

LUCK, MORALITY, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

by

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Abstract

The main objective of *Luck, Morality, and the Meaning of Life* is to defend the Kantian version of impartial morality from Bernard Williams' critiques. The thesis begins by exploring the problems luck presents to us. Various philosophical methods which deal with those problems are discussed. The Kantian version of impartial morality is chosen because it not only intends to offer methods that help us transcend the problems luck presents in morality, but also aspires to ultimate justice by urging people to pursue the best good, namely, to be moral, which is open to all.

Several of Williams' arguments against impartial morality are then discussed and evaluated. His arguments can be divided into two main streams: (i) the ground project thesis, and (ii) the arguments that resist changes. I believe these arguments try to serve Williams two objectives: (i) impartial morality is argued to be flawed and unfeasible, and (ii) Individualism is advocated.

I show that none of Williams' arguments can refute the theory of impartial morality, nevertheless, some of its non-fatal flaws are exposed. I then discuss the Individualistic motive in Williams' arguments. I try to determine whether Williams's Individualistic world is feasible and appealing by considering the issue of adultery as a test case, and by comparing his world with the Kantian one.

Williams' world is found to be unstable if his Individualism is universally applied. There is evidence which shows that Williams endorses some form of elitism, and this is perhaps the only way for his world to be feasible, nevertheless, unappealing.

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Ch.1 Introduction: is luck a threat to the good life and morality?

1.1 What is luck?

*'This'¹ is Fate, that inevitable force which checks our aspirations towards happiness ere they reach the goal, which watches jealously lest our peace and bliss should be complete and cloudless --- a force which, like the sword of Damocles, hangs perpetually over our heads and is always embittering the soul. This force is inescapable and invincible. There is no other course but to submit and inwardly lament.'*²

This force --- call it fate, luck, contingency, fortune, or whatever³ --- can be felt as we listen to the opening theme of Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony. Is it a universal or merely Russian sentiment that luck is regarded so pessimistically, i.e., is luck something that is inescapable, invincible, and worst of all, embittering us and preventing us from achieving happiness? Certainly, Tchaikovsky's idea of fate does strike a chord in the hearts of many, but life would be rather gloomy if we only thought of it that way. Indeed, many people disagree with this outlook; they think of luck rather as an (effortless) opportunity to improve one's condition and well-being. According to Rescher,⁴ the Spanish, being the world's champions in this statistic, on average spend about 15% of family income on gambling⁵ --- presumably with the optimistic belief that by yielding themselves to luck through this means they will gain more in return. Despite this kind of optimistic attitude, luck is regarded, especially by the philosophically minded, as threatening to the good life and as creating a philosophical problem in the realm of morality, and these two concerns

¹ I.e. the opening theme of Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony.

² From P.I. Tchaikovsky's letter to Madame N.F. von Meck, 17 Feb. 1878.

³ I prefer, however, to use the term luck throughout this thesis, for, unlike fate, the notion of luck does not assume or deny a world that is deterministically, or theologically, or even pessimistically ordered, hence it is a more neutral notion.

⁴ Nicholas Rescher, 'Moral Luck,' p.144. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

⁵ cf. *The Economist* (August 29, 1987), and *The New York Times* (May 14, 1989).

are the focus of this chapter. To understand how luck gives rise to these problems, let's examine the notion of luck first.

Luck may affect us in many ways, but what they have in common is that how things turn out, whether well or ill for us, depends on forces that are completely beyond our cognitive or manipulative control. In other words, we are **incapacitated** by luck. How things turn out is beyond our cognitive control because we are epistemically limited. We cannot foresee and plan ahead for **all** the possible interceptions and obstacles that might influence the course and consequence of our intended action. Those interceptions and obstacles may be due to natural forces (such as the weather), or to intended or unintended actions by humans or even other species. Since things turn out in such an unintended fashion, we tend to think of them as accidents or happening by chance. Even though this is our impression of luck, it need not commit us to endorsing or rejecting any metaphysical outlook on the world. If all or some events of the world are random, i.e. not governed by any rational laws, then there is no way we can stop those events from happening, for, by definition, it is impossible to find out that they were going to happen --- hence, those events are 'pure accidents'. By contrast, if the world is causally or divinely determined, we will still get the impression of chance, because the 'hidden causes' that are at work are, at least at the time, beyond the limits of our knowledge. The only difference between these two types of metaphysical world view is that in the deterministic world there is always hope of finding the causes or divine reasons behind those accidents, but there is no such hope with the world that has genuine randomness.

Apart from our cognitive incapacity to foresee the happening of unfavorable events, our inability to completely manipulate the outcome is another frustrating aspect of luck. Even if we can foresee the happening of something, such as a forecast hurricane, we do not have the power to stop it nor to prevent the destruction it causes. (Even though people might have the time to escape from the place, their houses may be destroyed by it.) We are not only incapacitated in this kind of grand natural disaster, but in many levels and many aspects of life. Even things like the occurrences of our own thoughts and our mental capacity are not always within our control --- sometimes, on a lucky day, a useful idea just 'occurs' to us out of the blue, and at unlucky times we simply cannot recall a certain

important piece of information no matter how hard we try. Hence luck operates in any event, and unless if someone is omniscient and omnipotent, nobody, whether rich or poor, virtuous or vicious, can be immune to it. A virtuous person, through no fault of her own but only pure bad luck, may be trapped in a situation in which the outcome is not under her control.

In summary, the notion of luck involves the notion of conditions or factors that determine an event (whether it is a natural phenomenon or the outcomes of our actions) that are beyond our ability to foresee and/or manipulate; hence the marrow of the notion of luck is human incapacity to control an event.

According to Nagel⁶, there are roughly four ways in which luck operates in human lives, they are:

1. constitutive luck;
2. circumstantial luck (or, sometimes called, situational luck⁷);
3. resultant luck,⁸ i.e. luck in the way one's actions and projects turn out;
4. luck in how one's will is determined by antecedent circumstances, I shall call this deterministic luck of the will, for it presupposes that one's will is subject to the laws of nature.

Constitutive luck affects 'the kind of person you are, where this is not just a question of what you deliberately do, but of your inclinations, capacities, and temperament.'⁹ Thus, for example, it is a matter of constitutive luck if someone was born blind or endowed with high intelligence, or a meek temperament. To a very limited extent an agent can alter some of these givens, e.g., through some intensive habituation to alter some of one's inherent temperament, or through some advanced medical treatments to cure some physical defects. However, it is still within the scope of luck whether one has the opportunities¹⁰ to obtain the means (e.g. having the educational or medical resources

⁶ Thomas Nagel, 'Moral luck,' p.60. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

⁷ Margaret Walker also discusses this type of luck as well in her 'Moral luck and the virtues of impure agency,' p.235. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

⁸ cf. M. Walker, p.235. Op cit.

⁹ Thomas Nagel, p.60, op cit.

¹⁰ i.e. circumstantial luck.

available), and whether one would make such a decision, i.e. has the will,¹¹ to go through it if the chances are there. It is a matter of luck whether one possesses the character traits such as persistency, patience, hard working etc. that are required on the agent's part.¹² And chance factors can intercept the course of action.¹³ Let's now turn our attention to the other three modes of luck and their operations.

Before our birth, we not only cannot choose our inherent constitutions but cannot choose where to be born either.¹⁴ Whether to be born in a wealthy or poor family, in a peaceful country or one that is struck by wars or natural disasters is not up to us. We are totally subject to the mercy of circumstantial luck in this respect. Some may argue that although we cannot choose where to be born, we can, through our efforts, change our circumstances (e.g. by working harder to improve the financial situation of our family) or get ourselves into a more favorable circumstances (e.g. by escaping or migrating to another country). It is true that no condition, whether one's inherent constitution or circumstances, is fixed and permanent. Nevertheless, whether such a condition can be changed (and, hopefully, improved) is largely subject to circumstantial luck and resultant luck. It requires circumstantial luck in order to have the opportunity to change. E.g. It was a matter of circumstantial luck whether a Jew in Nazi Germany had the money and the access to get the document and passenger ticket to leave Europe. The escape also required resultant luck to ensure its success, by not only not having any 'external',¹⁵ interception, but also having all conditions that are necessary for the escape. E.g. the ship sailed safely, and the country of destination would permit the passengers on board to land. Let's discuss resultant luck in more detail.

The nexus of causal factors, which are beyond one's control, that happen to interact with and determine the course of an action or a project is what resultant luck is about.¹⁶

¹¹ i.e. luck in how one's will is determined by antecedent circumstances.

¹² i.e. constitutive luck.

¹³ i.e. resultant luck.

¹⁴ Assuming there is no 'life before birth' where one can choose who one wants to be in the next life, and where one wants to be born.

¹⁵ By 'external' here I mean that which is unintended by the agent, and which is usually beyond her control.

¹⁶ Causal determinism seems to be assumed in this explanation of resultant luck. However, the notion of resultant luck still stands even if the world is not causally determined. As already discussed, even if some or all events of the world are not causally determined, but are, say, random or determined by the capricious

Luck is on one's side, so to speak, when the causal factors that are within the field of one's intended action or project are not only not obstructive but are conducive to its progress and completion, and bad luck implies the existence of causal factors that work for the contrary.

The notion of risk is closely related to that of resultant luck; the more the success of an action or project relies on external factors, the riskier it is. Although choosing a low risk project, having prudential planning, and being careful can, to some extent, minimize the risk, it is impossible to shield against all the effects from external factors, i.e. to be completely risk proof. Since our power is so limited, unlike that of an omnipotent God, we do not have complete immunity to resultant luck.

So far it looks as though all aspects of our lives are subject to luck, and the pessimist would take it as a proof that every person is a helpless victim of fate,¹⁷ as no one can have full control over one's life and one can be rather helpless in certain situation when very bad luck strikes. To rescue us from this predicament, some philosophers, amongst whom Kant is the most prominent advocate, argue that there is at least one thing we can have full control of, namely, our will. This is where the debate on freedom of the will enters. The problem with the thesis of free will is that it is hard to understand how one can determine and control one's will by being totally detached and undetermined by anything other than the agent herself, while the concept of agency does not include one's constitution. Many, including Schopenhauer,¹⁸ think it is not possible to have such a free will, he thinks that a man can do what he wants, but not want what he wants. Indeed, it seems to be the case that one's own constitution, (especially one's inclinations and temperament), circumstances, and past experiences¹⁹ will determine one's will. However, since all these factors are subject to luck, the causal nexus between them and one's will would ensure that one's will too is subject to luck. Hence one's will is not really up to

wishes of some irrational deity, it is still a matter of luck whether or not there is any random (or theistic) blow at the course of our action or project.

¹⁷ It is important to note that some people may agree with the above argument on the power of luck without drawing the pessimistic conclusion about themselves.

¹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essay on the freedom of the will*.

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, the past experiences, if powerful enough, would be transformed into one's character traits and the like, even though it is our past circumstances that prompt the experiences.

oneself, and this is the fourth way, i.e. deterministic luck of the will, Nagel thinks luck affects us.

The advocates of free will would certainly disagree with this, and some, like Kant, have put forward beautiful (alas perhaps implausible) metaphysical arguments for free will. I won't go into the controversial debate of free will here, but to give the free will advocates the benefit of the doubt, let's be agnostic about whether our will is subject to luck. (More on this in the next chapter, 2.2.ii.)

1.2 Is luck a threat?

So far we have discussed the ubiquity of luck, concluding that all, or virtually all,²⁰ aspects of our lives are subject to luck. However, this on its own does not seem to imply that it is a threat; indeed when good luck comes we welcome it with open arms. Nevertheless, occasional good luck is not enough to protect us from the threat and problems to which luck gives rise, and there are at least four reasons why luck is so negatively regarded. I will discuss them in turn.

1.2.i The helpless fear of being the victim of fate

Firstly, there is the widely shared fear of being struck by serious misfortune. By this I mean the contingency that can ruin our lives through robbing or depriving us of the most meaningful or necessary things or loved ones, and/or simply cutting our lives short with unfulfilled projects. In Tchaikovsky's words, it 'checks our aspirations towards happiness ere they reach the goal'. Although some, and perhaps very few, lucky people have never been struck by any serious misfortune throughout their life times,²¹ there is no way we can guarantee that we will be so lucky. Misfortune can strike anybody (even if one is rich or virtuous) at any time, like the sword of Damocles which 'hangs perpetually over our heads', and the thought that it could happen to me is certainly not very comforting.

²⁰ As we are being agnostic about whether one's will is also subject to luck.

²¹ Assuming that death itself, which no one can escape, is not regarded as a serious misfortune, especially if it happens at an old age. Otherwise every person would be struck by such misfortune at least one time in one's life.

As already mentioned, there are ways --- such as rational planning, taking low risk options, being cautious --- to minimize the probability of encountering misfortune, but there is no way we can eliminate it entirely due to the limitations of our cognitive and manipulative capacities. Although buying insurance may help us through some of the difficult times, often it cannot replace the specific loss, like the death of a loved one or the loss of one's limb. So no matter how hard we try to avoid misfortunes, we still cannot get rid of the image that we are the helpless victims of fate. Instead of thinking of ways to reduce the chances of misfortunes through ordinary insurance, many serious, but somewhat 'other-worldly', thinkers take another route. They advocate certain religions or philosophies of the good life that do not attach much value to the things that depend upon life's contingency. More about this in the next chapter.

1.2.ii The unequal distributions of resources and natural endowments

Apart from buying insurance or being other-worldly, there might be a third way to deal with the victim image of fate, by thinking of the good side of luck rather than dwelling upon the gloomy side. This method, although optimistic, does not only appear to be naive when the tragic misfortunes are a real possibility, but also exposes another problem to which luck gives rise, namely, the unequal distributions of resources among people and among nations (which is subject to circumstantial luck) and the unequal endowments between individuals (which is subject to constitutive luck). It seems deeply unfair that for conditions that are subject to luck and no fault of any individual, some people have a better chance to lead a good and happy life while some have to struggle day and night to survive, let alone to dream of having a good and happy life. Many social theorists and political philosophers have been trying to find ways to create a more equal world, or even a utopia. But the road is long and full of obstacles, and many have cast doubt on the practical possibility of a utopia. Again, the 'other-worldly' thinkers take this problem to heart while searching for ways to 'salvation'.

1.2.iii The threat to our concept of agency

The third problem with luck is not to do with the conditions, whether good or bad, one is in, but rather with the deeper philosophical problem that lies behind the notion of

luck. As already mentioned, the essence of the notion of luck is human incapacity, and this is where the problem originates. For *if* all aspects of life --- including our will and our character, which, together with other circumstantial factors, contribute to the determination of the choices of our actions ²²--- are subject to luck, then we are not in control, not only in the sense of being impeded in doing what we will to do,²³ but also in the sense of being who we are, viz. we are not in control of our characters, our will,²⁴ and accordingly, our identity and our actions. If this is so, it is not only a distressing thought about how 'helpless' we actually are, but also a threat to our concepts of personhood and agency, and to all the notions and practices, such as (moral) responsibility and moral judgment, that are related to them. This is why 'compatibilism' --- the notion that agency and responsibility are consistent with determinism --- is so attractive.

To acknowledge the ubiquity of luck is a step towards conceding that we are merely products of nature and nurture, i.e. something that is ultimately passive and helpless, just like any other creatures or even inanimate things, viz. we are merely things and our actions are just events, and 'I myself might not exist at all as a person, but only as a focusing point for these terrific forces.'²⁵ But this thought is very disturbing and hard to accept because '[w]e are unable to view ourselves simply as portions of the world for it leaves us with no one to be'.²⁶ Our being 'things' is deeply in conflict with most people's subjective experience and belief about themselves, namely, there is something unique about us that sets us apart from the rest of the world. If we really buy the idea that we are merely products of nature and nurture, then there seems nothing about ourselves or our actions to be proud or ashamed of, nor is there anything about others or their actions to be admired or despised, for it would ultimately be a matter of luck that we or others turn out this or that way. The same destruction of our self-image occurs with respect to our notions of moral

²² Again, even if causal determinism is false, and that some or all of these events are random or are determined by the will of a deity, they are still subject to luck as we cannot control them. Thus the same argument concerning control can apply even if other metaphysical outlooks were true.

²³ cf. David Hume's notion of 'liberty of spontaneity'; from Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, book II, part III.

²⁴ cf. Hume's notion of 'liberty of indifference'; from Hume, op cit.

²⁵ Joanna Field (Marion Milner), *An experiment in leisure*.

²⁶ Thomas Nagel, op cit.

responsibility and moral judgment, and this is the fourth reason why luck is regarded as a threat.

1.2.iv The threat to morality

In the realm of morality, there are various types of things that are subject to praise or blame or other kinds of moral assessments. These include the consequence of an action, the action itself, the intention (or will) behind the action, or even the intention (or will) behind a suppressed or impeded action, and the character and temperament of the agent. Usually all of those considerations are present, though with different weight, in moral assessments. However, there are cases of terrible consequences in which an agent can be excused on the ground that she does not have any intention to bring about a tragedy, and that it is beyond her control to prevent the action that brings about it. This includes cases involving coercion, ignorance, involuntary movements, pure accidents, and mental illness. In those cases the agent is in an 'I can't help it' situation. But once we accept this as a reason for excuse and exemption from moral responsibility, according to Nagel, we find that the application of excuse and exemption can extend to all cases, because, as already discussed, luck is ubiquitous, and the realm of morality is no exception to it.

This point becomes apparent if we consider how the four kinds of ways luck operate in the moral realm. In the case of constitutive luck, some people seem to be endowed from birth with characters, temperaments, and inclinations that are admirable and they usually do not have much problems in complying with some moral rules, as their characters etc. are in accord with those rules. Some people, however, may be endowed with a despicable and mean character, and have problems with the rules.

