion to ascetic Socraticism and would need a reconstruction of the self to suit it. It would need also a utopian politics of renunciation by everyone; or else it would have to admit that virtue as purity of heart, while it was the only good, could only be a minority accomplishment. (Williams 1985, 46). Thus, not only is the Ethical regarded as only one source of

This characterization of the Morality System arguably captures the central features of the *deontological* moral theory associated by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and therefore also a kind of (Protestant) Christian morality of which Kant's ethics is a formalized version in secular (dis)guise. In addition, Williams appeals to individual *elements* of the Morality System (such as *impartiality*) in his critique of the second of the two most prominent moral theories espoused in the modern period in the West, namely *Utilitarianism*, as developed most systematically by Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900), but more widely associated with Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873).[2] One thing that is notable by its absence from Williams's definition of the Morality System is the role of either *personal good* or *virtuous character* among the basic materials of sound moral thought. This is an absence that might therefore be thought to put the Morality System at odds with any systematic kind of *Ethics of Virtue*, as historically associated with Aristotle (384-322) or Medieval Christianity, or more recently espoused in the philosophical writings of Alasdair MacIntyre (1929-) and Rosalind Hursthouse (1943-).

The Ethical: Williams thinks of the Morality System as a particularly *narrow* historical development of a wider category that he refers to as 'the ethical'.[3] One

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value among others, Williams also has little time be (possibly on broadly 'egalitarian' grounds) for the idea that ethical self-cultivation is the only valuable project of self-cultivation there could be.

[2] Williams describes Utilitarianism as 'a marginal member of the morality system' (Williams 1985, 178).

[3] Williams writes that the substance of the Ethical could in principle also be captured by the term 'the moral' in a colloquially recognizable sense, although he suggests that 'the ethical' (from the Greek) has distinctive connotations relating

crucial connotation of 'the ethical' is practical thought involving the evaluation of *customs, dispositions*, and *character traits*. In light of this fact, one might think there is a deep tension between the Ethical on the one hand, and a Morality System focused on *obligatory actions*, *ends*, or *principles* on the other. Yet this is, I will shortly suggest, a misleading impression. More important, I think, is a theoretical contrast between a *plural* and *socially embodied* set of *conceptual tools* for the description and evaluation of human behaviour of a greater or lesser degree of *articulation* or *systematicity* on the one hand, and a comparatively *rigorous* and *systematic* set of norms and principles regarded as *explaining* and *justifying* all kinds of socially embodied ethical evaluations on the other. The fact that Williams adds to this contrast a peculiarly Kantian 'twist' on the side of the Morality System is neither essential to grasp that contrast, nor – I think - the most helpful way to make it.

Either way, my starting point is the recognition that the Ethical involves a universally recognizable set of *practical questions* (e.g. 'How should one live?') to which the Morality System gives a highly 'peculiar' kind of answer; and that this kind of answer could easily seem (and, indeed, did seem to Williams) to miss out on a fundamental source of practical knowledge, or wisdom; namely that which is characteristically formulated using the language of *the virtues*. The fact that this source, and that vocabulary, has recently been made extensive use of in the anthropology of ethics, as prominently exemplified e.g. in Lambek (2010); Laidlaw (2013) and Lambek et. al. (2015), makes Williams's complaint of

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to the evaluation of *individual character*, whereas 'the moral' (from the Latin) has distinctive connotations relating to *social expectation*, or 'mores'. (Williams 1985, 6.)

relevance beyond the narrow confines of the kind of 'analytical' moral philosophy that Williams himself practiced.[4] For if we follow through on Williams's contrast, it might therefore come to seem as if there is a deep tension between the virtue-based accounts of moral agency embodied in recent 'anthropology of ethics' and alternative accounts of moral agency that emphasize aspects of the Ethical embodied in the Morality System as defined by Williams. In what follows I attempt to critically interrogate this hypothesis.[5]

1.c. <u>Discussion</u>

In this section, I have done two things. First, I have identified a distinctive way of taking the Ethical seriously captured by Williams's idea of the Morality System. Second, I have identified a potential tension between this 'peculiar' way of taking the Ethical seriously and a way of taking the Ethical seriously that is focused on the development of virtue, and thereby also on any form of ethical self-cultivation interpretable in those terms. If this tension were deep (or fundamental), we would be faced with a choice between saying either (with Williams) that the Morality System is at best an optional way of taking the Ethical seriously, or (with the Morality System) that adopting an ethics of self-

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[4] That Williams himself would have been uncomfortable with this label does not, in my view, make its application to his work even remotely inappropriate.