In the case of circumstantial luck, it seems to be true that many offenders of serious crimes had a childhood that was full of abuse and other things which transformed the characters of, perhaps, meek children into cold blooded serial killers or criminals of other terrible crimes. In other words, one's environment, i.e. circumstantial luck, can help mold one's character, especially children's. Nevertheless, that is not the only way circumstantial luck operates in the moral realm, Nagel thinks it can also serve to provide 'moral tests', that is, the things one is called upon to do, an opportunity to test out whether one is brave, righteous, honest etc. However the occurrence of these 'tests' is beyond our control. To use

Nagel's example, ordinary citizens of Nazi Germany had an opportunity to act heroically against the regime or to consent to it tacitly and be culpable of the evil it brought about. Here is a test that was unique to the Germans at that time, and such a test may not be available to citizens of other nations or at other times.

Moreover the circumstances can also be a crucial factor for whether or not someone would commit a certain action, e.g. a war crime. According to Nagel, if an officer who worked for the concentration camp had not been living in Nazi Germany, but had migrated to Argentina for business reasons, he would have led a quiet and harmless life. It is beyond his control where he was born, and it is a matter of luck whether the opportunity to migrate to another country is available to him.

Another type of situation that is also subject to circumstantial luck is that of moral dilemma. Through no fault of the agent, she is in a tragic situation where there is no way for her to be right whether she chooses this or that option or gives up choosing either of them. Even if it might be argued that the agent should be exempt from blame, this still may not save her from having agent-regret, i.e. the agent blaming herself for the wrong she has brought about.²⁷ And others may blame her as well.

The third widely agreed way luck operates in the moral realm is via resultant luck. As already discussed, there are many factors that are beyond our control that can determine whether an action or project can be completed. To borrow Nagel's example, whether or not a murder is successful depends on 'whether the victim happened to be wearing a bullet-proof vest, or whether a bird flew into the path of the bullet --- matters beyond his control'.²⁸ Yet the penalties for attempted murder and successful murder are quite different. Some people may find it unfair to judge one according to the consequence one brings about when it is determined by factors that are beyond one's control. This is the main reason why Kant rejects consequentialism and attached the moral value to the good will instead.

The question at stake is whether or not the will is subject to luck. If it also is, then many popular notions of moral responsibility are totally untenable, and our practices of moral assessment and punishment are seriously flawed. For nothing in the moral realm is

²⁷ c.f. Bernard Williams, discussion in *Ethical Consistency*, pp.91-109.

²⁸ Thomas Nagel, *Moral Luck*, p.61 In Statman (ed.): 1993.

within our control, and since we excuse and exempt those who are incapacitated, we are compelled by this reasoning to excuse and exempt everyone all the time. Even though we can still praise or blame or hold someone responsible for bringing about a certain consequence, this means no more than holding something responsible for being in that particular causal chain that precede the event. Just as a broken belt of a motor is responsible for the break down of a washing machine, in which case the belt 'can't help itself' from breaking due to the constant wear and tear through the years of operations, so is a person who has done something bad, for she can't help doing the bad thing or holding a bad intention.

To a certain extent, we would like to think that agents whose actions are subject to luck are not morally responsible for their actions. Yet it seems counter-intuitive to exempt the official who worked in a concentration camp, and it would be troubling to think of Hitler as an unfortunate product of fate who is not responsible for the Holocaust. Nagel thinks this is a paradox in moral philosophy, for 'a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment,'²⁹ and this is where the problem of moral luck lies.

I have discussed from 1.2.i to 1.2.iv the four reasons why luck is regarded as a threat to us and to moral theory. Although they are compelling and hard to refute, many people just won't take the 'Tchaikovskian attitude' to 'submit and inwardly lament'! In the next chapter I shall examine the resistant forces in Western philosophy, and see whether there is any hope of rescue from this predicament.

²⁹ Ibid., p.59.

Ch.2 A variety of philosophical methods to combat the threats of luck

Both modern and ancient philosophers, according to Martha Nussbaum,³⁰ see the effect of luck as a real problem to human well being that needs to be resolved. I would like to consider two conceptions of a good life and their relation to the problem of luck; I shall call them the 'rich concept approach' and the 'self-sufficiency approach'. The rich concept approach is one that incorporates a variety of external goods³¹ into our scheme of value without leaving us rather vulnerable to the assault of luck. Aristotle is one of the greatest advocates of this middle path approach. The self-sufficiency approach is one that renders us *totally invulnerable* even in the world of contingency. Invulnerability can be obtained by engaging in a pursuit that has the highest value, and that cannot be affected by luck, i.e. something that allows a person to become absolutely self-sufficient. Let me discuss the rich concept approach of Aristotle first, and then discuss why it is, though in accord with our common sense, inadequate to solve the deeper problem of luck, and hence why so many philosophers bite the bullet and endorse the self-sufficiency approach instead.

2.1 The rich concept approach

There are two different accounts of good life in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter, EN). In the last book of the EN, Aristotle too takes the self-sufficiency approach of Plato and regards the value of contemplation as the only good that is worth pursuing,³² and hence the sole constituent of *eudaimonia*.³³ However, this dominant end account is inconsistent with the rest of his writing on that topic which offers an inclusive end account. In fact the rich concept approach would imply a rejection of the Platonic view of

³⁰ M. Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, ch.1.

³¹ I.e. we are not in complete control in obtaining such goods.

³² *Nicomachean Ethics*, book x, ch. 6-8.

³³ '*Eudaimonia*' is usually translated as 'happiness', but since there are some differences between the two, and there is a strong tendency to associate happiness with pleasure, which is not what *eudaimonia* is about, so I would preserve the use of the term '*eudaimonia*' in this discussion.

contemplation, for it rejects a solitary and isolated life,³⁴ but endorses a life that is rich in a variety of goods and flourishes through close ties.

Instead of finding ways to incorporate these two opposing views, Nussbaum acknowledges that there are two different accounts of *eudaimonia* in EN, but she only cares for the rich concept approach as she thinks it allows us to have a rich scheme of value without yielding us totally to the mercy of luck. Let's, firstly, examine the three criteria of *eudaimonia*.

In EN book 1 ch.7, Aristotle characterizes the best good, which he argues is *eudaimonia*, as something that is most choiceworthy, complete,³⁵ and self-sufficient. It is not hard to understand the first two criteria. If something is the best good, then it would be most wanted, hence most choiceworthy.³⁶ As far as the criterion of completeness is concerned, if we pursue a good not for its own sake but for something else, then by definition it is not the best good. Thus something is the best good only if we pursue it for its own sake.

The third criterion, however, requires much more explanation, for the self-sufficiency approach and the rich concept approach interpret it differently. Aristotle thinks something is regarded 'as self-sufficient when all by itself it makes a life choiceworthy and lacking nothing.'³⁷ The notion of being choiceworthy and lacking nothing seem to suggest the self-sufficiency approach of the Platonic view of contemplation. For contemplation is regarded, in book 10, as the most choiceworthy activity, and it does not require any external goods. Hence even the poorest and most solitary person can pursue this activity, and she does not lack anything to make her *eudaimon*. However, the rich concept approach rejects this interpretation of *eudaimonia*. For 'what we count as self-sufficient is not what suffices for a solitary person by himself, living an isolated life, but what suffices also for parents, children, wife and in general for friends and fellow-citizens, since a human being

³⁴ Cf. EN 1097b9.

³⁵ By complete, Aristotle means it is the (final) end itself and not the means for something else.

³⁶ Assuming the bridge between the objective value of something is directly proportional to its objective value.

³⁷ EN 1097b15.

is a naturally political [animal].'³⁸ Thus according to the rich concept approach, unlike the self-sufficiency approach, more than one good is considered to have intrinsic value and to be choiceworthy. And many of those goods are quite vulnerable to luck, e.g. *philia*,³⁹ good looks, wealth etc.

There is a puzzle in how we can have more than one good that is most choiceworthy and complete. To understand this we can have recourse to the notion of 'inclusive end', namely, one encompassing more than one type of good. Consider the idea of having a 'good holiday'. It is an inclusive end rather than a dominant one, for the latter can only be attained through the completion of one particular type of activity. Often the components of a good holiday include having various types of pleasant and enjoyable activities, such as sunbathing, having gourmet dinners, enjoying beautiful scenery, as well as being treated nicely by the people in the place where one is visiting, and it may even include getting bargains for accommodation and other expenses. Each of these types of activities or situations one encounter does not, on its own, suggest anything about a good holiday, but having them together as a whole would constitute a good holiday. Each activity is pursued for its own sake and for no other end. Indeed, if we consider the activity as merely a means for something else, we may not find it that enjoyable; on the contrary, pursuing these activities simply because we find them pleasurable and meaningful is what a good holiday is about. Now a similar interpretation of inclusive end can apply to Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*, and the next thing we have to find out is what these variety of goods and activities are. Aristotle has offered a number of candidates and they can be classified into two groups:

- (a) external goods that require good fortune; and
- (b) goods that would help us resist, but not be totally immune to, the devastating effect of life's contingency.

³⁸ *EN* 1097b8-12.

³⁹ *Philia* is often translated as friendship, but it is not a very satisfactory rendering, for it has a much wider scope than what we would usually regard as friendship. It ranges from relationships between those who are as intimate as spouses, to those that are as distanced from each other as those among fellow citizens. One of the characteristics these relationships have in common is that the persons involved have good will for one another. For this reason Nussbaum translates *philia* into love instead of friendship. Since I do not want to get

These goods, whether in group (a) or group (b), may be in the form of a certain possessions or attachments or personal attributes, or in the form of activities. Some of the goods in both groups are related insofar as the existence of one is conducive to the attainment of the other one. The goods in group (b) are regarded as having intrinsic value because they are our '*ergon*' (usually translated as 'function'), and what count as the goods in group (a) are determined by our human nature, that is, what we naturally need and cannot be without. As already mentioned, Aristotle takes the middle path between the demand of preserving our rich scheme of value and the demand of protecting us from the assault of luck. He does so by incorporating the goods in group (a), which fulfill the former demand, and the goods in group (b), which fulfill the latter demand, into his account. I shall examine some of the goods in group (a) and (b), and then discuss whether the combination of these two groups of goods can balance these two demands.

2.1.i The external goods in group (a)

Aristotle supports the common view that *eudaimonia* requires the goods in group (a), i.e. external goods that are subject to fortune:

'Most people suppose that the *eudaimon* life is the fortunate life, or not without good fortune; and no doubt correctly. For without the external goods, which are in the control of luck, it is not possible to be *eudaimon*.'⁴⁰

In another passage, Aristotle sheds more light on what these external goods are and why they are necessary to *eudaimonia*:

'we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources.

For, first of all, in many actions we use friends, wealth and political power just as we use instruments. Further, deprivation of certain [externals] --- e.g. good birth, good children, beauty --- mars our blessedness; for we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary or childless, and have it even less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died.'⁴¹

into the argument of what its English rendering should be, I would rather preserve the Greek term *philia* throughout this thesis.

⁴⁰ *Magna Moralia* 1206b30-5.

⁴¹ *EN* 1099a33-1099b5.

There are two points I would like to make about the value of those external goods suggested by Aristotle. Firstly, sometimes those external goods are the means to do fine actions, and since those fine actions (which are the goods in group (b)) are regarded as having intrinsic value, it means that those external goods are necessary but not sufficient for *eudaimonia*. (More details on this point will be discussed when we look at the relational goods, namely, the social/political relations and *philia*.) Secondly, Aristotle does actually think that some, if not all, of those external goods have intrinsic value (viz. they are not merely means for fine actions), and no good life can be without them, hence they are the components of an *eudaimon* life. (cf. the interpretation of inclusive end). Again, the relational goods will be examined to illustrate this point.

Nussbaum thinks social/political relations and *philia* (among particular individuals) are, for Aristotle, both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable, hence they are indispensable, though very vulnerable, external goods for *eudaimonia*. Let's examine these two types of value. As far as the instrumental value is concerned, according to Aristotle, *philia* encourages virtue, for 'good people's life together allows the cultivation of virtue.'⁴²

Moreover, 'membership and good activity in a political community has a necessary instrumental role in the development of good character generally.'⁴³ Since good character is an intrinsic and essential component of *eudaimonia*,⁴⁴ a good social/political community is a necessary means for *eudaimonia*. The reason why it is so instrumental for the development of good character is that it provides laws and public education.

The laws are necessary, even for adults, because 'it is not enough to get the correct upbringing and attention when they are young; rather, they must continue the same practices and be habituated to them when they become men. Hence we need laws concerned with these things also, and in general with all of life. For the many yield to compulsion more than to argument, and to sanctions more than to what is fine.'⁴⁵

⁴² EN 1170a11.

⁴³ M. Nussbaum, op cit., p.346.

⁴⁴ More on the discussion of good character, its relation to *eudaimonia*, and how it resists the assault of luck later.

⁴⁵ EN 1180a1-5.

There are two reasons why Aristotle thinks public education is essential for good upbringing. Firstly, it provides the uniformity of value, viz. students who go through the same education will be brought up with the same values. Hence the conflicts of values among the citizens are minimized. Secondly, by attending public schools, the students have a better chance of getting the right value, for not every parent is as well equipped as the teachers on the subject about values.

Apart from being an instrumental value, Aristotle thinks the relational goods also have intrinsic value. He thinks it is absurd 'to make the blessed person solitary. For no one would choose to have all [other] goods and yet be alone, since a human being is political, tending by nature to live together with others. This will also be true, then, of the happy person; for he has the natural goods, and clearly it is better to spend his days with decent friends than with strangers of just any character. Hence the happy person will need friends.'⁴⁶ He thinks 'having friends seems to be the greatest external good',⁴⁷ and it is a key component of *eudaimonia*. 'Anyone who is to be happy, then, must have excellent friends.'⁴⁸

There are three types of friendship, namely, character-friendship, friendship for utility, and friendship for pleasure; but only the first type of friendship, viz. friendship among virtuous people, has the highest and intrinsic value. This type of friendship is complete and choiceworthy, and is what Aristotle recommends as far as *eudaimonia* is concerned. Nevertheless, one of the criteria of *eudaimonia* seems to be missing, namely, self-sufficiency, for the existence of character-friendship relies not only on the existence of the agent, but the existence and availability of her friend. Even though Aristotle seems to want to make character-friendship appear self-sufficient by claiming that 'the excellent person is related to his friend in the same way as he is related to himself, since a friend is another himself',⁴⁹ the problem of luck is still there, e.g. our virtuous friends may die or leave us due to external circumstances, and claiming that they are another ourselves does not ease the pain of actual separations. In other words, even though character-friendship is

⁴⁶ EN 1169b17.

⁴⁷ EN 1169b10.

⁴⁸ EN 1170b19.

one of the greatest goods for good life, like other important external goods, it is very much subject to luck whether one will have it. If having a *eudaimon* life requires one to have a balanced set of external goods, but since the acquirement of any external goods is subject to luck, then having a *eudaimon* life is still something that is privileged to the blessed and fortunate people.

Despite the vulnerability to luck of these external goods, Nussbaum thinks '[i]n a certain sense we value risk itself, as partially constitutive of some kind of value.'⁵⁰ And beauty can be found in the fragility of the good, that is, the growth of human excellence,⁵¹ as well as the common notion of a good life which consists of a rich scheme of value that can only be attained through having a variety of external goods. Nevertheless, are mere beauty and the intrinsic values of external goods enough? Or do we need more security against ill fortune in order to have an *eudaimon* life?

2.1.ii The less vulnerable goods in group (b), and the combination of the goods in groups (a) and (b).

The problem of fragility and the fear of ill fortune prompt Aristotle and many other philosophers to find other goods that are not so vulnerable to contingency, or even to find goods that are totally immune to luck. This is one of the major motives for having self-sufficiency, though not in its absolute sense, as a criterion of *eudaimonia*.

The two types of less vulnerable goods Aristotle has in mind are virtues (*arete*) of character and virtues of thought (e.g. *theoria*). (I shall from now on speak of virtues in general to refer to these two types of goods). The virtues are the goods because it is our *ergon* to cultivate them. They are the key component of *eudaimonia* because '*eudaimonia* is an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue'.⁵² They are less vulnerable to luck because, compared with other external goods, they are not only more enduring and stable, but also the acquisition of virtues is less dependent upon good fortune, for one can

⁴⁹ EN 1170b6.

⁵⁰ M. Nussbaum, op cit., p.346.

⁵¹ M. Nussbaum quotes Pindar's poem about the metaphor of a growing vine tree, like that of the growth of human excellence, is beautiful but fragile: 'but human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky.' Op cit, p.1.

⁵² EN 1102a5.

cultivate one's virtues through processes such as learning and attention,⁵³ a capacity with which many people are endowed. Hence virtually everyone can become virtuous without much interference of luck, and this is why Aristotle thinks it is better to be happy because of virtues than because of fortune.⁵⁴

The question we are most concerned with here is whether or not Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*, which balances itself between having the stable virtues that resist the threats of luck and the fragile external goods that are desirable but are vulnerable to it, can satisfy us. To take the possession of the virtues of character, for example, even though it does not help us escape from ill fortune altogether, for one's blessedness would be oppressed and spoiled by great misfortunes which involve pain and impede many activities, the fine character can bear

'many severe misfortunes with good temper, not because he feels no distress, but because he is noble and magnanimous. If this is so, then the happy person could never become miserable. Still, he will not be blessed either, if he falls into misfortunes as bad as Priam's. Nor, however, will he be inconstant and prone to fluctuate, since he will neither be easily shaken from his happiness nor shaken by just any misfortunes. He will be shaken from it, though, by many serious misfortunes, and from these a return to happiness will take no short time; at best, it will take a long and complete length of time that includes great and fine success.'⁵⁵

Thus no one, not even a saint, could be completely unshaken by misfortunes if they are serious and numerous enough.

The key to Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* is to have a balance between the virtues and the external goods. Although he has not shown us how exactly we can balance the two, he has done a great job in acknowledging our common sense notion of happiness that involves a rich variety of desirable and earthly goods, and our need for security and stability, and hence for something that is not so subject to luck as the external goods. Nevertheless, some may argue that even though his account includes some goods that are less vulnerable to luck, it cannot ensure that we can be immune to the assault of ill fortune. And even if his account is palatable and in accord with our common sense, it is an unhappy matter of fact that not everyone is lucky enough to have such an *eudaimon* life, as so many

⁵³ EN 1099b20.

⁵⁴ EN 1099b17-23.

people lack those precious external goods.⁵⁶ Thus Aristotle is confronted by a dilemma: the richer the account of external goods of *eudaimonia*, the more appealing it is; nevertheless, the more it is subject to luck, and hence the less hope for us to attain it because it is beyond our control to have those external goods. If the *eudaimon* life were dependent upon good luck, then one's *eudaimonia* could be taken away easily whenever misfortune strikes; hence there is an urge to opt for an *eudaimon* life that can transcend the influence of luck as much as possible, such that the attainment of the good life can be accessible to everyone. This seems to call for an account of *eudaimonia* that relies upon as few external goods as possible, even though this kind of stoic life may be rejected for being too barren and futile. The fear of ill fortune as well as the longing for the equal access to the good life for everyone have prompted many philosophers to bite the bullet and choose a simple life that is absolutely self-sufficient in order to transcend the influence of luck and to make life worth living. Perhaps this might be Aristotle's motive for choosing a life of contemplation (cf. bk. X of EN) as the dominant end of *eudaimonia* (as opposed to the inclusive end), for this is the kind of dominant end which is thought to allow an agent to lead an absolute self-sufficient life. Let's turn our attention to the discussion of the self-sufficiency approach.

2.2 The self-sufficiency approach

There are several different candidates for a dominant end that is invulnerable to luck which meets the necessary requirement for the self-sufficiency approach. To name a few popular candidates chosen by Western philosophers, they include contemplation; endorsed, for example, by Plato, Spinoza ('intellectual love of God'), and to a certain extent, Aristotle (cf. bk. X of EN); moral endeavour, the exercise of the good will, which is advocated, for instance, by Kant; and utility (which can be regarded as a form of moral endeavour) --- by Bentham et al.

Interestingly, the idea of salvation is implicit in the motives of these philosophers, for, as Nussbaum puts it, they have the 'aspiration to purity and to freedom from luck that

⁵⁵ EN 1100b31-1101a14.

⁵⁶ Even many affluent people in the West do not have the privilege to have an *eudaimon* life, because many have difficulties in maintaining a stable intimate relationship (cf. Aristotle's emphasis upon *philia*).

is also a deep part of humanness'.⁵⁷ Let me, for the rest of this chapter, examine these three different candidates for dominant end advocated by these philosophers.

2.2.i Contemplation

According to Plato, the highest good for us to strive for lies in our rational capacity, namely, contemplation. Contemplation is dominant because, firstly, it is regarded as the best human faculty, the exercise of which yields the highest value.⁵⁸ Secondly, it is supposed to be able to govern 'the irrational parts of the soul,'⁵⁹ thereby to reduce internal conflicts as well as to minimize the number and intensity of one's desires. The fewer and less intense one's desires are, the more self-sufficient one is, and hence the less one is exposed to the assault of luck. Thirdly, contemplation can be done in solitude and it requires virtually nothing from the outside, except, of course, the basic necessities to sustain one's life and mental capacity in order to pursue this activity.

The perfection and blessedness of this kind of rational pursuit is beautifully depicted by Spinoza:

'Prop. XXXII. Whatever we understand by the third kind of knowledge we are pleased with, and that accompanied with the idea of God as the cause.

Proof. – From this kind of knowledge follows the greatest possible contentment of mind (Prop. 27, Part V.), that is (Def. Emo. 25), pleasure arises, and that accompanied by the idea of oneself, and consequently (Prop. 30, Part V.) accompanied also by the idea of God as the cause. Q.e.d.

Corollary. – From the third kind of knowledge arises necessarily the intellectual love of God. For from this kind of knowledge arises (prev. Prop.) pleasure accompanied by the idea of God as the cause, that is (Def. Emo. 6), the love of God, not in so far as we imagine him present (Prop. 29, Part V.), but in so far as we understand God to be eternal: and this is what I call the intellectual love of God.

Proof. – The third kind of knowledge (Prop. 31, Part V. and Ax. 3, Part I.) is eternal: and therefore (same Ax., Part I.) love which arises from it is also necessarily eternal. Q.e.d.

Note. – Although this love towards God has no beginning (prev. Prop.), it has nevertheless all the perfections of love, just as if it had arisen, as in the corollary of the previous proposition I supposed. Nor is there any difference here, save that the mind has had from eternity those same perfections which we have now supposed to accrue to it, and that accompanied by the idea of God as the eternal

⁵⁷ M. Nussbaum, op cit, pp.5-6.

⁵⁸ Cf. Plato's *Republic* and ch.10 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, book x, ch. 6-8

⁵⁹ cf. Plato's *Republic*.

cause. Wherefore if pleasure consists in the transition to a greater state of perfection, blessedness must clearly consist in the fact that the mind is endowed with the perfection itself.’⁶⁰

Undoubtedly, some people are intoxicated through the activity of contemplation, nevertheless, not so many people are so intellectually inclined, besides, some people may find such a pursuit too elitist and individualistic, and hence not something that should be encouraged to the mass majority. This may be one of the motives for Kant and Bentham to opt for moral endeavour instead.

2.2.ii Kant: the doctrine of moral supremacy

The doctrine of moral supremacy states that the supreme status should be attached to morality, and hence the moral point of view is the most authoritative stance. Moral considerations always override other types of consideration, and moral worth, compared with other kinds of worth, has the highest value.

Kant is the most conspicuous advocate of the doctrine of moral supremacy. This can be seen from his notion of the good will. For Kant, the good will is the highest good.⁶¹ For ‘[n]othing in the universe --- in fact, nothing whatsoever --- can we possibly conceive as absolutely good except a good will.’⁶² Indeed, contrary to commonly held belief, the good will has greater value than happiness. The pursuit of the latter is usually thought to be the final end of human existence, but Kant thinks one only seeks ‘his happiness for the sake of duty’,⁶³ because it is very difficult to maintain a good will, and hence to perform one’s duty, when leading a gloomy life.

The good will is what really matters in life, for it plays a vital role as the necessary and sufficient condition of moral goodness. It is necessary because it produces good character and hence good actions. It is sufficient insofar as moral credit is the same irrespective of the consequences of an action so long as one does everything humanly possible and acts from the good will. For ‘[t]he goodness of the good will does not consist in what it causes or produces, or in how well it achieves a given goal. Rather, its goodness

⁶⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*. Part V.

⁶¹ Kant, *Foundations of the metaphysics of Morals*. [396]

⁶² Ibid. [393]

⁶³ Ibid. [399]

consists solely in its own activity, that is in the way that it wills. In its own right, it has an immeasurably greater value than any other inclination, more than all other inclinations combined.’⁶⁴

Kant’s argument for the doctrine of moral supremacy can be sketched as follows:

- [P1] The supreme value (i.e. the ‘absolute good’) is attached to the good will.
- [P2] The good will is what really matters in morality.
- [P3] ([P2] implies that) the worth of morality is the same as the value of the good will.
- [C] (from [P1] & [P3]) The doctrine of moral supremacy, that is, moral worth is the supreme value.

If [P2] is true, [P3] is a valid inference. However, both [P1] and [P2] are controversial premises. As far as [P1] is concerned, some, e.g. Aristotle and the Utilitarian, would think that other things, such as happiness, are better representations of the supreme value than the good will. Regarding [P2], many would disagree with Kant that the good will plays such a vital role in morality. The Utilitarian may even argue that if the presence of the good will does not increase the overall utility, it would make no moral difference whether or not it is there.

Before examining the validity of Kant’s argument for the doctrine of moral supremacy, I think it would do Kant justice if we explore the reason why he structures his argument in such a way that entails the doctrine of moral supremacy. In ‘*Moral luck*’, Bernard Williams suggests that the motive of Kant’s argument comes from the aspiration for the ultimate justice in the face of the world’s unfairness (cf. 1.2.ii). The ultimate cause of such unfairness is luck, as not everyone can achieve success, wealth, happiness, true love etc., if there is a pursuit that can transcend the influence of luck, then everyone, including the sick, the physically challenged, the socially and physically disadvantaged, and the loner, have the opportunity to pursue it; and if that pursuit is something of supreme value, then everyone has the chance to possess what is the worthiest. Hence ultimate justice can be achieved because no one is prevented by luck from obtaining it. Is there such a pursuit that is immune to luck? Many, if not all, pursuits are not open to all either because

⁶⁴ Ibid. [394]

not everyone has the talent or resources to pursue it. One may be constrained by constitutive luck, i.e. talents and endowments; and/or because circumstances prevent one from achieving success, i.e. circumstantial luck and resultant luck; and/or because one does not have the will or intention to pursue it. If one's will is determined by the laws of nature, it would be a matter of luck how one's will is being determined by antecedent circumstances, i.e. deterministic luck of the will. (cf. 1.1)

In support of Williams' interpretations, it does seem that there is one pursuit which Kant thinks can be immune to luck, moral pursuit, and that it is so because of two characteristics of the good will:

[G1] The exercise of the good will is immune to constitutive luck and deterministic luck of the will because, according to Kant, we possess free will.

[G2] The good will has intrinsic moral value and is the sole consideration of moral evaluation (that is already mentioned in [P2]); hence both circumstantial luck and resultant luck cannot make a difference to **moral** evaluation.

[G1] is supported by Kant's conception of free will:

'If a living being is rational, then he has will, which makes him a kind of cause. And if such a will is free, then he can exercise his causal power without being determined to his choice by causal influences outside the will itself. since will makes a rational being a cause, freedom of will cannot be separated from law; will cannot exercise a lawless freedom, even though it may act independently of the laws of nature. Will, as the ground of free causality, is subject to the immutable laws of freedom, laws of a special kind. Otherwise a free will would be an absurdity What else then can freedom of the will be but autonomy, that which makes will to be its own law? But to say that will is its own law in all its choices is to assert nothing less than the rule that will ought always act on a maxim which at the same time contains will itself as the ground of universal law. Now this is precisely the formulation of the categorical imperative, the supreme principle of morality. Thus a free will is exactly the same as a will which is subject to moral law.'⁶⁵

According to Kant's disquisition on free will, firstly, free will is equated with a will that is subject to moral laws, in other words, the exercise of one's free will amounts to having a good will. Secondly, a rational agent is autonomous and is free from the influences of all objects, for she is free from the laws of nature and is dictated to by reason

⁶⁵ Ibid. [446-447]

alone. The freedom from the laws of nature not only allows her to transcend the immediate causal factors that are antecedent to the occurrence of her will but also her own constitution insofar as it affects her moral deliberations⁶⁶ --- including her own temperament, inclinations, and desires --- viz. she is able to have a good will even if she is endowed with bad traits such as greed, cruelty, laziness, bad temper, and is tormented by all sorts of wicked temptations. In other words, the autonomous agent can transcend the influence of constitutive luck as far as moral deliberation is concerned.

Moreover, according to [G2], moral evaluation is immune to circumstantial luck and resultant luck. 'Even if, through bad luck or the stingy providence of a stepmotherly nature, the good will were impotent in putting into effect its intentions, even when doing everything humanly possible, still the good will, all by itself (as distinguished from a mere wish), would sparkle like a jewel of intrinsic value. It makes no difference whether or not it be useful or productive.'⁶⁷ In other words, since moral evaluation is based solely upon the good will which has intrinsic value, the consequence of an action --- which is subject to circumstantial luck and resultant luck --- has no moral significance. To a certain extent, we can sympathize with Kant's good will argument, for example, we would appreciate someone's good intention to help us, even though, due to some uncontrollable factors, that person fails to help us the way she intends. Nevertheless, there is still a difference in the way we conventionally praise or blame an agent even though we know she has good will and the outcome of the action is beyond her control. Nagel remarks: 'However jewel-like the good will may be in its own right, there is a morally significant difference between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-storey window while trying to rescue him. Similarly, there is a morally significant difference between reckless driving and manslaughter. But whether a reckless driver hits a pedestrian depends on the presence of the pedestrian at the point where he recklessly passes a red light.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ This free will does not, however, help us transcend all kinds of constitutive luck, e.g. poverty, ugliness, low intelligence etc. That is why, to remedy this, Kant urges us to put less value on this kind of characteristic, and more on the moral ones. More on this when I discuss Kant's doctrine of moral supremacy.

⁶⁷ Ibid. [394]

⁶⁸ Thomas Nagel, '*Moral Luck*', p.58.

Kant may, of course, say that even though Nagel's view represents that of the majority, it by no means implies that this is the way we should make moral assessments. I think Kant's view can be justified by his higher goals: the striving for ultimate justice in the face of the world's unfairness. If both [G1] and [G2] are true, then moral pursuit is completely immune to luck and can be perfected by everyone. However, if moral pursuit is something idle, and is not a very valuable pursuit, then no matter how great the moral value is attached to the good will, it still won't entail that the good will has the absolute supreme value, for there is a distinction between moral value and value in general, something may have value in a specific field but may be thought to have no value by those who are outside that field. Perhaps religious value is a good illustration of]

this point. A certain religious group may regard praying as having a very high religious value; however, for those who reject all religion (as opposed to those who belong to a different group), praying may have no value at all, for none of the religious stuff has any value anyway. The same goes with morality. Thus, if the moral pursuit is not something valuable (in the absolute sense), then it won't mean much to us even if Kant is right that it is immune to luck and can be achieved by all. Kant think this cannot be so, for the world would then be fundamentally unfair. It must be the case that everyone has an equal chance to obtain what is most valuable in the world. We cannot seriously think otherwise.

Williams thinks this is the real motive behind Kant's argument for the doctrine of moral supremacy. If he is right, it is perhaps true that Kant is treating morality as religion was formerly treated. For religion, say, Christianity, is thought to be open to all (because everyone is free to choose to believe in God and to do good), and going to heaven is something that surpasses all worldly goods. Thus the religious pursuit allows everyone the equal opportunity to obtain the highest good (heaven), and this give us a sense of ultimate justice. (Now, as the world is getting more and more secular, Kant's advocacy of moral supremacy may be a good substitute to the religious supremacy which was widely held in the past.)

Kant is not the only one who holds this doctrine. It is so widely held that even the Utilitarian --- the usual opponent to the Kantian --- takes for granted that morality is the

supreme value. In the next section I shall examine the work of one of the chief advocates of Utilitarianism --- Bentham.

2.2.iii A variation of the doctrine of moral supremacy: the supremacy of the Utilitarian values

The doctrine of moral supremacy can not only be defended, as Kant does, by arguing that a certain basic moral attribute has the supreme value, hence moral worth is supreme, but also by arguing that the moral principle is ubiquitous, viz. it applies to the practical deliberations of all actions. Bentham's defense of the principle of utility relies on such an approach.

Bentham's principle of utility is based on a descriptive feature of human nature. He thinks human beings are subject to 'two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure.They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while.'⁶⁹ Presumably, Bentham thinks it is a matter of fact that all human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain all the time, and this nature determines **all** our actions, words and thoughts --- hence the ubiquity of the influence of pleasure and pain in the field of actions. The fact that we are subject to pleasure and pain is not only descriptive, but also normative, for '[i]t is for them *alone* to point out what we ought to do' (italics mine).⁷⁰

This nature of ours forms the only standard of right and wrong, and is the foundation of the principle of utility. 'By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment, or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words, to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever; and therefore not only of every action of a private individual, but of every measure of government.'⁷¹ The application of utility is

⁶⁹ Jeremy Bentham, *The principles of morals and legislation*. Ch.1, p.1.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.1.

⁷¹ Ibid. p.2.

concerned with 'every action whatsoever', hence the application of this principle is ubiquitous. Moreover, since every action is approved or disapproved by this principle, and it is the only standard of right and wrong, it not only implies that utility is what all other moral values cash into, viz. it is the highest moral worth, but also implies that it is the consideration which overrides all other types of considerations.

Bentham thinks this principle is so fundamental to morality that it alone gives meaning to words like 'ought', 'right' and 'wrong'. 'Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words ought, and right and wrong, and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none.'⁷²

Bentham's argument for the doctrine of moral supremacy can be sketched as follows:

- [P1] The principle of utility is the foundation of morality.
- [P2] The principle of utility applies to all actions, and its consideration overrides all other types of considerations.
- [C] Moral consideration is ubiquitous in all practical deliberations, and it overrides all other types of considerations. Hence, the doctrine of moral supremacy.

Both [P1] and [P2] of Bentham's argument are very controversial, but the beauty of his system lies in its simplicity ---namely, the reduction of all practical deliberations into the considerations of pleasure and pain. And the striving for the maximum overall, i.e. all sentient beings considered, utility (whether in the form of happiness or pleasures) is the dominant end of a Utilitarian. Since it is a global quantity that is maximized, the effect of luck on individuals does not loom very large. In other words, instead of seeking 'personal salvation' from the assault of luck, the Utilitarian focus is upon the 'global salvation'. This is done by identifying oneself with the pleasures and pains of **all** sentient beings, and by

Bentham takes happiness to mean more or less the same thing as benefit, advantage, pleasure and good; and unhappiness as mischief, pain and evil.

⁷² Ibid. p.4.

adopting some kind of Utilitarian calculations for decision making to maximize utility. Accordingly, the considerations of one's own pleasures and pains, as well as the considerations of the effect of luck upon oneself, are diminished to the point where one's well being is no more important than the well being of any other sentient being who has the same capacity for pleasures and pains. Hence, like Kantianism, Utilitarianism offers safety and the security of a decision-procedure.

2.3 Concluding remarks

The purpose of this chapter is not to argue which type of approach is the best as far as combating the threats of luck is concerned. Rather, I would like to show that because the inclusive end approach cannot deal with the fundamental problem of luck, whereas contemplation as the dominant end is not a palatable alternative, the Kantian or Utilitarian approaches, which take moral endeavour as their dominant end, become appealing alternatives. Perhaps this explains part of the reason why Kantianism and Utilitarianism have been dominating modern moral philosophy. Having discussed one of the fundamental motives of these two traditions, namely, to combat luck, it is easier to understand why they are structured in such a way.