[5] Williams, incidentally, was not a 'Virtue Theorist' in a significant sense, in my view; mainly because he would have considered any attempt to synthesize the insights gained by thinking in terms of the vocabulary of the virtues into a *systematic moral theory* to be making the same 'hubristic' mistake as the attempt to synthesize the insights gained by thinking in terms of the vocabulary of 'the good' or 'the right' into either a Utilitarian or a Deontological moral theory. I shall briefly return to the significance of this dispute for how to think about different moral theories below.

cultivation is incompatible with really taking the Ethical seriously. In the following sections I will suggest that the appearance of dilemma here is based on a misunderstanding of exactly what is at stake in accepting the claims of the Morality System.[6] By giving a diagnosis of that misunderstanding, I hope to explain both what is right and what is wrong in thinking of an ethics of self-cultivation as being in tension with the acceptance of the Morality System as a genuine source of insight into the Ethical more widely understood.

2. *Virtuous Self-cultivation in the Morality System*

So what, if anything, could it mean to practice virtuous self-cultivation within the Morality System? Given that Williams's definition of the Morality System is narrowly targeted at a distinctively Kantian conception of the Ethical, it makes sense to focus the discussion of what self-cultivation could amount to in the Morality System by focusing on Kantian ethics, broadly speaking. Having done that, I will then go on to say something in the following section about what self-cultivation could amount to within the context of Utilitarian moral thought; not only because Utilitarianism is the other main target of Williams's critique of the morality system; but also because it has potentially interesting implications for

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[6] C.f. Christine Korsgaard, who writes: 'In recent years it has become rather fashionable to focus on the phenomenon of necessitation. It seems to invoke the lugubrious image of the good human being as a Miserable Sinner in a state of eternal reform… Necessitation is thus conceived as *repression*. In opposition to this, some recent virtue theorists have offered us the… equally rebarbative picture of the virtuous human being as a sort of Good Dog, [who]… does what he ought to do… with a tail-wagging cheerfulness and enthusiasm. The opposition between these pictures is shallow, for they share the basic intuition that the experience of necessitation is a sign that there is something wrong with the person who undergoes it.' (Korsgaard 2009, 3-4)

how some influential contemporary philosophers currently think about our present historical predicament, both ethically and politically speaking.

2.a. <u>Kantian Self-cultivation: how to become a person of principle</u>

What could virtuous self-cultivation consist in on a Kantian interpretation of the Morality System?

i) theory:

One of the key notions of the Kantian version of the Morality System is *acting according to duty*, including the duties you have to *yourself and others* in virtue of being *the kind of thing that you most fundamentally are* ethically speaking, namely a *rational agent.* As a rational agent you are someone who *sets yourself* and *voluntarily pursues ends*; and to set yourself ends under the guise of rationality, you must do so in accordance with *basic laws of practical reason.* These are the laws by means of which we can be said to make, or 'constitute', ourselves as the kind of socially embodied agents we are. For Kant, there are two basic laws of this kind: first, to set oneself rational ends (the 'categorical imperative'); and second, to take the means to those rational ends (the 'hypothetical imperative'). A person who acts in accordance with the basic laws of rationality is someone who: a) acts under a maxim that could at the same time be willed as a 'universal law' (this is the Kantian analogue of the so-called 'Golden Rule'); b) acts as a 'representative' of an ideal 'Kingdom of Ends' (in which everyone would only ever act on universalizable maxims); and c) always

treats 'humanity' (and the rational agency it embodies) in *themselves* and *others* as an intrinsically valuable *end*, and so never as a *means only*.[7] The morally successful Kantian moral agent is a person whose overall behaviour is constrained by *respect for all rational agents*, *without making exceptions* on the grounds of either *custom* or *convenience* (such as breaking a costly promise, or lying to save face.) The morally successful Kantian moral agent is therefore what we might colloquially describe as a *person of principle*; hence a person who by 'constituting' themselves as such is effectively engaged in a multiply realizable project of virtuous *self-cultivation* as a person of principle, both by 'constitution' and by 'growth'.

ii) applications:

This thumbnail version of Kantian ethical theory has the following implications for the place of virtuous self-cultivation in the Morality System:

First, the successful Kantian moral agent is *not* supposed to be *a purely selfless altruist*. (Indeed, she *cannot be* a purely selfless altruist.) The duty to respect rational nature as an end in itself applies to the agent *him or herself* as much as to anyone else. Indeed, Kant claims we have a rational duty to respect our own rational nature by developing our natural talents and social relationships and thereby play our part in the creation or pursuit of the Kingdom of Ends. A person

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[7] '[T]he only way in which you can constitute yourself well is by governing yourself in accordance with universal principles which you can will as universal laws for every rational being... The moral law is the law of self-constitution, and as such, it is a constitutive principle of human life itself.' (Korsgaard 2009, xii-xiii).

who aims to do so successfully would be a Kantian moral agent cultivating virtue. The successful Kantian moral agent is a person who shows *self respect* as well as respect for others (e.g. who *does not commit suicide* for selfish reasons alone, because endorsing our continued existence as a rational agent is a necessary condition for our ability to show genuine respect for ourselves).

Second, the successful Kantian moral agent is *not* supposed to be *a rule-fetishist*, or otherwise a narrow-minded stickler for rigorous procedure. Although their agency will display or aspire to *consistency* in virtue of being *controlled by* rational principles (and therefore being *integrated, stable, trustworthy, or 'safe'*), it does not follow that they exercise ethical agency by *self-consciously articulating* what they do in terms of rational principles on any given occasion, although it *is* a presupposition of Kant's view that all moral agents must be *capable* of doing this to a minimal degree, in order for ethical principles to genuinely *oblige them*. (This requirement of 'promulgation' is regarded by Kant as a necessary condition for being ethically accountable, and so praise or blameworthy.) To this extent, Kantian morality is meant to be both *contextually flexible* and essentially *transparent* to those to whom it applies.[8]

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[8] Imagine being sentenced to eternal damnation for failing to conform to a Law you are in principle unable to understand. *If* you think this is absurd, you will subscribe to a similar requirement of promulgation. (This issue was of major concern to moral philosophers in the 'modern' period, insofar as it was thought that the Moral Law is also a Divine Law.) Of course, the issue is far from uncontroversial. (For further discussion, see e.g. Harrison 2002, Chapter 1 ('The Word').)

Third, the successful Kantian moral agent is a person who, although they do necessarily *respect themselves* as rational agents, does *not* – at the level of the basic maxims on which they act – *make any exception* of themselves. In our capacity as (finite and fallible) rational agents, all human beings are *ethically on a par*, or *equal*, even if we are *metaphysically separate*. Hence, there is no 'natural moral hierarchy' among humans in the Kantian version of the Morality System. (The same does not apply to the non-rational (i.e. non-human) animals.)

Fourth, a successful Kantian moral agent is both: 1) *rationally required* to pursue some of the character traits that we know of as the *virtues*, and 2) has the *rational option* to pursue and indefinite number of more specific and contextually dependent traits we would recognize as virtuous. The former, or 'required', virtues correspond to what Kant calls our 'imperfect obligations', over which we have substantial discretion in how they are applied and for which there are no antecedent right-holders. (The virtue of Charity belongs in this category.) The latter, or 'optional', virtues include the pursuit of genuine goods the pursuit of which is *rationally permitted*, but *not required*. (The virtues embodied in specific social roles, such as the systematic engagement in aesthetic pursuits, belong in this category.)[9]

Fifth, successful Kantian moral agency is *restricted* to rational beings capable of acting *under the guise of universal law*, and so to beings who have the *conceptual capacities* for *acting on a principle*. It does *not* follow from this that Kantian

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[9] 'Yet if virtue need no more be unprincipled than justice need be… uniform, a choice between them may be neither necessary nor plausible.' (O'Neill 1996, 184)

moral agents have no *duties* to other beings who do not posses these capacities (such as vulnerable human beings or other parts of nature), or that there is nothing *good* for those beings that Kantian moral agents have *reasons* to cultivate and promote. What does follow is that whatever duties Kantian moral agents have toward such beings (who are themselves unable to have duties), these duties are not based on the requirement to *respect their nature as rational agents* (which, by hypothesis, they are not)*.