In the next chapter I discuss the commonality of the structure of Kantianism and Utilitarianism inspired by that motive, including their adherence to the doctrine of moral supremacy and their adoption of the impartial perspective. Then I discuss Williams' objections against these two approaches, putting the emphasis upon Kantianism.

Ch.3 Impartial morality as the dominant end and Williams' objections against it

3.1 A brief introduction to Williams' strategy in '*Moral Luck*' against the Kantian project

As already mentioned, Kant's motive to achieve ultimate justice helps shape the structure of his moral philosophy, and recognition of this point can be found in Williams' ML.⁷³ Let me outline the argument for this Kantian vision:

- [P1] Moral value is immune to luck and 'unconditioned'.
- [P2] The capacity for moral agency is present in any rational agent, thus it is open to all (assuming everyone has rational capacity).
- [P3] Moral value has the highest worth, hence the doctrine of moral supremacy.
- [C] Every person has an equal opportunity to be moral, and hence to obtain what is supremely important and valuable in life, and to be fully immune to luck in this dimension. Thus the ultimate justice in the world is achieved.

As far as this Kantian vision is concerned, Williams' objective is to refute [P3], i.e. the doctrine of moral supremacy. He does have a direct line of argument which, to a certain extent, can weaken it. However, this is not his main means of refuting [P3]. Rather, it seems to me, he objects against [P3] through an indirect method, that is, by casting skeptical doubt on the freedom of morality from luck (i.e. to refute [P1]), which would, in turn, imply that [C] is false. By showing that it is impossible for the Kantian to attain ultimate justice through the freedom from luck, the Kantian loses the motive to hold on to the doctrine of moral supremacy. Whether or not the striving for ultimate justice is the only motive for having [P3] is, of course, another question. If it is, then Williams' finding that the Kantian vision is unattainable, coupled with support for the plurality of different types of values would be a sufficient reason for us to let go of the doctrine of moral supremacy.

⁷³ I.e. '*Moral Luck*'.

Williams thinks this 'will leave us with *a* concept of morality, but one less important, certainly, than ours is usually taken to be.'⁷⁴

Since the indirect method is Williams' distinctive strategy, I shall not only discuss his idea why [P3] should be abandoned, but also examine several arguments found in PCM⁷⁵ and ML which are directed against [P1]. Notice, however, that Williams' objectives for those arguments are not simply confined to the refutation of [P1]. Indeed, he has not explicitly said that all those arguments have that one goal in common. They have other objectives as well. For instance, one of the arguments in PCM exposes the impoverishment and misrepresentation of the Kantian conception of person. This is perhaps Williams' style to explore several issues within one discussion. I shall, in chapter 4, examine other arguments Williams raised that are conducive to his objection against [P3], as well as his objection against the Kantian project in general. For the time being, let me examine the impartiality thesis held by both Kantianism and Utilitarianism as a method to combat the influences of luck. It is one of the major supports for [P1], and is singled out by Williams for particular criticism.

3.2 The impartiality thesis and a sketch of Williams' critique

Kantian morality is, to a certain extent, shaped by its commitment to [P1]. Even though many contemporary moral philosophers who are inspired by Kantianism do not deploy or endorse Kant's theory of noumenal freedom, the demand to transcend the three other types of luck⁷⁶ is still entrenched in their thinking. As far as a personal ethic, as opposed to an ethic of public policy, is concerned, two methods can be employed by an individual to transcend these three types of luck. They are the adoption of the impartial stance, to combat constitutive luck and circumstantial luck, and the deployment of rational deliberation and justification, to combat resultant luck. Both methods are used for moral deliberation (before an action) and moral assessment (after an action). I shall focus on the first method, and Williams' criticism against it, in this section.

⁷⁴ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck,' p.54. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

⁷⁵ I.e. 'Persons, character and morality'.

⁷⁶ I.e. constitutive luck, circumstantial luck and resultant luck.

The adoption of the impartial stance can allow one to transcend both constitutive luck and circumstantial luck because 'moral thought requires abstraction from particular circumstances and particular characteristics of the parties, including the agent, except in so far as these can be treated as universal features of any morally similar situation'.⁷⁷ Thus moral principles are applied to everyone universally regardless of the circumstances and the characteristics of the people involved as both of these ignored features are subject to luck. Rawls' idea of 'the veil of ignorance' is a conspicuous exemplification of this aspiration to transcend these two types of luck. He thinks 'we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage. Now in order to do this I assume that the parties are situated behind a veil of ignorance. They do not know how the various alternatives will affect their own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations.'⁷⁸

In PCM, Williams argues that the adoption of the impartial stance in moral thinking is seriously flawed, because, firstly, by abstracting the particular characteristics of the parties, the Kantian concept of person becomes too impoverished and abstracted to allow any room for one's ground projects. Secondly, by abstracting from particular circumstances, the Kantian moral point of view cannot make sense of some vital human experiences such as personal relations, which, strictly speaking, are a type of ground project. Thirdly, there is a risk of conflict between one's ground project and the demand of impartial morality, and this challenges the adherence to the doctrine of moral supremacy. Let me examine in detail the arguments for these objections against impartial morality and the notion of a 'ground project'.

Although the Kantian conception of person, unlike the Utilitarian one, emphasizes the subjectivity of individuals and the importance of agency, it amounts to nothing more than a 'bare identity', for the contents of the identity are expunged. Williams thinks this is where the problem lies, because the Kantian conception of person not only would abstract one's idiosyncratic tastes and preferences, or some fleeting desires, but also the desires,

⁷⁷ Bernard Williams, 'Persons, character and morality,' p.2.

⁷⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Ch.3, section 24.

interests, projects and attachments that not only help to constitute one's character but are also closely related to one's existence. Williams calls them 'categorical desires' or 'ground projects'. A categorical desire or a ground project is like Spinoza's notion of *conatus* which gives one the motive force that 'propels him into the future, and gives him a reason for living.' Hence ground projects or categorical desires 'to a significant degree give a meaning to his life.'⁷⁹

So what exactly are ground projects or categorical desires? According to Williams' description, it seems to be the case that so long as the projects or desires play the role of *conatus* in one's life, they need not be unique to a particular person, nor do they have to be the same as other people's. Projects can be concerned with selfish ends, or a self-centred one (like the artistic project of a Romantic painter). They can be altruistic or moral, e.g. work for reform, or justice, or general improvement of the world. And Williams thinks there is no contradiction in the idea of one dying for one's ground project if this is what is necessary for the project; in such a case 'to live would be to live with it unsatisfied'.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, this does not mean that the ground projects or categorical desires have to be something grand or large; they 'may be of a relatively everyday kind such as certainly provide the ground of many sorts of happiness.'⁸¹ Indeed, one may not even be conscious of them, and may not be aware of their significance until one loses them and starts questioning the point of one's own existence. Of course, losing a ground project does not imply that one has to commit suicide, for, in general, one has a nexus of projects rather than one separable project which plays such a ground role. However, if one loses all or most of them, that would remove meaning and one might not see much point in going on living.

I shall call Williams' argument, which deploys the idea of the importance of ground projects, against impartial morality the 'ground project thesis'. Before I go into that I want to mention another aspect of life for which the Kantian theory cannot account, namely, personal relations. They are related to the notion of ground project because we usually have

⁷⁹ Bernard Williams, '*Persons, character and morality*', p.12-13.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p.13.

⁸¹ Ibid. p.12.

deep attachments to our family members and friends, hence their well being and our relations to them are our ground projects as well. Now, Kantian moral thought requires the abstraction of personal relations not merely because they constitute our own ground projects, but also because the particular characteristics of the parties (i.e. the agent as well as all other people involved) are abstracted. Hence, even our relations with our enemies or people whom we dislike⁸² would be abstracted in moral thought. Since we only perceive the 'bare identity' of the parties, they are inter-substitutable in moral thought, viz. they can be replaced by anyone else (or at least anyone who has the universal features related to the moral situation in question). Thus, Kantianism is not doing any better than Utilitarianism as far as personal projects and personal relations are concerned.

A classic example that takes the stance of impartiality seriously can be found in William Godwin's writing, in which self interests and personal ties give way to moral demands (in that case, the choice which yields most utility). Godwin thinks if the palace of Fenelon, the archbishop of Cambray, were on fire, and only one of them could be rescued, the life of Fenelon should be preferred to that of the valet. In his example, Fenelon was supposed to be of more worth than his valet --- a perplexing supposition for we moderns, but perhaps a prevalent thought in the 18th century, a time when the egalitarian notions such as human rights were not yet popular. Now, this truth still holds even if I or my beloved (who are presumably of less worth than Fenelon) were the valet. 'Suppose I had been myself the valet; I ought to have chosen to die, rather than Fenelon should have died justice is the principle that regulates my conduct accordingly Suppose the valet had been my brother, my father or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition Justice would have taught me to save the life of Fenelon at the expence of the other. What magic is there in the pronoun "my", that should justify us in overturning the decisions of impartial truth?'⁸³

Godwin's demand is regarded by many, including John Cottingham, as too stringent and as unacceptable, for they think there is a fundamental problem with the

⁸² Presumably their well being etc. would not constitute our ground projects unless if one regards things like a revenge (if that applies to the case) as one's ground projects.

abstraction of personal relations and other types of ground projects in moral thought. For, as Williams puts it, 'somewhere one reaches the necessity that such things as deep attachments to other persons will express themselves in the world in ways which cannot at the same time embody the impartial view, and that they also run the risk of offending against it.' But according to the doctrine of moral supremacy, in this kind of conflicting case, impartial morality 'must be required to win; and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent', it is unreasonable because it demands that the agent give up 'something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all.'⁸⁴

Notice, however, Williams is not saying that the demands from one's ground projects, say, the demand from friendship, must always win. 'That would be absurd, and also a pathological kind of friendship.' Nor is Williams saying that there are many and serious conflicts between these projects and impartial morality; 'after all these projects, in a normally socialized individual, have in good part been formed within, and formed by, dispositions which constitute a commitment to morality. But, on the other hand, the possibility of radical conflict is also there.'⁸⁵

Undoubtedly, many recent philosophers are aware of the significance of personal relations, and how the power and authority of love can conflict badly with morality. Williams mentions two ways in which they try to deal with the threat of such conflicts. One way is to 'moralize' personal relations, viz. to make moral relations a necessary condition of personal relations, or a stronger view, to regard the latter as a species of the former. By doing so, personal relations are 'domesticated' and the possibility of them conflicting with morality is minimized. Williams thinks these views about personal relations are absurd and wrong, for relations between loved ones are particular and require preferential treatment, whereas moral relations resist that, as they are universal. Even if the concerns shown in lovers' relations are the same as that in moral relations, this does not mean one enters

⁸³ William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice and its influence on Moral and Happiness*. Book II, ch.II.

⁸⁴ Bernard Williams, 'Persons, character and morality', p.18 & p.14.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.17 & p.12.

personal relations through the moral ones, nor does it mean the latter is the foundation of the former. Hence the possibility of conflicts is still there.

Another way to deal with the threat of this kind of conflict can be found in an example formulated by Charles Fried, a situation which is quite similar to Godwin's, but in which he tries to avoid the unpalatable Godwinian conclusion. Consider a situation in which only one of two persons in equal peril can be rescued, and one of them is the wife of the rescuer. Two questions are at stake here: (a) Who should the rescuer save? (b) How does the rescuer decide? Since we do not know which victim has more worth, Godwin might say that both victims should have an equal chance of being rescued; in other words, the wife of the rescuer would not receive more 'points' than the other victim simply because of her personal tie with the rescuer. Since there is no other way to distinguish which victim is worthier to be rescued, it may not be too far fetched to say that Godwin would concede the method of flipping a coin to decide. Fried rejects both of these answers. If the rescuer does not occupy any official role, such as captain of a ship or public health official, Fried thinks it would be absurd to ask the rescuer, in the name of impartial justice, to 'treat both equally, perhaps by flipping a coin.' For 'the occurrence of the accident may itself stand as a sufficient randomizing event to meet the dictates of fairness, so he may prefer his friend, or loved one.'⁸⁶

Thus, for question (a), Fried thinks the wife may be rescued; it is an acceptable choice. Nevertheless Williams is not happy with the way he comes up with this answer to question (b). By saying that it is 'a sufficient randomizing event' Fried is giving a **justification** why the Godwinian notion of fairness, which would regard the rescuer's preference for his wife as unfair to the second victim, does not apply to this case. Nevertheless, Fried is still arguing within the framework of impartial morality, a framework which is ubiquitous. Although the Godwinian notion of fairness is rejected in this case, it is only replaced by another notion of fairness, one that regards the rescuer's choice as fair (or at least not unfair) by virtue of the fact that it is a randomizing event. In

⁸⁶ Charles Fried, *An Anatomy of Values*, p.227.

other words, the rescuer's choice is legitimated by the nature of the event, rather than motivated by, say, the love for his wife.

Fried's treatment, though more palatable than Godwin's, does not satisfy Williams either. Even if his argument for fairness is valid, it is still a misrepresentation of what deep personal ties involve, because Fried 'provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife.'⁸⁷ In other words, the idea that the rescuer is motivated by the thought that it is fair and permissible to save one's wife is a misrepresentation of the internal experience of the rescuer, or at least the internal experience of what some hope the rescuer would have. Such an internal experience would involve thoughts such as 'I love her', and this is the kind of experience which explains why, Williams thinks, the rescuer 'cannot at the same time embody the impartial view.'

So far Williams has shown that the concept of person required by impartial morality is inadequate to account for ground projects and deep personal ties, and there is no way to eliminate the possibility of radical conflicts. In which case, because impartial morality must win, it is probable that the conflicted agent would be left with a life which he sees as meaningless if he complies with moral principles, but which he must see as such if he has to offend against moral demands. This seems wrong. Williams wants to argue even further for the conclusion that the concept of the person provided by the Kantian theories is not even enough to yield what the Kantians want. This argument, if sound, would give the Kantian demand for the adoption of the impartial stance a final blow, as the Kantian project would be shown to be self-defeating.

Williams' argument goes like this:

- [P1] Ground projects are the conatus of one's existence, and they give meaning to life.
- [P2] (from [P1]) If life is without any ground project, then nothing would have any sense to one, and one would lose the conatus to go on living.
- [P3] Impartial morality demands the abstraction of all ground projects.

⁸⁷ Bernard Williams, '*Persons, character and morality*,' p.18.

[C] (from [P2] & [P3]) If one grants the supreme importance to impartial morality, then the adherence to the impartial system (which also has the status of a ground project) would not have any sense in one's life. Hence, the impartial demand is self-defeating.

Let me save the evaluation of Williams' argument against the impartial thesis until the next chapter. I want to move next to the Gauguin story. This story not only illustrates some of the arguments already discussed in this section, but is also intended by Williams to challenge the Kantian and the contemporary rationalist attempt to transcend the influence of resultant luck on moral assessment. But before I discuss this challenge, I want to examine the relation, if any, between Williams' discussion of the ground project thesis and his Gauguin story. If there is one, then his story can serve as a detailed example of (i) why it is inappropriate to adopt the impartial stance of morality; and (ii) why Williams thinks that 'while we are sometimes guided by the notion that it would be the best of worlds in which morality were universally respected and all men were of a disposition to affirm it, we have in fact deep and persistent reasons to be grateful that that is not the world we have.'⁸⁸

3.3 Gauguin's decision

In ML Williams tells us the story of a creative artist, 'Gauguin'. To avoid unnecessary controversy over the personal history of the real artist, Williams portrays his own Gauguin as someone who shares many similar features with the historical Gauguin --- e.g. they both choose to leave their wife and children for Tahiti, they are both passionate for art, they both produce great painting etc. Nevertheless, there may be other aspects the two Gauguins do not share, e.g. the way they deliberate on the matter of going to Tahiti, and the factors which motivate them to do so may not be the same. It is his Gauguin Williams' discussion is concerned with, not the historical one. Thus I think it would be fair to Williams' discussion if we regard his Gauguin as a fictional character, and have as little recourse to the historical facts of Gauguin the real artist, especially those concerned with

⁸⁸ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck,' p.37-8. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

his beliefs and feelings, as possible, in order to avoid controversy over what the historical Gauguin was really like.

According to Williams, Gauguin is confronted by the choice of either leaving for Tahiti where he believes he can produce his best works of art and become a successful painter, or staying in Europe, which will certainly suppress his artistic inspiration. If Gauguin opts for the former, he would turn 'away from definite and pressing human claims on him'.⁸⁹ Williams does not tell us explicitly what these human claims are, but presumably they are mainly of his wife and children, as the historical Gauguin left his family for Tahiti, and we are supposed to infer that it would be his wife and children who would suffer most from that choice. What account does Williams give of the reasons for Gauguin to decide to leave?

We have been told that he leaves because he believes Tahiti is the place for him to become a successful painter. But what we are not told is whether it is success *per se* which motivates Gauguin to leave, or if there is something more to it, e.g. he can't live without art, or he is a rebel who wants to break free from the conventional moral codes of his time and culture, i.e. to be a responsible husband and father for its own sake, or for the sake of meeting and making love with the women in Tahiti, and uses art as his excuse to leave and rebel. What really goes on in his deliberation? The closest clue we get is in Williams' discussion on retrospective justification. There he argues that Gauguin cannot justify his action at the moment of his choice, that justification can only occur after the result is known. This makes us wonder if Gauguin is a gambler who takes his own future and the well being of his wife and children as his stakes. If so, what really motivates him is success *per se*, as that is the prize of his gamble, plus, perhaps, the excitement of taking the risk. Undoubtedly, there is some element of risk taking in his decision, after all, he cannot be absolutely certain if he really will be able to make it, and the stakes are very high as well. However, this doesn't seem to be the way Williams wants us to think of Gauguin for two reasons. Firstly, the thought of gambling his life for some great returns, in terms of money

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.37.

and fame, doesn't seem to be the dominant motive of an artist of the romantic kind,⁹⁰ and Gauguin 'owes something to romantic conceptions of artistic creation'.⁹¹ Secondly, I believe Williams would want to portray his hero as sympathetic and appealing as possible, and still remaining 'one of our kind', because he is using the Gauguin story as an example to challenge our conceptions of morality and practical rationality. It won't serve his purpose to choose a character who opts out of the realms of morality and practical rationality all together, for it would be very difficult to use such a character --- who shares so little, in those respects, with us --- as an example to challenge those conceptions of ours. To avoid such an alien impression of Gauguin, Williams reassures us that his Gauguin is not amoral, viz. he is not someone 'who was not at all interested in the claims on him, and simply preferred to live another life'.⁹² Indeed, an amoral Gauguin or a rebel would serve a purpose which even Williams wants to avoid, namely, the rejection of morality⁹³ altogether. Thus Gauguin is portrayed as someone who is concerned about those claims on him, and who also knows how his family may suffer if he leaves. In other words he does take the conventional moral codes on board, but whether or not they are the dominant considerations of his decision is another question.

By the same token of being one of our kind, we could assume that Gauguin also shares our conception of practical rationality. This doesn't mean he has to take the type of deliberative rationality deployed by Rawls, which ensures our conduct to be above reproach, for many of us do take risks in certain situations, usually when something we care for deeply is in question. So long as Gauguin is not someone with the 'gambler temperament', but who rather has a reason (other than for the thrill and/or greed to gamble) to take such a risk, we would still take him to be rational, even though it is not rational in the 'above reproach' sense.

⁹⁰ According to Oscar Wilde, which may be an indication of what an artist of the 19th century is like, an artist pursues art for art's sake. In other words, she would not do it with the dominant motive of getting success in terms of fame, financial rewards or achieving some kind of political purposes etc.

⁹¹ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: a postscript*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ I am using the term 'morality', unless specified, rather loosely here, i.e. I am not making the distinction of morality and ethics the way Williams does.

If my analysis of Gauguin's character is correct, then he does not play the role of a gambler or that of a pure rebel against the moral claims on him by leaving for Tahiti. Yet the reason which motivates him to leave has to be an amoral one, because Williams wants to use it as an example to show that moral value does not and should not always win, Gauguin's is a case in which artistic value (and, perhaps, his personal success and sexual fulfillment) overrides moral demand. Bearing these thoughts in mind I would like to extrapolate⁹⁴ from Williams' arguments in PCM and ML the details of Gauguin's deliberation which Williams neglects in ML. It seems to me that Williams' ground project thesis is the best explanation of Gauguin's deliberation. If Gauguin has a genuine reason to leave, despite the risks, he is not just using painting as an excuse to rebel against morality for its own sake. Thus if becoming a successful painter (among other things) is his ground project, his project is, as Williams wants to persuade us, worthwhile and important. (N.B. in chapter 6 of this thesis, I shall consider other possible motives for Gauguin to leave for Tahiti, namely, to pursue a Bohemian lifestyle which is filled with adulterous sexual explorations, for it seems to be a subtext of Williams' passage. For now, I shall only discuss Gauguin's artistic aspiration, as it is sufficient to bring out the point about Williams' ground project thesis.)

Let's grant that to become a successful painter is Gauguin's ground project. The next question we have to ask is what exactly does success involve? Williams tells us that it is 'a life which will enable him really to be a painter', and it 'does not have to be the same thing as recognition'.⁹⁵ And presumably it does not have to be the same thing as getting rich through his painting. Nevertheless, Williams' notion of success is so vague that all we can be sure success would essentially involve is that he would have the necessary environment which allows him to be a painter, and presumably, that environment would have the kind of landscapes, people, and (carefree) atmosphere etc. which he thinks is necessary for his paintings, and that he is free from the mundane obligations of being a

⁹⁴ It has to be an extrapolation because Williams has not told us what exactly goes through Gauguin's mind when he is deliberating about it.

⁹⁵ Bernard Williams, '*Moral Luck*,' p.38. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

father and husband which, perhaps he finds, take up too much of his time and energy, while that time and energy should be spent on painting.

If that is what his ground project for painting is about, it seems that it can be broken down into two reasons, [R1] and [R2], which motivate him to leave for Tahiti. Firstly, [R1], it is his urge to be fully engaged in painting, and to apply Williams' ground project analysis to this, we could imagine that if Gauguin is deprived from living the life of a painter, his life will be without meaning, and even if he is unfortunate enough to keep living, he will become a living corpse. In Gauguin's eye, to be fully engaged in painting requires him to find the best environment for it. Even though some may argue that staying with his family is actually the best, or at least not a damaging, environment for his painting, with respect to his personal deliberation, this is not the point, because what is of concern here is his own belief about what is the case. Of course, he may hold a false belief about the choice of environment; moreover, he may be self-deluded about his ability to paint --- maybe he won't be able to produce any good work no matter where he goes. In that case he surely will have made a wrong decision, as it will be very costly, but with no rewards to his family or to him.

This leads us to the second reason, [R2], which motivates him to leave, and this reason is supported by Williams' argument on retrospective justification. Although according to the retrospective justification argument one is not able to justify one's choice at the time of choosing, this does not mean one cannot be motivated to pursue it. Gauguin, for example, may be partially motivated by his conviction that he has the talent to become a great painter. The only way to **verify** this conviction is to try it out, and hence to take the **risk**. And this is how [R2], the intention to test out one's judgement on one's ability by taking the risk, motivates Gauguin. If he is successful, his risky and self-centred choice will be justified retrospectively, at least to himself. But if he fails, he will have done the wrong thing.

Incidentally, I think there is a tension between [R1] and the retrospective justification argument. As far as [R1] is concerned, if a project plays such a ground role to an agent, to refrain from pursuing it is not a live option for her, as her life would be meaningless without it, but of course if she fails, life would also be meaningless for her.

But the underlying thought behind this (though Williams never mentions it) is that if she tries to pursue it, there is at least some probability for her to succeed, but if she does not try at all, the chance to succeed is virtually zero. Thus it is rational for her to pursue it no matter how unlikely it is to succeed.⁹⁶ To this extent it is a justified, for it is rational, reason for an agent to pursue it. Nevertheless, this is in conflict with the retrospective justification argument insofar as, in risky endeavour such as Gauguin's case, the decision to pursue the project cannot be justified until the end result is known. In other words, at the time of decision the agent's choice is not justified. Although conflict of this kind is not devastating to Williams' argument, it is still unpleasant to the logical minded reader. To maintain the consistency of his discussion on Gauguin, he has to either abandon the ground project thesis, or the retrospective justification argument. If he abandons the latter, then Gauguin is justified to leave for Tahiti, and what has (resultant) luck got to do with it? In other words, Williams' whole project about luck being a threat to morality and rational justification would be in vain. It seems to be the case that Williams has to put aside his ground project thesis, and deploys the retrospective justification argument for his Gauguin story. Nevertheless, this would leave the impression of a Gauguin who is not as sympathetic a character as we previously assume, and this makes us wonder what are the things which motivate Williams' Gauguin to leave. Could it be the case that he really is a gambler or risk taker after all? Could the alternative and Bohemian lifestyle, that is, being rid of mundane obligations and making love with the women there without societal scrutiny, attract him? I shall talk more about this in chapter 6 when I discuss adultery. Notice, however, even if Williams abandons the ground project thesis for the Gauguin story, he can still deploy this ground project argument against the impartiality thesis so long as he does not use it alongside the retrospective justification argument.

If my extrapolation of the way Gauguin deliberates is correct, there are two implications. Firstly, it is not hard to see why he does not, and perhaps should not, take up the impartial thesis for his decision making. The impartial thesis *might*, according to the Utilitarian formulations, rule that it is actually right for him to leave, because he will be

⁹⁶ That may explain why for many terminally ill patients, if there is hope in getting a cure, no matter how bizarre the method is or how dim the chances for it to succeed, they would give it a try.

able to produce the best works of art which nourish many people, and hence it justifies the suffering of his family,⁹⁷ Or, it might say, from a Kantian stance, that no matter what wonderful works Gauguin will produce in Tahiti, his escape from his duty to his family is simply wrong, and hence impermissible. Or, the rightness of his action may, according to the contemporary rationalist, depend upon some rational deliberative processes, say, the rational assessment of probabilities.

Whatever the impartial perspective might call for, according to Williams, it won't be the way Gauguin deliberates, because its reasons are not as 'internal' and important to him as the demands from his ground project (or if we abandon the ground project concept in this story, then demands from any project he happens to have which do not play the ground role). If his choice happens to coincide with what the impartial thesis rules good for him, he can save himself from the condemnation and harassment of some hyper-moralists. But if they don't coincide, Williams seems to be saying that Gauguin has a 'right', if I may use this term loosely, to choose what he wants to do, and if we deploy the ground project thesis here, that would amount to his struggle for his 'survival', viz. to follow what his ground projects dictate, if he wants to have a meaningful life.

The other thing which the Gauguin story seems to imply is that moral demand, i.e. the claims from his family in this case, does not always override other non-moral considerations. This story seems to illustrate that the world is not that bad, and is perhaps better, when people offend against the doctrine of moral supremacy on certain occasions. It is a good thing from Gauguin's perspective because he has the personal freedom to pursue what really matters to him; and Williams seems to suggest that we, at least those who care for the arts, are grateful that Gauguin did take the risk and left for Tahiti, otherwise we would never see the products of his creative art.

⁹⁷ Williams casts doubt on such reasoning, as the Utilitarian formulations only characterize the actual states of affairs, e.g. 'consequence x is better/worse as a result of the decision and action already made'. Hence, those formulations do not help to characterize the agent's decision before the actual consequence of the decision is known.

3.4 Williams' 3 arguments against the 'has tried one's best argument'

3.4.i Rich concept argument

Kant, Rawls, and many other contemporary moral philosophers⁹⁸ try to combat the impact of resultant luck. First of all, let's recapitulate what the Kantian attempts to establish with respect to resultant luck. According to Kant, 'the good will, all by itself (as distinguished from a mere wish), would sparkle like a jewel of intrinsic value. It makes no difference whether or not it be useful or productive.'⁹⁹ Some contemporary moral philosophers, such as Rawls, hold similar views. Rawls thinks that if an agent acts with deliberative rationality, and 'does what seems best at the time, and if his beliefs later prove to be mistaken with untoward results, it is through no fault of his own. There is no cause for self-reproach. There was no way of knowing which was the best or even a better plan.' In other words, the deployment of deliberative rationality can 'ensure that our conduct is above reproach, and that we are responsible to ourselves as one person over time', thus a rational agent 'need never blame himself no matter how things finally transpire'.¹⁰⁰

Whether it is the deployment of the good will or deliberative rationality, both Kant and Rawls think that their strategy can allow the agent to be immune to the impact of resultant luck. Hence, so long as her decision is justified, in terms of good will or deliberative rationality, she should not have any regret or remorse, nor should she be blamed for the undesirable outcome. Perhaps this is the way we wish to make moral assessment about ourselves and others, but, according to Nagel, it is not often how it works in practice. Consider two equally good willed rescuers, one successfully saves a victim from a peril, while the other one fails; and the success or failure of the rescue is largely beyond their control. Although we are grateful that the unsuccessful rescuer has such a good intention, there is still a difference in how they are evaluated, whether by others or by

⁹⁸ For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to them as the 'Kantians' even though that may be a confusing label as many of them do not endorse the Kantian metaphysics.

⁹⁹ Kant, *Foundations of the metaphysics of Morals*. [394].

¹⁰⁰ Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Chapter 7, section 64.

themselves. By the same token, someone who attempts to commit a murder is evaluated differently from another one who succeeds in doing so.¹⁰¹

I believe Kant and Rawls are aware that this is the way people usually make moral assessments, and it seems to me that they are offering a 'has tried one's best argument', namely, an agent should not feel regret or be blamed because she has already tried her best, through good will or deliberative rationality. The elevation from regret and blame is what can be done to transcend the impact of luck, in this case, resultant luck.

Williams is unhappy with this kind of approach. It is not merely that it is not the way we are accustomed to view ourselves and others, but that, he thinks, such an approach involves a superficial concept of responsible agency. It is superficial because 'one's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not', and those things include 'those elements which are essential to the outcome but lie outside [one's] control'.¹⁰² In other words not only resultant luck, but all kinds of luck, would play a role in our concept of agency, if we want that concept to be rich and closer to the truth. Let me call this the 'rich concept argument'.

3.4.ii Agent-regret argument

An example which shows why such a rich concept of agency is closer to the truth can be found in the phenomenon of agent-regret. According to Williams, an agent may have agent-regret for an unintended outcome which lies beyond her control even when her decision for the (ill-fated) action is justified according to deliberative rationality.

This is because there is a **special relation** between an agent and her actions, whether voluntary or non-voluntary. Agent-regret is different from regret in general, for it is a species of regret 'which a person can feel only towards his own past actions (or, at most, actions in which he regards himself as a participant). In this case, the supposed possible difference is that one might have acted otherwise, and the focus of the regret is on that possibility, the thought being formed in part by first personal conceptions of how one

¹⁰¹ Cf. Nagel's '*Moral Luck*' for the details of these and other related examples.

¹⁰² Bernard Williams, '*Moral Luck*,' pp.44-5. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

might have acted otherwise.’¹⁰³ According to Williams there are three things agent-regret requires: a first-personal subject-matter, a particular kind of psychological content, and a particular kind of expression (e.g. the agent’s hope to compensate for the damage). Contrary to what the Kantians might have expected, ‘[t]he sentiment of agent-regret is by no means restricted to *voluntary* agency. It can extend far beyond what one intentionally did to almost anything for which one was causally responsible in virtue of something one intentionally did. Yet even at deeply accidental or non-voluntary levels of agency, sentiments of agent-regret are different from regret in general, such as might be felt by a spectator, and are acknowledged in our practice as being different.’¹⁰⁴

Williams’ discussion of our sentiments of agent-regret shows that, contrary to the Kantian assumption, there is a special relation between an agent and an event caused¹⁰⁵ by her. This implies that the notion of agency involves non-voluntary consequences caused by an agent. Since the notion of moral responsibility depends upon the notion of agency, the former concept has to encompass non-voluntary actions/events. This is an implication which the Kantians have tried to avoid, for it leads us back to the problem of luck.

Williams thinks it is a good thing that an agent has the sentiment of agent-regret about her own past actions even when they are largely outside her control because it indicates that she has a healthy spectrum of moral sentiments and moral dispositions,¹⁰⁶ which is thought to be a necessary condition for an agent to be moral. Thus it is a morally good thing to have agent-regret, but it cannot be accounted nor endorsed by the superficial concept of responsible agency. Let me call this the ‘agent regret argument’. Now both Kant and Rawls are confronted by the dilemma of either to neglect the good things, such as the healthy disposition of agent-regret, but insist upon their conviction to transcend luck through their thin notion of moral agency, or to succumb to luck but have a rich concept of agency.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p.42.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.43.

¹⁰⁵ Here I am using the notion of causality casually. In some cases, because the causal relation between an event and the agent is so remote or ‘irrelevant’ no sentiments of agent-regret would involve, as the agent does not think she has any thing to do with that event, even though she somehow plays a causal role.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Bernard Williams’ ‘*Moral Luck*’ and ‘*Ethical Consistency*’.

3.4.iii Epistemic weakness argument

Finally, the last argument in ML based on the Gauguin case which I want to examine is concerned with justification. Williams tells us that Gauguin's decision is not justified, presumably because it is too risky and the stakes are too high. Only success can 'justify' his decision for him and for us. However it does not mean failure would necessarily show him to be unjustified, although it certainly does not justify him. Even if Gauguin fails, according to Williams, it is how he fails that indicates whether or not his decision is justified. If it is an extrinsic failure --- e.g. due to an injury, he is prevented from painting again --- it won't 'unjustify' him because 'he is not totally alienated from [his decision]'. For such a tragedy cannot prove that Gauguin's belief about himself having the talent to become a painter is false. Nevertheless, if, given the adequate environment, he still, contrary to his belief, cannot paint, then it is an intrinsic failure, and 'the project which generated the decision is revealed as an empty thing, incapable of grounding the agent's life.'¹⁰⁷ Thus, it is a matter of luck whether his decision can be justified because it depends on whether he has a true belief concerning his artistic talent (which is a matter of 'epistemic luck'), and on other contingency which determines whether or not he will succeed in becoming a painter (which is a matter of resultant luck and/or circumstantial luck). Since having the true belief of his artistic talent is intrinsic to the success of his project, the notion of 'epistemic weakness' which is about the uncertainty of one's beliefs is vital here.

Although Gauguin has epistemic weakness, viz. he does not possess the indubitable knowledge of his artistic talent, as Williams tells us, this does not mean that Gauguin would have to feel uncertain about his artistic talent; he may be very confident about it and yet be deluding himself about his true potential and ability. Not only won't his own judgment about his talent be a rational and justified belief, Williams does not think that consulting any professors of art would shed any light on this. In other words there is no way Gauguin can rationally justify his decision, which is based on the belief about his talent, before the result is known. Let's call this the 'epistemic weakness argument'.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck,' pp.40, 51, 50. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

It seems to me that the criteria of this kind of justification can apply to virtually all cases of decisions that are concerned with whether or not a project should be undertaken. After all, isn't having true beliefs about the possibility of succeeding in the projects in question intrinsic to their success? Nevertheless, given the limits of human knowledge, it seems to me that very few, if any, decisions of this kind can be justified under these criteria until the results are known. For example, who can be 100% certain that a marriage will work out for the rest of one's life before one dies? The impact of this argument, if valid, is quite large. It implies that none of the Kantian strategies that intend to save us from the impact of resultant luck could be applied in these kind of cases, for how could we get comfort from the value of the good will or rational deliberation while none of them is justified in the first place due to our epistemic weakness? Since they are not justified in the first place, if things go wrong, the agents would not be immune to blame nor self-reproach. In other words, the good will or rational deliberation, though can combat the impact of resultant luck, cannot guard us from the assault from our epistemic weakness.