iii) <u>Conclusion:</u>

To conclude, a Kantian interpretation of the morality system is consistent with the idea of *ethical self-cultivation* in the form of a project of living as a person of principle. A successful Kantian moral agent is an integrated character truly describable as a 'person of principle'. What is distinctive about this Kantian conception of ethical self-cultivation is that it inevitably brings with it a *principle-based* conception of what *virtue* consists in and what constrains its possible development; an *explanation* of the ethical status of that conception in terms of a theoretical account of *moral agents as essentially rational agents*; and the claim that this account is *asymmetrically privileged* with respect to any pre-theoretical conception of what virtuous self-cultivation could reasonably consist in, regardless of our historically contingent circumstances.[10]

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[10] The transcendental and religious significance of Kant's theory are closely in the background but never, at least officially, explicitly on the page. For a discussion of how the basic elements of the Kantian system can be explicitly developed in a transcendental direction, one of the best places to look are the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose philosophical 'pessimism' was more than incidentally influenced by Buddhist writings, and who was therefore led to

2.b. <u>Utilitarian Self-cultivation: doing what you can</u>

What could virtuous self-cultivation consist in on a Utilitarian interpretation of the Morality System?

i) theory:

The key operative notion in a Utilitarian moral theory is that of *the good,* or a *valuable state of affairs*, which *right action*s (i.e. those we have a duty to perform) *promote*. To this extent, a successful Utilitarian moral agent is an *instrumental vehicle* in the promotion of *good things.* Different versions of Utilitarianism can be distinguished with respect to a) their *theory of good ends* (e.g. pleasure; social harmony); and b) their *theory of right means* (e.g. 'direct' vs. 'indirect' or rule-bound ways to assess actions in terms of how they promote the good). The possibilities here are virtually endless (e.g. a 'Perfectionist Utilitarian' may propose the *maximization of socially harmonious lives;* and an 'Indirect Virtue Utilitarian' may *forbid* actions *incompatible* with *character-traits* the *general possession* of which in some population would *maximize the existence of socially harmonious lives*). Considered as an ethical theory, Utilitarianism takes a *temporally neutral* (e.g. our life as a whole), *interpersonally impartial* (e.g. 'All count for one, and no-one counts for more than one') or *impersonal* (e.g. 'The

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reject the basically individualistic categories on which Kant's system was based. (See e.g. Schopenhauer 1818/19; Janaway 1994.)

more good in the world, the better the world is') perspective on *the good.* Following Sidgwick and others (see e.g. Sidgwick 1907; Nagel 1970; Parfit 1984), we can reach this view in two argumentative steps, as follows: 1) My *good at any one time* (including the present) is *not rationally privileged* compared to my good at any other time. (That step is meant to yield Prudence, which tells the Utilitarian moral agent to promote their own good across their life as a whole.); 2) The *good of any one person* (including myself) is *not rationally privileged* compared to the good of any other person, considered from 'the point of view of the Universe'. (That step is meant to yield Morality, which tells the Utilitarian moral agent to promote the good *impartially,* or *impersonally).* It follows that although successful moral agency does *not* consist in the pursuit of *one's own* benefit, it does consist in *pursuing the benefit of everyone including one's own*, or (to put it more neutrally) *acting for the best in the world as a whole* (and thus a potentially *non-sacrificial* form of 'altruism'). A successful Utilitarian agent is therefore someone who is naturally describable as *acting for the best*, or as 'doing what they can'.

ii) applications:

This thumbnail sketch of the Utilitarian theory has the following implications for the place of ethical self-cultivation in the Morality System.

First, although Utilitarianism *does* consider the moral agent as an instrumental vehicle in the promotion of the good overall, it does *not* claim that individual agents therefore have to *aim at the good* overall, either in general or on any

particular occasion. This basic truth is a conceptual cousin of the so-called 'paradox of hedonism', namely that the best way to realize some good (such as pleasure) is not always to aim directly at it, but to aim at other, 'intermediate', ends, the successful pursuit of which will result in realizing the 'final' end in the long run. The most effective strategy for promoting good on the whole could therefore be (and for most people arguably is) to cultivate self-regarding or partial projects, or to be satisfied with less than optimal solutions or compromises in an arbitrarily wide range of individual interpersonal transaction (e.g. because pushing things too hard every time is likely to have counterproductive consequences). A successful Utilitarian moral agent could therefore be someone who displays many of the traits we would pre-theoretically associate with *a person of virtue*, such as being friendly, temperate or a 'decent citizen'.[11]

Second, even though a Utilitarian moral agent may not be well advised to aim directly at the good overall, the question of our *effectiveness* in promoting the good overall *can always in principle,* and *sometimes actually will*, arise; and arise, moreover in a particularly challenging way.[12] For example (and in contrast to the

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[11] This 'dual' aspect of Utilitarian moral thinking is readily visible in the writings of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), whose *Utilitarianism* (1861) offers a canonical statement of the 'consequentialist' aspect of his theory and whose *On Liberty* (1859) offers a canonical statement of a 'liberal' ethics of individual freedom. The question of whether, and if so how, Utilitarianism is compatible with an ethics of *self-cultivation* can read as a particular instance of the more general question of whether, and if so how, Utilitarianism is compatible with *individual freedom*, which is the question that Mill tries to negotiate his way through in these (arguably his most widely read) works. (For further discussion of Mill in this context, see e.g. Riley 1988; Anderson 1991. See also Berlin 1958.)
[12] Williams makes much of this point, both in his (1985) and elsewhere (e.g. Williams & Smart 1973). In a nutshell, his criticism is that classical Utilitarianism

Kantian view), for the Utilitarian it is always in principle a question of whether we should 'make an exception' of ourselves in an individual case (e.g. by breaking a badly conceived promise, or abandoning a deeply held family commitment or another one of our 'ground level' projects). Exactly how, where, and for whom this question will arise is a question of *the utilitarian division of ethical labour*. For example, Sidgwick suggests that it would actually be better not only if *most people do not think in Utilitarian terms*, but that *most people do not believe in Utilitarianism*. (This is the essentially esoteric and 'elitist' position later mocked by Williams under the label 'Government House Utilitarianism'). Yet there may be no need for a Utilitarian to go that far. A more representative example of a compromise position from recent history is the popular movement that currently goes under the name 'effective altruism', and that has been endorsed by prominent public intellectuals such as Peter Singer (1946-) among others. The key idea on this view is that each of us, as individuals, has an ethical duty *to do what we can* (at least up to the point where the benefits we produce cease to have only a moderate cost to ourselves). Exactly what that would involve is obviously highly dependent on our personal, cultural and historical circumstances. Thus, a person growing up in the mountainous regions of the Scandinavian arctic may do best by supporting their local community and tending to their reindeer, sheep or cows in an ecologically sensitive way. A person growing up in metropolitan London may do best by taking a degree from one of the Ancient universities and pursue a career as a Private Equity investor

implies that i) *there is no question* in cases where there should be a question, and ii) *there is a question* in cases where there should not be a question. Much of the subsequent literature has been focused on the extent to which Williams's criticisms have been targeted at a 'straw man' (For further discussion, see e.g. Scheffler 1993).

while donating a significant part of their income to charitable causes. And an internationally famous philosopher-ethicist may do best by jetting across the globe from conference to conference in order to spread the word about ecological destruction or climate change. To this extent, the 'effective altruism' interpretation of Utilitarianism is consistent with an indeterminately wide range of personal projects that would each qualify as examples of ethical self-cultivation in virtue of being contextually appropriate vehicles for the promotion of the good overall.[13]

Third, standard versions of Utilitarianism are committed to a thesis known as 'the separateness of persons', according to which each locus of experience and agency (such as an individual human being) is irreducibly distinct from every other as a location of *value* and *criticism*. Yet in principle, Utilitarianism is neutral with respect to both a) the nature of *the things in which goods can inhere* (e.g. human minds vs. animal minds or ecosystems), and b) the *best distribution of goods* among those things (e.g. 'egalitarian' distributions vs. 'prioritarian' distributions vs. 'perfectionist' distributions).[14] Yet at the 'vehicle' end of the equation, the Utilitarian interpretation of the Morality System does require there to be some unitary locus of agency (whether individual or collective) to act as a potential *subject of criticism* for its (more or less) effective promotion of the

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[13] And with all the potential for window-dressing, self-deception, or ironic detachment that the serious pursuit of such a project arguably involves. Once more, the possibilities are virtually endless.