In this section I have set out three arguments against the impartial thesis found in Williams' ML, they are, 'the rich concept argument', 'the agent-regret argument', and 'the epistemic weakness argument'. They are controversial arguments, especially the last one. I shall evaluate them and his ground project argument against the impartial thesis and the doctrine of moral supremacy in the next chapter. If his arguments are sound, it would show that the Kantian effort to transcend the impact of constitutive, circumstantial and resultant luck is in vain. Are we left with nothing but the 'Tchaikovskian attitude' to 'submit and inwardly lament' about our human condition? Let's find out.

Ch.4 An evaluation of Williams' arguments for objective 1

4.1 A summary of Williams' argument

As we have observed, luck has some unwanted effects upon us. They include the uneven distributions of natural endowments and resources among us, and the sense of helplessness when we realize that nothing is within our complete control. I have shown how Kant and others endeavour to combat those obnoxious results by advocating:

(i) the doctrine of moral supremacy, so that anyone can have an equal opportunity to achieve what is supremely valuable;

(ii) the adoption of the impartial stance, so that particular characteristics can be ignored.

The adoption of this stance reduces inequality, because people are not discriminated by their personal characteristics, and the general welfare, as opposed to concerns for one's own, is the dominant consideration in moral deliberation;

(iii) the adoption of low-risk strategies so that the effects of luck can be minimized. Rawls is a prominent proponent of the adoption of such strategies, and he thinks choosing a low-risk-rationally-justified option allows an agent to be above reproach even if the outcome does not turn out as well as expected.

As already discussed in the previous chapter, Williams rejects these three methods. Before I go into the evaluation of his arguments, let me present the summary of them in a systematic and structured way that will help us to assess his arguments. Williams' arguments can be divided into two main streams, and several different arguments can be found within each of them. Often the same argument objects against more than one method, however, there are two different objectives in these arguments.

The two streams are:

(a) the ground project thesis;

(b) the argument that resists changes to the way we are.

Before I go into the summary of these two sets of arguments, I want to point out that the advocacy of Individualism is an underlying theme of all of them, whether it

supports them or is supported by them. Although Williams has not used this term to describe this standpoint, I think it is quite apparent from his discussions that he takes the personal --- in terms of one's own commitments, projects, desires, concerns etc. --- to be the foundation of human lives, and hence of one's personal deliberations and actions. However, I do not mean that Williams is advocating egoism, for, as already mentioned, one can be committed to some altruistic projects, not just to egoistic ones. Nevertheless, the crux of his argument is that even with altruistic projects, an agent can derive meaning from them if they are **his** projects, and they are done, or partially done, by him.¹⁰⁸ In other words, his agency has to be involved, and projects, including altruistic ones, have to have personal meaning to him; and the supreme importance of meaning one finds in self-regarding projects is the foundation of Individualism. The Individualist tends to resist coercion or suppression that threatens her projects, and hence she has a tendency to resist theories that advocate the supremacy of the state or the supremacy of the morals, if they threaten what is essential to an individual.

I shall assess this underlying theme of Individualism later. Now I want to move onto the summary of the two streams of Williams' arguments bearing their relations with the theme of Individualism in mind.

4.1.i (A) The ground project thesis

I have already discussed the ground project thesis at length. Let's recapitulate the four arguments that are drawn from it, and see how some of them are related to Individualism.

(A1) There are two readings of this argument. The strong reading concludes that impartial morality is self-defeating, because, according to the Kantian tradition, it requires an agent to abstract from all the particular characteristics of all the parties involved, and that would include, presumably, the agent's adherence to impartial morality, viz. even if an

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *PCM*, especially pp.13-4. 'Admittedly *some* conflicts are ruled out by the projects sincerely being [altruistic or moral] projects; thus a man devoted to the cause of curing injustice in a certain place, cannot insist on his plan for doing that over others', if convinced that theirs will be as effective as his (something it may be hard to convince him of). For if he does insist on that, then we learn that his concern is not merely that injustice be removed, but that *he* remove it --- not necessarily a dishonourable concern, but a different one.'

agent holds impartial morality as her own ground project, it would also be abstracted when the perspective of impartiality is adopted.

The weak reading says that by adhering to the impartial morality, an agent's own ground projects would be abstracted, without those ground projects, her life would be without meaning and nothing would make any sense to her, including her adherence to impartial morality.

(A2) It is unreasonable, absurd, and is an attack on an agent's integrity to demand that she gives up her ground projects in the name of impartial morality, the 'moral cost' is simply too high. (A similar line of argument is deployed in his discussions in (Bs)).

(A3) Personal projects, desires, commitments etc. are the motive of actions. They are the 'internal reasons'. On the contrary, external reasons, viz. reasons that are not derived from one's own projects etc., are impotent to motivate one into action. Accordingly, when the demands of impartial morality do not correspond to one's own projects etc., they are external reasons and are impotent to motivate actions. Even if one's motive coincides with what impartial morality demands, Williams argues, this is not because that agent arrives at such a decision by adopting the impartial stance; rather, she has some projects etc. that prompt that decision. For example, in the story of Jim and the Indians, in Williams' 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', even if Jim chooses to kill one Indian in order to save the other 19, it is not the Utilitarian calculation that dictates him to do so.

(A4) The doctrine of moral supremacy should be abandoned. This conclusion is supported by (A2) and (A3), as well as the idea that promotes the values of non-moral projects, and the idea that impartial morality fails to transcend the undesirable effects of luck. In Williams' words, 'Scepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was These forms of scepticism will leave us with a concept of morality, but one *less important*, certainly, than ours is usually taken to be' (font style mine).¹⁰⁹

4.1.ii (B) The argument that resists changes to the way we are

According to Williams, there are certain characteristics humans all share:

(B1) Where the perspective of practical deliberation is concerned, he claims that we have to deliberate from a personal point of view, rather than from an impartial perspective: 'practical deliberation is in every case first-personal, and the first person is not derivative or naturally replaced by anyone. The action I decide on will be mine.'¹¹⁰

(B2) Our concept of agency is richer than what is offered by Kantianism and Utilitarianism. According to Williams, it involves responsibility for events which are not the products of one's will. One piece of evidence which shows that this is the way we understand the notion of agency is our tendency to hold ourselves or others responsible for things we did not will, and that might have happened by a mere accident, such as a car crash; or thing that happened as a byproduct of an action intended for something else. A classical dramatic example can be found in the story of Oedipus. Oedipus is held responsible, by himself and others, for patricide and incest though he does not have any intention to kill his own father or to marry his own mother, nor does he have the knowledge of who they are for that matter. Another piece of evidence for our concept of agency being richer is our common tendency to have agent-regret. Any theory of agency which fails to account for those features of our experience is inadequate; and Williams resists theories that prescribe us to be otherwise. For instance, as far as the sentiment of agent-regret is concerned, he thinks 'it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone.'¹¹¹ For this and other things, such as our ground projects, are our psychological constitution; they are the way we are. Thus it is unreasonable and absurd to require us to give them up --- and this can be seen as an Individualistic line of argument which resists impositions upon us, as well as a form of 'naturalism'.¹¹²

(B3) Although people engage in rationalistic thinking, according to Williams, it seems to be untrue that we employ it for practical deliberations and justifications as often as the rationalists would like to see. I shall call this 'the argument against the prevalence of rationalistic justification'. The scope of this argument is wider than those against impartial

¹⁰⁹ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck,' p.54. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

¹¹⁰ Bernard Williams, 'Ethics and the limits of philosophy,' p. 68.

¹¹¹ Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck,' p.44. In Statman (ed.): 1993.

morality, but it also relies on an individualistic presupposition, namely, this is the way we are --- spontaneous and impulsive --- and Williams thinks it is a good thing that we can at times let go of our rational thinking and go with our feelings of that moment. This line of thought can be deployed against the kind of rationalistic justification proposed by Rawls for an 'above reproach approach',¹¹³ or against the impositions of impartial morality on us, or even against our very own system of values and projects: 'If we are not agents of the universal satisfaction system, we are not primarily janitors of any system of values, even our own: very often, we just act, as a possibly confused result of the situation in which we are engaged. That, I suspect, is very often an exceedingly good thing.'¹¹⁴

4.1.iii The two objectives

Two major objectives can be found in Williams' arguments which we have been discussing, they are:

(Objective 1) Impartial morality is a flawed and unfeasible theory, this objective is largely, but not exclusively, supported by (A1), (A3), (B1) and (B2).

(Objective 2) An adherence to Individualism. Hence, we shouldn't be forced to change ourselves and our personal projects, or to mould ourselves into the ways demanded by impartial morality or other strategies¹¹⁵ or moral ideal¹¹⁶ in order to transcend the obnoxious effects of luck. In other words, it is against 'external' imposition. This objective is largely, but not exclusively, supported by (A2), (A4), (B1), (B2) and (B3).

4.2 Are the arguments for Objective 1 plausible?

4.2.i An evaluation of (A3) and (B1)

I would like to examine Williams' arguments of (A3) and (B1) first because they have important implications for his other arguments. (A3) and (B1) can be seen as making very similar claims, namely, that the real source of practical deliberation and hence action

¹¹² Like P.F. Strawson's idea about 'reactive attitude'.

¹¹³ Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Chapter 7, section 64.

¹¹⁴ Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism,' p.118.

¹¹⁵ The adoption of the low risk above reproach method.

¹¹⁶ An adherence to the doctrine of moral supremacy.

has to be from something internal or personal to us, and I take 'internal' and 'personal' to amount to more or less the same thing. The reason I break it down into two distinct arguments is that (A3) is concerned with action and is supported by the ground project thesis. (B1) is concerned with practical deliberation and it need not presuppose the ground project thesis; rather it merely claims that the adoption of the personal perspective for practical deliberation is the way we do it. However, I take both (A3) and (B1) to amount to more or less the same thing by asserting that the decision which results from practical deliberation directly determines one's action that is regarded as the agent's own free action.

As far as (A3) is concerned, the question about whether desires or beliefs (or the equivalent of desires and beliefs) determine practical deliberations, and subsequently actions, has been disputed for many years. Some, such as Hume and Williams, take desires (or their equivalent, such as personal projects) to be one's motivation; whereas others, such as Kant, take free actions to be dictated by pure reasons, as opposed to appetite. It would be a thesis on its own to discuss whether actions are motivated by desires or reasons or both. Here I will merely express a few thoughts which are related to our present enquiry.

Williams' argument that only internal reasons can motivate actions appears to be quite plausible. Virtually all of us have, sometime or another, encountered some situation in which we are given reasons to take or refrain from a certain course of action, but we do not care for those reasons or they do not make any sense to us at all. Unless there are other reasons, such as the desire to please the person who tells us what to do, we won't be motivated into actions by those reasons alone. Possibilities of this kind suggest that the story of motivation can be very complicated even if we do not touch on those issues such as the needs to fulfill some subconscious or suppressed desires, etc. And the story can be complicated even further when we consider the possibility of turning an external reason into an internal reason or a reason that has personal significance to an individual through some kind of 'internalization'. For instance, one may change one's mind about a certain claim which she did not care for initially (e.g. the claim that human beings should be vegetarians) when she gains more information about it (e.g. the information about eating meat is bad for human health, and hence her own health, and it is cruel to animals etc.). All

these indicate that the theory of action is complex, nevertheless this does not mean that we cannot, for the sake of argument, grant (A3) in this discussion.

As far as (B1) is concerned, we need a bit of clarification on what Williams means when he insists that practical deliberation has to be first personal and that it cannot be replaced by anyone. Either he is making a very strong claim that no one else except the agent in question has the authority to deliberate and decide what she should do, or he is making the weaker claim that the content of one's practical deliberation has to have personal significance to the agent herself. It seems to me that Williams would endorse only the latter claim, as the former is too 'subjectivistic', whereas the weaker claim is in accordance with his theory concerning internal reasons. For, one's own personal projects, desires, and beliefs, which belong to the category of internal reasons, are the 'potent' objects for practical deliberation. Projects, desires, and beliefs of someone else, which the agent does not share, are impotent to determine decisions or to motivate actions.

If we do grant both (A3) and (B1), the next question we have to ask is what their implications are for impartial morality. Williams claims that what impartial morality demands of us are external reasons, and that the adoption of the impartial perspective amounts to forcing an agent to consider projects, desires, and beliefs, which she does not endorse at all, as the 'potent' objects for her practical deliberation. If these objections are sound, Williams is right to argue that it is not psychologically feasible for us to do what impartial morality requires at all times, except when what it requires us to do happens to coincide with our own personal projects, desires, and beliefs. But even in those cases, according to Williams, we are not motivated to perform those required actions through impartial deliberation, but rather by the significance we attach to our own projects etc. In other words, we have no reason to hold onto impartial morality, for what use is there to hold onto such a theory if it could never, in principle, be put into practice? Either the impartialists have to refute Williams' theory of action and theory of practical deliberation (which, I take, is the last resort if nothing else works) or they have to show that the impartialist demands can be and are overriding internal reasons, or, at least, they can and ought to be 'internalized' into internal reasons; and that the personal perspective for moral deliberation can be impartial, viz. it is feasible for the projects, desires, and beliefs that an

agent may not endorse to be the potent objects of deliberations and motivations for actions when this is what impartial morality calls for. At first sight, this rendering of the internalization of the impartial perspective sounds like a self-contradiction, thus we have to ask whether or not it is possible for the demands of impartial morality to be internal reasons. This leads us to Williams' argument in (A1).

4.2.ii An evaluation of (A1)

One may wonder whether or not impartial morality can be held as one's ground project such that every demand derived from it would be an internal reason for the agent. The problem with that thought is that even if an agent is deeply committed to impartial morality, according to the strong reading of (A1), it is not possible for those demands to be internal reasons because they are self-defeating demands. For all the characteristics of the parties involved would be abstracted, hence all ground projects, including one's commitment to impartial morality, would be abstracted whenever one attempts to adopt the impartial stance.

Indeed if the only method to adopt the impartial perspective is through such stringent abstraction, perhaps no one would ever be able to make any moral deliberation when adopting this perspective. For how can any decision be made if an agent deliberates in a void, that is, when all characteristics, including the projects, desires etc. of the parties, are abstracted? However, this is a condition which even the Kantians may find too strong. After all, some moral projects have to be there for deliberation, and according to Rawls, the veil of ignorance only asks us to imagine that we **do not know** who we are, what economic class we are in, what personal projects we have etc. in order to deliberate without partiality towards ourselves or biased views about the issues. In other words, any feasible kind of impartial morality, such as Rawls', when held by an agent as her ground project, would help eliminate partiality and favouritism, and help promote justice and other types of moral commitments (provided they can be universally applied) as one's projects. The use of the veil of ignorance does not require an agent to abstract her moral projects, her concern for justice, pleasure, or social goods.

Even though it is possible for an agent to hold impartial morality as her own ground project, i.e. believing that impartial morality provides internal reasons for her

actions, this does not mean the demands of impartial morality will always be in accord with all her own projects, desires, and beliefs, and hence the practice of impartial morality is still unfeasible. There are two ways to understand this argument: (i) It suggests that because, at times, none of an agent's own projects, desires, and beliefs are in accord with the demands of impartial morality, her own commitment to impartial morality, at least in those instances, would be an empty shell, a mere fantasy that cannot be attained, for such a commitment alone cannot motivate a certain actions. That is to say, we are back to the problem of psychological unfeasibility. (ii) It grants the possibility of actions being motivated solely by one's commitment for impartial morality even though those actions are not in accord with any other project, desire or belief of one's own.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, it still does not eliminate conflicts of values between one's deep commitment to impartial morality and other deep commitments to something else that happens to be contrary to what impartial morality demands.

(i) is a much stronger claim than (ii), but neither of them is a unique problem for impartial morality. We can imagine situations in which similar problems would confront other deep commitments, e.g. for a certain Ideal, or Deity, or even a person. Nevertheless, what makes the commitment to impartiality different from other commitments, and this is what Williams finds most objectionable, is that, according to the doctrine of moral supremacy, impartial morality must win. And hence one's own integrity and meaning of life are at stake. Even if we take (ii), the weaker claim, as the interpretation for the argument against the feasibility of impartial morality, there are still two problems with impartial morality when it is coupled with the doctrine of moral supremacy. Firstly, it may still be argued that, in cases of conflict, there is a lot an agent has to give up if she adheres to both the doctrine of moral supremacy and to impartial morality. To attempt to resolve those conflicts by giving up our non-moral projects, and hence changing ourselves, is too difficult and quite often at a high '**personal cost**', as some people would suffer greatly because of those changes. This may explain why the project of impartial morality appears

¹¹⁷ It is a bit similar to a case in which a suitor tries to impress his beloved so hard that he would do anything, including things he personally does not care for at all, and those actions (which he would normally regard as unbearable) are motivated by nothing but his desire to win the heart of his beloved.

external and psychologically unfeasible to many people, and their unwillingness and lack of motivation to adopt this perspective for moral deliberation. This is an individualistic argument derived from (A2) which I shall examine closely later when I discuss objective 2 of Williams' argument. Secondly, even if an agent is willing and manages to hold impartial morality as her 'dominant' ground project --- presumably by abolishing many other ground projects and desires etc. because they are likely to conflict with impartial morality and the latter must win --- that project alone is not enough to sustain her sense of meaning, and her adherence to impartial morality would make no sense either. This is the weak reading of (A1).

The second challenge prompts us to ask whether it is possible to have merely one ground project in a person's life, or do we have to have a variety of projects? I guess there is no *a priori* answer to this question, but it seems quite possible that a person can have merely one ground project, as can be seen in cases of fanatics. Surely from a moral fanatic's point of view, if we try to imagine ourselves to be one, life would still make sense, although everything she encounters would be judged through the lens of impartial morality; in the same way some religious fanatics interpret everything they see with religious meaning. Such an individual may be hard for other non-fanatics to understand, and, from a non-fanatic perspective, the fanatic is leading a crazy and meaningless life, but this need not be how the fanatic feels about her own life. If she does find it so senseless, she might quit it after a while; meanwhile, there is nothing to prevent her from living a meaningful though fanatically moral life. Thus, the weak reading of (A1) --- if it intends to show that it is psychologically impossible for anyone to hold impartial morality as her sole ground project in the first place --- is false.