[14] Egalitarians would normally aim to give all 'the same'; prioritarians would normally aim to give more to the worse off; 'perfectionists' would aim to prioritize 'higher' goods over 'lower'. (See e.g. Parfit 1984; 1997.)

good.[15] Hence the question of what forms of *individual agency* it is better to *promote*, and so better to *cultivate*, will always be a live issue on any Utilitarian interpretation of the Morality system, whatever form it takes. On the account of Utilitarian self-cultivation I have just outlined, this is a question of what kind of person I should be in order to be able to effectively 'do what I can' in my actual historical circumstances.

iii) <u>Conclusion:</u>

A Utilitarian interpretation of the morality system is consistent with the idea of *ethical self-cultivation* under *the guise of the Good*. A successful Utilitarian moral agent is someone we might naturally describe as 'acting for the best', or 'doing what they can'. What is distinctive about the Utilitarian interpretation of self-cultivation is a *teleological* conception of what *virtue* consists in (where acting out a set of character traits could in principle be considered either as instrumental to the good, or a good in itself), and an *explanation* of that conception in terms of an account of *good ends*, and the *right means to those ends*; where that account is *asymmetrically privileged* with respect to any pre-theoretical, or otherwise historically contingent, conception of what ethical self-cultivation, might possibly consist in.

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[15] To this extent, some personally 'reductive' version of Utilitarianism would arguably be consistent in principle with the view expressed in the following passage: 'Buddha has spoken thus: 'O Brethren, actions do exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not. There is no one to cast away this set of elements and no one to assume a new set of them. There exists no Individual, it is only a conventional name given to a set of elements.' (*Vasubandhu*, quoted in Parfit 1984, 502).

3. *Ethics and the Place of Moral Theory*

3.a. <u>Comparison and Evaluation</u>

In the previous two sections I have briefly sketched two possible conceptions of ethical self-cultivation within the Morality System: first, a Kantian conception focused on the idea of a *person of principle*, and centered around the notion of *duty,* or *the right*; and second, a Utilitarian conception focused on the idea of a person *acting for the best*, and centered around the notion of *the good*. These alternative points of focus were intended to be at least *representative* of the two main kinds of moral theory that Williams associates with the Morality System, namely those that prioritize *the theory of right* (Kantian Deontology) and those that prioritize *the theory of the good* (Utilitarian Consequentialism).

Both a Kantian and a Utilitarian view are *consistent* with an ethics of virtuous self-cultivation and will arguably even *recommend* or *require* it in different circumstances. On a Kantian view, the place for virtuous self-cultivation is partly located in the *a priori* indeterminate space left open by the Moral Law for the pursuit of *permissible action*, or the implementation of *imperfect duty*. This may give the impression that the Kantian view is more hospitable to an ethics of virtuous self-cultivation than a Utilitarian view that aims to capture *everything.* Yet while that impression may be 'structurally' correct, it is mitigated at the level of content by the existence of non-direct versions of Utilitarianism, pluralist theories of the good, and the further fact that not all versions of Utilitarianism claim to capture *everything*. Either way, it is not obvious that the moral theories

that are most representative of the Morality System will condemn the subject of virtuous self-cultivation to a damaging or otherwise implausible version of deliberative 'schizophrenia' (see Stocker 1976). Of course, in virtue of (at least aiming to) not being normatively toothless, both the Kantian and the Utilitarian view are bound to rule out *some* forms of self-cultivation (e.g. unprincipled, destructive, or unashamedly selfish behaviour) as ethically unacceptable. Yet it would be impossible for them to avoid doing so without ceasing to be substantially normative theories that give people substantial advice about how (not) to live their lives. Does this mean that Williams was basically misguided in thinking that we would be better off rejecting what he called 'the morality system' altogether? Not necessarily.

According to one alternative way of thinking about it, the key idea to understand the alleged conflict between ethics and the morality system, and also the deeper issue that Williams had with them, is their claim to *explanatory* and *normative priority*, as a result of which the ethical acceptability of any project of ethical self-cultivation is *strictly conditional* on being *explicable in their terms*. In other words, the extent to which any project of self-cultivation could amount to an exercise in virtue is meant to be *hostage* to its being a *rational application* (at least in principle) of some suitable moral theory, and therefore – what in the relevant philosophical tradition amounts to the same thing - to *which among the relevant moral theories* is *true*. Williams, as I understand him, is dismissive of both claims. Moreover, the situation would remain fundamentally unchanged in this respect even were we to consider a *combination* of these views; such as a *pluralist moral theory*, where considerations of *the right* and *the good* are

interpreted as *equally fundamental*, and so as a *plural source* of ethical criticism.[16]