Nevertheless, even though there are people who, perhaps 'by a leap of self-transcendence',¹¹⁸ manage to hold impartial morality as their sole ground project, it does not mean it is appealing to the rest of us who are not yet so converted. The fanatic individual is often perceived and portrayed as dangerous (as she looks like she would do anything for her project), psychologically unbalanced, and leading an impoverished life.

¹¹⁸ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p.206ff.

Indeed, philosophers, such as Susan Wolf and John Cottingham, have contrasted such 'moral saints' with the 'ordinary people', and concluded that sainthood is not a lifestyle for most of us. Even though it is more moral and virtuous, it does not allow us to have a happy life, and it would be too difficult and 'costly' to give up the latter, which is more colourful, 'normal', and full of variety. In such a world people can pursue non-moral projects, such as painting, music, dinners at restaurants, freely and without guilt.¹¹⁹

There is a tendency in the writings of Williams and others to portray the (hyper) moral life as boring and difficult, and the (hyper) moral institution appears to be oppressive and coercive. What are the consequences of such a portrayal? According to Catherine Wilson,¹²⁰ the choice of presentation confirms for those who are in privileged positions the entitlement to what they have, and hence to communicate indirectly that there is no reason to give it up. I shall discuss this line of argument more fully when we discuss Individualism.

The impartialists need not worry about the consequences of that portrayal yet, but it is appropriate to question the authenticity of that portrayal. Firstly, does an individual who adheres to impartial morality have no other ground projects but that of impartial morality, in other words, has she got to be a 'moral fanatic'? The impartialists do not have to accept such a caricature. There is nothing in impartial morality, whether in the Kantian or Utilitarian form, which says that no other non-moral projects are allowed. Such projects are acceptable, provided that they do not conflict with morality, for, according to the doctrine of moral supremacy, morality must win. Morality is analogous to the law of a state, everyone is allowed to engage in whatever kind of activities they so choose provided that they do not break the law. In other words, people can do what is permissible or to refrain from what is forbidden (e.g. murder or cannibalism)¹²¹ but are not required to do what is supererogatory. This distinction can also help reply to Williams' objection against the doctrine of moral supremacy. Instead of asking an agent to put all kinds of moral

¹¹⁹ Cf. Susan Wolf's '*Moral Saints*.'

¹²⁰ Catherine Wilson, *Immanence and imposition*.

¹²¹ Of course there are a lot of disputes on what are forbidden and what are permissible even among the impartialists, and consensus on what are and what aren't permissible may not be reached. However, I think

considerations above all of her own non-moral projects, only in the case when a project is forbidden would moral considerations override the non-moral projects. Even though Williams is anti-theory, I think he may still want to retain notions such as 'forbid' in the thick concepts of ethics. Having spelled out the limits of the doctrine of moral supremacy, it shouldn't sound as frightening as Williams portrays it. It does not attack one's integrity or threaten to cause one's life to lose meaning. Of course, for some who are unfortunate enough to hold forbidden projects as their ground projects and deep commitments, (e.g. Hitler's commitment to exterminate all Jews), when their projects are constrained, whether by external forces or by listening to the demand of morality, their integrity¹²² may be attacked and their lives may lose meaning temporarily or permanently. But what is sad is not their loss, but that they were dedicated to those forbidden projects in the first place, and perhaps what a society can do is to persuade them to change their projects into something permissible. More on this about the reasonableness of giving up one's ground projects when we discuss (A2) of objective 2.

Even though, in order to save the doctrine of moral supremacy, we have made the distinction between 'permissibility' and 'supererogatory', this distinction, Williams may argue, will be blurred when the notion of 'negative responsibility' is deployed. For the impartialists would be required to do much more than what is merely permissible, for example, the time and money we spend eating in a restaurant should be used to help those who are starving etc. Unless, perhaps, a limit is set somewhere on when to apply deliberation in the moral and impartial way, the impartialists may still be portrayed by that caricature of moral fanatics. But where should the limit be set, if there should be any limit at all, and how much should an agent change and give up if she is in the privileged position? There is no quick and easy answer to it, but the point here is that an impartialist need not be portrayed as someone who is leading a meaningless or boring or impoverished life. Indeed, I think the impartialists should resist such a caricature, as it is very harmful to

the deployment of the distinction between 'permissible/forbidden' and 'supererogatory' is useful in dealing with the objection against the doctrine of moral supremacy.

¹²² Of course it is not the usual sense of integrity being used here, but Williams' which that when is constrained from sticking to her values.

moral education if people cannot see any thing palatable and reasonable in what a moral life would imply.

4.2.iii An evaluation of (B2)

The last argument I am going to examine in this chapter is (B2). I want to discuss the 'naturalistic' aspect of it here, and leave the 'individualist' aspect until the next section. The line of attack here is quite similar to that deployed in (A3) and (B1). By exposing the inadequacy of the Kantian conception of agency to account for what we are actually like, Williams tries to discredit Kantian moral theory as a whole. For the notions of agency, and hence moral responsibility, are an integral part of any moral theory. After all, morality is about flesh and blood human beings, not about some moral hero in some fairy tale. By showing that the Kantian fails, as in the case of (A3) and (B1), to get the correct picture of what we humans are really like (e.g. how we actually deliberate, form a conception of agency, and are motivated into actions), Williams shows that it is wrong to assume that we are capable of a certain thing, while in fact we are not, and hence to require us to do what we are not capable of doing. Since 'ought' implies 'can', and, conversely, if we are incapable of doing something, we are not obliged to do it. Thus impartial morality should not, for the sake of consistency for their whole enterprise, demand us to do what we cannot do, including to conceptualize in ways that are alien to us.

Assuming that there is a direct correlation between agency and responsibility, the argument in (B2) shows that the way we actually hold others and ourselves responsible differs from what the Kantian thinks it should be. This indicates that the Kantian concept of agency is too distorted to provide any realistic picture of how we actually and naturally understand moral responsibility. Unlike the Kantian conception, our notion of moral responsibility not only depends on one's intention, but also encompasses consequences that are not the product of one's will. On an interpersonal level, people are often held responsible for damage that was unintentionally done by them. For example, we ask the person who inadvertently causes a certain accident for compensation (or at least for part of the cost) for the damage. It might be argued that such common practices of compensation are not really what moral responsibility is about, but rather that people are bound by the laws or customs to compensate in such a situation because they have played a causal role in

contributing to the damage. To assure us that our actual notion of responsibility is wider than Kantian moral responsibility, Williams draws our attention to our sentiment of agent-regret which indicates the special relationship between an agent and her actions, whether voluntary or non-voluntary. Our concept of agency, reflected by the way we have the sentiments of agent-regret, involves non-voluntary actions as well as voluntary ones. (Cf. 3.4.ii)

As already mentioned, there are 'naturalistic' and 'individualistic' aspects of (B2). The individualistic aspect involves the claim that we would lose something in giving up the way we conceptualize agency and moral responsibility, and that agent-regret is a virtue that should be preserved. I shall discuss this kind of argument in the next chapter. What is at stake here is the naturalistic aspect which involves the claim that it is not psychologically feasible to give up our common notions of agency and moral responsibility, and that we cannot be persuaded by theory alone to stop having sentiments of agent-regret --- this is similar to Strawson's argument that we cannot be persuaded by the theory of determinism to give up our 'reactive attitude'.¹²³

Undoubtedly those judgements which Williams thinks the Kantian theory fails to validate are shared by many, if not all, people. I don't think Williams intends to claim that they are necessary truth about humans, though he does think the first personal perspective is necessary for practical deliberation. I have already refuted that argument. Of course this does not mean it is easy to detach from one's first personal perspective and to replace it by the impartial perspective. What I am going to argue, and a similar argument applies to the issues about agent-regret, the rich concept of agency, and the rich concept of moral responsibility, is that one can be urged and persuaded to commit to impartial morality, and hence to adopt that perspective because it is the means to attain justice and other goods that impartial morality envisions.

As far as the sentiment of agent-regret is concerned, it is true that it is quite a common and, indeed, respectable sentiment which many people are disposed to have. However, it cannot encompass a necessary truth about regret because it is not hard to find

¹²³ Cf. P.F. Strawson's '*Freedom and Resentment*'.

some people who have no disposition of any sentiment of agent-regret whatsoever. Indeed, some people feel no guilt about damaging consequences caused by their non-voluntary (or even voluntary) actions. Of course although the Kantians claim that an agent does not have a reason to reproach herself for doing things that lead to terrible consequences if she non-voluntarily does them or has already chosen the safest course of action with the best intention, they do not mean that such a sentiment (of agent-regret) should be forbidden. They are only saying that it is not a very rational response. A more sympathetic way to look at this is to take the Kantians to be persuading the agents who suffer from agent-regret to be released from this 'self-punishing' state, by helping them to understand that they are not to be blamed for, as it is not really their fault. Nevertheless, Williams has certainly made a good point about the exhibition of agent-regret as a virtue, for someone who lacks this sentiment seems to have a warped moral psychology; and an improved Kantian theory should accommodate this kind of consideration.

Some Kantians may disagree with the way I interpret the Kantian theory as persuading and urging as opposed to prescribing, and I am aware that this approach does not sound very Kantian, especially when Kant puts so much emphasis on the idea of some imperatives being categorical. However, from the perspective of moral education, I find such an interpretation quite justified. For, unlike the imposition of laws upon the citizens who may not choose to be under that regime, a moral position is, presumably, taken up voluntarily; and during the process of internalizing the theory, I think it is quite legitimate for the agents to feel that they are urged, by **good and justified reasons**, as opposed to propaganda etc., to think in a certain way, rather than to feel that a certain imperatives are imposed upon them like a totalitarian regime. I believe part of Williams' complaints about the 'moral institution' came from the resistance of being 'forced' to perform or not to perform a certain action. More on this attitude in the next chapter.

Let's now turn our attention to the claim that it is psychologically unfeasible to give up our rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility. This is connected to the discussion of agent-regret, as the latter is not merely about whether an agent has a certain sentiment, but rather about whether an agent is responsible for things that are a consequence of her action but not her intention. Here, again, it is not psychologically impossible for people to

take that superficial concept of agency, and regard a certain agent not responsible for any result she has not intended. Indeed, I have seen many people think in that way. When they are confronted by some ill consequences that results from some unintended actions of others (or from themselves, for that matter), they may initially feel outraged and take those persons responsible for the damage. However, after they think through the whole thing and become convinced that those persons genuinely do not have the intention to do the damage, they no longer view those persons as culprits, but either dissolve their anger, or blame the outcome on God, or some inanimate things, such as luck, etc. In other words, contrary to Strawson's famous argument, people can be persuaded to view things such as responsibility differently by their acceptance of a certain metaphysical theory of free will, or determinism, or the Kantian notion of moral responsibility. That is to say, the belief in a certain metaphysical theory can have an effect upon how we feel and react to a certain situations.

It is perhaps a matter of disposition, but some people would certainly become more forgiving and less vengeful, when others unintentionally do harm to them, if they were convinced by the theory of determinism or the Kantian theory of responsibility. Nevertheless, I agree that it might be rather difficult to put this thought entirely into practice. For the tenacious mind, perhaps it really is psychologically unfeasible to abandon the sentiment of agent-regret for non-voluntary or carefully planned actions, or for her to abandon the rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility. Another problem in putting this view into practice, say, in our legal system, is that we can never be certain whether or not someone has no ill intention to bring about damage, unless the event happens in a very accidental fashion.

If my interpretation of the Kantian theory as persuading and urging people to have or not have a certain sentiments by understanding a situation through its 'superficial' notion of agency is granted, then we can see why the Kantian theory is immune to Williams' naturalistic objection in (B2). For, it is not intended, contrary to the said objection, to describe what all humans tend to be like, but rather to persuade their readers to change their old concepts of the world (if they were different from the Kantian ones), and whereby to change their ways of reacting and feeling about a certain situations.

Interpreted this way, Williams' complaint does sound a bit like 'personal indulgence', namely, a resistance to personal change. On the other hand, although Williams cannot prove that it is a psychological necessity that all humans have sentiments of agent-regret for non-voluntary or well planned actions, nor that we all hold the rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility, his objection still represents what some people believe to be their own psychological limitations even though we may never be sure whether or not it really is impossible for them to make those changes. Such a belief about one's own limitations, according to William James,¹²⁴ is enough to 'incapacitate' her to make any changes. Having mentioned so much about 'persuasion by good and justified reasons', it is time to turn our attention to what, if there is any, good and justified reasons are available for us to take up the Kantian package, i.e. the adoption of impartial morality, its concepts of agency and moral responsibility, and rationalistic justification. In other words, let's discuss whether it is difficult and worth it for us to change and adopt the Kantian package, or whether we should stay the way we 'naturally' are --- an Individualistic argument that is endorsed by Williams.

¹²⁴ William James, *The Will to believe*.

Ch.5 An evaluation of Williams' arguments for objective 2

5.1 The argument from heavy costs and the argument from worth

Although, as I have shown in 4.2, it is not, in general, psychologically impossible to adopt impartial morality, as well as to change the way we are and the concepts we hold for the sake of adhering to impartial morality, there has arisen, in recent years, a popular line of argument which argues that such moral endeavour is too difficult. For, any desire, aim, or project of an agent that is in conflict with impartial morality would have to go. That implies the possibility of having numerous changes (ranging from minor adjustments to drastic transformations) imposed upon an agent, and much effort and loss, more than we can or should pay. Let's call this 'the argument from heavy costs'. It is implicitly endorsed by some philosophers, including Williams, John Cottingham, and Susan Wolf. It is based upon the psychological premise which states that, in the formulation of Catherine Wilson, 'the burdensomeness of carrying out an obligation tends to reduce the perceived strength of the obligation'.¹²⁵ Now, Williams et al, who can be described as 'immanence theorists',¹²⁶ use this premise to claim that it is too burdensome and too costly for anyone to adopt impartial morality, and to urge that it is pointless.

Is the adoption of the whole package of impartial morality¹²⁷ too burdensome, according to **the argument of heavy costs**? Or would the adoption of it make us worse off than if we stay the way we have been, according to **the argument from worth**? Usually the combination of the two considerations are taken into account. As far as the latter

¹²⁵ Catherine Wilson, Op. cit.

¹²⁶ The classification of immanence theorist, as opposed to imposition one, in moral and political philosophy can be found in Wilson's 'Immanence and imposition'.

¹²⁷ By the 'package of impartial morality' I not only refer to the different methods (such as the Utilitarian calculations, or the veil of ignorance) to adopt the impartial perspective, and the moral obligations it generates, but also other related principles, such as the doctrine of moral supremacy, and the principle of negative responsibility.

consideration is concerned, some immanence theorists may complain that life would be more colourful and joyful if we were not restrained from engaging in harmless but non-moral activities, such as playing the oboe, and eating out occasionally, for the sake of becoming a moral saint. In other words, they argue that there should be a limit to how much morality can interfere with one's life; once that limit is exceeded, life would become dull, unenjoyable, and unhappy. That is the difference between a (morally) good life and a happy (or *eudaimon*) life. To a large extent they do overlap with each other, as most of us are brought up in ways that the social moral norms in our societies are internalized. However, when we allow the doctrine of moral supremacy, and other moral principles, such as the principle of equality, and the principle of negative responsibility, to determine our decisions, we would find that, according to Wolf and Cottingham, although our world may become 'morally better' because everyone is led to the path of 'moral sainthood', the quality of our lives would be worse. Hence we would be less happy (or *eudaimon*), and many simple but harmless pleasures in life would have to be forgone. E.g. in order to honour the principle of equality, one might have to start refraining from having expensive dinners (e.g. at restaurants), and spend that money to feed those who are without food instead. Thus as far as the argument from worth is concerned, we have to find out whether being moral is more important than being happy; hence we have to ask: is the doctrine of moral supremacy plausible?

Williams' argument against the doctrine of moral supremacy and other moral principles is much harsher. He would also agree with those theorists that there should be a limit to moral interference if a happy life is to be maintained, but his main line of argument is not based on that thought. It is not merely a matter of whether a happy life can be maintained, but a matter of whether one would lose one's integrity, meaning of life, and other things by becoming too moral. Certain non-moral pursuits are not merely necessary for happiness, but are also a basic necessity for a person's sense of identity, and hence her survival as a functioning person. Losing these things cannot be compensated by any prospect of a morally ideal world. Moreover, since those personal projects are so necessary to oneself, the difficulties and burdensomeness of carrying out the obligations imposed by the package of impartial morality, which demands an abnegation of those projects, would

be so big. Thus, according to the argument from heavy costs, the strength of those obligations would be weakened. However, if the strength of those obligations are weakened, that means impartial morality would no longer hold the supreme status, and the doctrine of moral supremacy must be false. Thus, at most, impartial morality is merely one value among many other values in life. The framework of this heavy costs argument seems valid to me. Nevertheless, we have to find out whether the obligations implied by impartial morality are really *that* burdensome before we can determine whether this argument is cogent. Thus, let me, firstly, draw a list of items which Williams thinks we have to give up if we adhere to impartial morality. I shall, then, discuss whether or not there is any real loss due to impartial morality. If so, I shall discuss whether such a loss is too high a cost to bear, this is where the argument from worth becomes important.

5.1.i A list of items one is alleged to lose due to one's adherence to impartial morality

The two foremost important things that are at stake are one's integrity and one's ground projects, and hence the meaning of one's life, cf. (A2). Other losses induced by too much morality can be found in the discussions of (B1), (B2), and (B3). We lose: the satisfaction of making practical deliberations based upon our personal perspective as opposed to the perspectives of others; our rich concept of agency, and hence the concept of moral responsibility, that is held by many of us; our disposition of the sentiment of agent-regret; our tendency of being spontaneous, as opposed to having rationalistic deliberations and calculations all the time.