Yet this is not the only way to understand the ethical theories in question. Nor is it obviously the best way to do so (even if many of their most prominent supporters and critics have historically understood them this way). A different way to understand these theories is to think of them as *intellectual tools*, or *models*, by means of which we can *explicitly articulate* a certain *aspect* of a given instance of ethical thought (e.g. its teleological aspect) at some arbitrarily high level of formality, simplicity or systematicity. To do so can be an effective exercise in the aid of both *understanding* and *criticizing* some instance of ethical thought, including an attempt to describe what any particular, and historically located, exercise of ethical of self-cultivation could consist in. Our engagement with ethical theories can play this role even if those theories *do not have*, and are not in the end assigned by us, any *fundamental,* or *asymmetric, explanatory* or *normative priority* at all. Thus understood, ethical theories can in principle be assigned comparable status in making sense of actual or possible projects ethical self-cultivation as the use of a range of alternatives sources of illumination, such as *comparison*, *contrast*, *analogy, allegory*, *imagery*, *story* or *myth* (c.f. Nussbaum

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[16] Williams writes about Kantianism and Utilitarianism that '[n]either view is adequate, and a better view is not going to consist of any simple compromise. Ethical life itself is important, but it can see that things other than itself is important. It contains motivations that indeed serve these other ends but at the same time [can] be seen from within that life as part of what make[s] it worth living.' (Williams 1985, 184). The last sentence of this statement is somewhat obscure, but one way of reading it is as claiming that ethical thought should recognize that not all things it is worth ethically valuing (such as aesthetic pleasure) are themselves ethical values. I confess that I am not entirely sure what is gained by making this point here.

2001). On this picture, ethical theory is not so much an independently graspable source of external criteria for the ranking or licensing of different conceptions of ethical self-cultivation as a conceptually sophisticated tool for thinking them through. While I think this way of looking at things has a great deal to be said in its favour, there is no space to do this issue justice here.[17]

Finally, and going back to the beginning, I am now in a position to identify both what I regard as the strength and the weakness of Williams's critique of the Morality System, as that critique is relevant to our understanding of ethical self-cultivation. On the side of *strength*, Williams's critique presents a powerful challenge to the idea that the soundness of any conception of ethical self-cultivation is necessarily hostage to being 'externally licensed' by the kind of ethical theory he associates with the Morality System, and that is paradigmatically exemplified by Kantian Deontology and Classical Utilitarianism. On the side of *weakness,* Williams's critique – partly because of his emphasis on a somewhat 'peculiar' Kantian interpretation of the Morality System – underplays the extent to which the Morality System – even in its broadly Kantian manifestations - is not only *consistent* with, but may also *recommend* or even *require*, the pursuit of substantial projects of ethical self-cultivation; even if the precise terms in which it does so may not be ones that either Williams, or we, would accept. In other words, what I am suggesting is that the *real* point of controversy here is *not* over the legitimate *presence* in a sound moral outlook of

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[17] The idea of understanding the place of ethical theories this way can arguably be traced back to the work of the American pragmatists, such as John Dewey (1859-1952; see e.g. his (1920)); but on some readings even some of Plato's (b. 428/4?) dialogues could conceivably be read this way. (See e.g. Lear 2017.)

some substantial commitment to an ethics of self-cultivation. The real point of controversy is what (if anything) could possibly *explain* the place of such a conception in a sound moral outlook, and what could ultimately *justify* it to us when, or if, we ever take that question to arise.[18]

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[18] At this point, further paraphrase is pointless, so I shall quote verbatim from the Preface of Williams's 1981 essay collection, *Moral Luck:* 'Moral philosophy certainly needs the benefits of theory, but of theory in other parts of philosophy. I am more than ever convinced that what it does not need is a theory of its own. There cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is, nor, despite the vigorous activities of some present practitioners, can there be an ethical theory, in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning. The latter undertaking has never succeeded, and could not succeed, in answering the question, *by what right* does it legislate to the moral sentiments? The abstract and schematic conceptions of 'rationality' which are usually deployed in this connection do not even look as though they were relevant to the question – so soon, at least, as morality is seen as something whose real existence must consist in personal experience and social institutions, not in sets of propositions' (Williams 1981, ix-x). It goes without saying that Williams's views on this issue remain deeply controversial. (See e.g. Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014.)

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