5.1.ii The three possibilities

In 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' Williams tells us two stories, one about George and the other one about Jim. George is a scientist who feels apprehensive about doing research for biological warfare, even though he is aware that by taking that job he could prevent another enthusiastic scientist, who would advance the progress of that research a lot further, from that the job. Besides, his wife would prefer him to take the job in order to lighten the burden of taking care of the children. In Jim's story, he is confronted with the dilemma of either pulling the trigger to kill one Indian, which in turn would save the other

19 Indian prisoners, or refusing to do so, in which case the officer would kill the 20 of them! It seems obvious from a Utilitarian perspective, which requires one to make impartial calculations, that George should take the job in order to slow down the biological warfare research, and Jim should pull the trigger in order to save 19 Indians.

Williams deploys the concept of integrity to illustrate that there is something wrong in taking the Utilitarian impartial stance, for Utilitarianism has ignored the important fact about agency --- it is 'I' who pulls the trigger, 'I' who actually engage in the warfare research, even though at the end of the day these choices contribute to the overall goods of the world, 'I' have to compromise my own integrity --- a consideration which the Utilitarian does not take on board.

I would like to explore Williams' argument by incorporating the discussion we have on (A3) in 4.2 about actions motivated by internal reasons, and hence the assumption we have granted of the fact that an agent has to have impartial morality as her project¹²⁸ in order for it to be an internal reason to motivate any action.

In 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' Williams does not mention whether the agents in the stories hold impartial morality (or the Utilitarian principles¹²⁹ in those particular stories) as their project (or commitment). The way he presents the stories seem to suggest that the heroes in those stories have their own feelings, and even gut impulses, about what they should do in those situations, and the Utilitarian calculation is simply not the kind of consideration they are single-mindedly committed to. Nevertheless, we cannot tell, from the text, what exactly is the relation between the agents and the project of impartial morality. Thus I will examine three main type of possibilities of how George and Jim would relate to impartial morality.

Possibility 1: Impartial morality is not their project (let alone a ground one) or commitment; in fact neither George nor Jim has the slightest desire for it, viz. the demands of impartial morality offers purely external reasons.

¹²⁸ Presumably, the stronger the project, the more weight it has in determining choices of actions.

¹²⁹ Although there are many differences between Utilitarianism and Kantianism, I take that both of them are difference forms of impartial morality.

Possibility 2: Impartial morality is their ground project, and hence they have the strong commitment to comply with the obligations resulted from the Utilitarian calculation.

Possibility 3: Impartial morality is a project or commitment of George and Jim, but they are not committed to it enough for it to play a grounding role in their life.

There are, of course, different variations within each of these possibilities. I think it is worth exploring these possibilities and their variations in order to find out whether or not there is any real loss to the agents in any of these circumstances. I shall discuss whether or not the loss is due to the package of impartial morality. If the loss is due to it, and if its cost is too high, then Williams' complaints against the package would be valid.

5.2 An evaluation of (A2) and the doctrine of moral supremacy

5.2.i Eliminating possibility 1

As far as the first possibility is concerned, although the demands of impartial morality are external reasons to the agents, this does not imply that no thought about impartial obligations ever occurs to them. It may or may not have occurred to them what a Utilitarian would choose were she in their situations, but even if such a consideration has occurred to them, it has no, or very little, weight in their practical deliberations, and that is what being an external reason means. Now, if impartial morality is something external for both George and Jim, then, according to the theory of motivation in (A3), impartial considerations won't have any weight in their practical deliberations, in other words, they won't form the motives for their actions. Hence, if there is no external coercion etc., it is most likely that the agents in question would not choose what impartial morality asks them to do, but simply choose what they happen to be inclined to do. In such a case, the integrity of those agents cannot have been attacked by the demands of impartial morality, as those demands have no weight in their deliberations. Thus, we can ignore this particular possibility insofar as there is no coercion or other compelling reasons which force an agent to choose what impartial demands, something which she does not care for at all.

What about the cases where the agents are oppressed by coercion or other compelling reasons? For instance, Williams might think that the agents are oppressed by moral philosophers who are impartialists in the form of 'symbolic oppression'! For this

kind of symbolic oppression to bite, it seems to me that the agents must, to a certain extent, internalize impartial morality; otherwise, no matter how strong the symbolic oppression is, it won't mean a thing to the agents. This kind of situation will be discussed in possibility 2 and possibility 3.

Let's consider other types of cases in possibility 1. There are many different reasons why one would fulfill a moral obligation purely for the sake of something else even though impartial morality is not one's project. For example, one may do it for the sake of pleasing others --- e.g. George might want to please his wife, whom he loves deeply, by taking on the job for the biological warfare research --- (or at least avoiding blame and repudiation from others), or for the sake of not violating the law (which happens to coincide with that moral obligation), and hence to avoid getting oneself into any punishment, or even for the sake of preserving one's life when one is being threatened by terrorists (who claim themselves to be in a moral mission) --- e.g. it may be the case that Jim is worried that if he does not comply to the 'invitation' to kill one Indian, those officers may kill him as well as all the Indians there.

However, even a non-Kantian may say that although those are reasons that can motivate moral actions, they do not spring from moral motives; for in those situations an agent is coerced (by terrorists) or compelled (by fear or love for someone) to act morally. Once the threat or the law etc. are gone, the (non-moral) motivation to act morally would be gone too. From this we can also add that an agent cannot be coerced or compelled to have a pure moral motive, rather, one has to truly believe in and be convinced by the rightness of a moral obligation in question in order to form a moral motive, in other words, the moral motive is something which has to spring from within.

Now back to our original concern: is the integrity of either George or Jim being attacked in those type of cases in which impartial morality is not their project, but nevertheless they act in accordance to the demands of impartial morality due to coercion etc., and they have a strong preference to do something else? As I have just mentioned, in such a case the agents in question are compelled or coerced to do the so-called moral thing (in the name of impartial morality) --- e.g. kill one Indian, take the job to slow down warfare research --- but subjectively, they do not really believe that those are the moral

things to do.¹³⁰ That is why the integrity of those agents does seem to be under attack because they are being coerced or compelled to comply with those obligations while they believe they should be doing something else. Nevertheless, their integrity is not attacked by the demands of impartial morality per se, for I have just argued that it is not the moral motives which drive them to do the ‘moral thing’. Rather, it is attacked by something else, such as the love for one’s wife or the threat from terrorists etc. In other words, the real ‘culprit’ of the attack is not impartial morality. Thus Williams cannot base his complaint against impartial morality upon these kinds of situations. To summarize our findings of the first possibility, the case in which impartial morality per se is not held as a project etc., either one’s integrity is not attacked because one is not acting in accordance with the demands of impartial morality, or it is attacked, but in the latter case it is not attacked by the demands of impartial morality. Therefore, as far as Williams’ integrity argument is concerned, we can ignore this particular possibility.

5.2.ii Possibilities 2 and 3

The second possible interpretation of Williams’ stories is that both George and Jim hold impartial morality as their ground project. Let’s consider the several variations of this possibility. It may be the case that it is their sole or dominant ground project, viz. they are moral fanatics described in 4.2. In such a case the problem about attack of integrity wouldn’t arise at all, for those fanatics would not hold other projects or desires that are in conflict with the impartial morality, because such projects or desires would have been abandoned by them whenever a conflict is perceived. Hence there is no other ground project or commitment of a moral fanatic that would be in conflict with the demands of impartial morality, and this implies that when doing the moral things, no project or commitment of hers would be frustrated. There will be no attack on her integrity if she does what impartial morality asks her to do, and hence we do not have to worry about the moral fanatics for the integrity discussion.

¹³⁰ Notice, however, that does not imply that they think what their gut feelings or strong preferences tell them to do are right and moral.

Apart from the fanatic type of case, another situation which I would like to consider arises where impartial morality is merely one ground project among others. Again, we can ignore the type of situations in which no other ground projects or strong desires etc. are in conflict with impartial morality, for, in those situations, there is nothing within a person that goes against her doing the 'moral thing'. The type of situation that is germane to the integrity argument is the type in which impartial morality is held as one of one's ground projects among other ground project(s) or strong desire(s) which go against the demands of impartial morality. And doing the moral thing amounts to an experience of one's integrity being attacked, for the other ground project(s) are being frustrated by the demands of impartial morality. Apart from integrity, a similar reasoning can be used for finding out the variation of the second possibility that is relevant to the argument of meaning of life. We get a similar finding, that is, one's meaning of life is at stake in the type of situations in which impartial morality is held as one ground project among others, and when there is a conflict between it and other ground project(s). For instance, a loving parent may face the dilemma of sending her child to a private school, which will cost a fortune but will give the child a much better academic background, while according to the ruling of impartial morality she should send her child to a State school and spend the amount of money for private tuition to those who are in need, e.g. to the children in some third world countries who don't even have access to any education. Williams will see the demand of impartial morality as an attack on the parent's integrity insofar as the parent takes it as her obligation to provide the best available education to her child. And even if the parent does not perceive this as her obligation, it is still a threat to the meaning of her life, for the well being of her child matters as much, or even more, than her own well being.

Both the integrity and meaning of the life of an agent will be at stake in this kind of conflict situation. Is it worth it, according to the argument from worth, to adhere to impartial morality if those are what one is going to lose? The stakes are certainly very high here, and if we merely focus upon the burdensomeness of fulfilling those moral obligations, it would seem natural that we would agree with Williams that the sacrifice involved in doing it is too high, and hence it is absurd and unreasonable to ask anyone to do what impartial morality requires. However, according to this particular type of situation

of the second possibility, i.e. in a conflict situation in which both the project of impartial morality and the other project which conflicts with it play the ground role in the agent's life, it seems to me his complaints about the loss can work either way. That is to say, if an agent, say, George, chooses to refuse to do what impartial morality demands, viz. he rejects the job offered to him for the biological warfare research, then his integrity and meaning of life would be at risk as well, for his deep commitment for impartial morality cannot be fulfilled. Therefore, the type of situation with which Williams is concerned does not seem to be a unique problem of impartial morality, rather it belongs to the more general problem of conflict of values, in which an agent is confronted by a tragic dilemma. That is to say, in whichever way she chooses, she would end up losing something very dear to her.

Now, saying it is a tragic dilemma does not imply that one should choose the moral thing or choose the non-moral thing. Nor does it mean that the argument from heavy costs does not apply here. Nevertheless, the weight of the argument from heavy costs in practical deliberations would be affected in this kind of case.

Let's take a detour and examine the application of the argument from heavy costs in cases of possibility 3 in order to get a thorough understanding of that argument. As far as the third possibility is concerned, it may be argued, and I believe Williams would endorse such an argument, if one does not have such a strong commitment for impartial morality, and hence if giving up a moral obligation does not yield such a great loss, and if one's ground project would be threatened by the fulfillment of that obligation, then the claim that one has less obligation to respect the moral obligation seems quite plausible.¹³¹ For, if x is totally impossible I need not do x, and if x is nearly impossible for me, my obligation is weaker than if it is easy for me. If this line of argument is sound, it would lead us to the claim that it is reasonable to give up a moral obligation for the sake of preventing a huge loss in one's life due to giving up one's ground project. In other words, in such a conflict, one is licensed to choose one's ground project instead of a relatively feeble belief or weak commitment in impartial morality. Even if we grant the claim that giving up the latter would also yield some loss to the agent, because of the big differences in the strength of

¹³¹ I shall comment on this line of argument shortly.

commitments she has for them, and because one's loss is, roughly speaking, directly proportional to the strength of one's commitments, the loss due to giving up a moral obligation would be relatively much smaller. The big contrast of the amount of loss is the major reason why the argument from heavy costs in this type of cases is so appealing, and hence it forms the basis for the choice to give up the moral obligation.

In the case of a tragic dilemma, since one's commitment to two moral obligations is equally strong, and hence the giving up of one moral obligation is equally costly and would also be an attack to one's integrity, there is not much point to deploy the argument from heavy costs, for the degree of burdensomeness would not be reduced by it. Hence, the argument from heavy costs, though not inapplicable, is less appealing, as it does not have the same weight in practical deliberations for tragic dilemmas as for other types of case (e.g. cases of possibility 3). For the force of the argument from heavy costs is, so to speak, being 'canceled out' by the consideration that giving up a moral obligation would be equally costly to an agent. One implication of this result is that the focal point for practical deliberation for such a case should not be upon which alternative that would yield more loss. Where then, if any, should the focal point be? Here is where the impartialist can have a say, and her argument would not only affect the cases of tragic dilemma, but also the cases in the third possibility. Let's discuss the cases of tragic dilemma first.

As already noted, loss is inevitable in tragic dilemma. Calculating the minute difference of the losses yielded by each alternative will not help an agent much in deciding what to do. Because of the difficulty involved in this kind of cases, an agent may be stuck in eternal hesitation, or she may allow herself to choose randomly, or let an impulse she has at that particular moment to determine the choice. In other words, the faculty of rationality seems to lose its function in such a situation. In line with (B3), Williams does not find it a problem if the rational faculty is not in operation in such a situation, for he thinks it is an exceedingly good thing for us to just act, 'as a possibly confused result of the situation in which we are engaged'.¹³² If the dilemma is merely between two non-moral ground projects, or even between two equally binding moral obligations, I think the

¹³² Bernard Williams, *A Critique of Utilitarianism*, p.118.

impartialist might agree with Williams that we just act. However, the dilemma in question is between a moral project and a non-moral one. Although both projects play an equally significant role in an agent's life, to the impartialist, who adheres to the doctrine of moral supremacy, the choice in this case is quite apparent: one should choose the moral project. is this a reasonable choice?

To answer this question, we have to discuss what the conditions are for Williams' critique in (A2) to be effective. For his argument to be effective, it not only has to show that if an agent chooses to act in accordance with impartial morality, she would lose her integrity and life would be meaningless for her, but it also has to show that if the non-moral alternative is chosen, the agent could preserve her integrity and meaning of life. Since neither of the alternatives can prevent the huge loss, an agent is free from the critique in (A2), as she would lose her integrity and meaning of life anyway no matter what she chooses.

Nevertheless, if the impartialist wants to be consistent with her applications of the whole package of impartial morality, the same doctrine of moral supremacy as its trump card would also be deployed in the cases in possibility 3.¹³³ Unlike the cases in the second possibility, the choice for the moral project would really seem absurd and unreasonable for the agents of the third possibility. This is a sound conclusion if we accept Williams' ground project thesis as well as his theory of motivation. Since we have granted them as plausible premises of Williams' argument in the way I interpret, the question at stake here is not about its cogency, but about whether such a world of possibility 3, in which people do not take impartial morality to be overriding, or the world of possibility 1, in which the moral consideration is totally impotent, is a world that is worth having (cf. the argument from worth). I shall discuss this in the next chapter. For the rest of this chapter, I would like to evaluate Williams' arguments in (B1), (B2), and (B3).

¹³³ But it would not apply in possibility 1 because the whole package of impartial morality would be viewed as external reason, and hence the doctrine of moral supremacy would have no force at all for the agents in those cases.

5.3 An evaluation of (B1)

According to the doctrine of the supremacy of impartial morality, one is supposed to adopt the impartial perspective as the determining stance during practical deliberations. This, of course, does not mean that considerations from the personal perspective do not occur to the agent herself, but saying that the impartial perspective plays a determining role implies that considerations from the personal perspective do not have any weight in the deliberations. It might be objected that there is a moral cost to the agent in giving up her own personal perspective, and contemplating considerations from the impartial perspective that she does not care for. This is the individualistic aspect of the critique in (B1). The question at stake here is: is it really that costly for an individual to abandon her own personal perspective? It might be argued that there is a loss involved because one has to give up one's personal projects and desires when she abandons her personal perspective. This line of thought is similar to that of (A2), except it extends beyond one's ground projects and integrity, as less significant projects or desires would also be included. Although there is nothing inconsistent with the claim that there is a loss involved whenever one has to give up one's own project or desire no matter how insignificant it is, this individualistic line of argument appears egoistic and selfish. It does not seem to be worth serious attention in a moral discourse unless one wants to argue for the unpopular form of egoism. Besides, when the loss is too little, it is not significant enough to play an effective role in the argument from heavy costs. Thus it looks as though we can rule out (B1) for the consideration of the argument from heavy costs except where it overlaps with (A2). However, it may be argued that there is something natural about adopting one's own personal perspective, and to ask someone to abandon this perspective, although psychologically feasible, would yield a great loss to that person.

Is it true that it is very burdensome and difficult for an agent to give up her personal perspective? Undoubtedly, whenever one has to change the way one has been, e.g. to change an old habit, or to change an attitude or belief on certain things, or, as in this case, to change one's perspective, one usually is not used to the change at the initial stage, and has to make an effort in order to make such a change. Perhaps the more deeply entrenched the old thing/way is, the harder it is to make the change, and the longer it takes to get used

to the change. Nevertheless, getting used to a change and making an effort to change do not necessarily mean losing something good due to the giving up of the old thing/way. Indeed, some old thing/way is so harmful to an individual that giving it up would be more beneficial to her. For example, it is not easy to ask a bad tempered person to react calmly and rationally when being confronted, but if she can make that change despite its difficulties, she would find that her life will usually improve by her reacting calmly and rationally. Thus giving up something we used to have does not necessarily yield a loss to an agent, for it all depends on the nature of the old thing/way that is in question. And sometimes the benefit of giving up the bad thing outweighs the burdensomeness of making that change.

There are two questions we have to consider. The first question is concerned with the argument from heavy costs, and the second question is concerned with the argument from worth. (i) How deeply entrenched is our personal perspective in us? This question is important insofar as the more deeply entrenched our personal perspective is, the harder it is for us to transcend it. (ii) Has the personal perspective got some high intrinsic value such that giving it up in moral deliberations would yield to a huge loss to the agent?

5.3.i How deeply entrenched is the personal perspective?

It seems to be the case that we have the tendency to see things from our personal perspective first. It takes a bit of patience and effort to shift our perspective from the personal one to that of others, or to the impartial one. Those who are capable of seeing things from perspectives other than their own are regarded as considerate, and even as having a high 'EQ'. It seems to be a virtue that can be learned. Although it might require certain character traits as its prerequisites, it is not something that can only be achieved by a selected few. In fact the majority of people manage to do that in order to fit in the social world. Thus although it requires some effort for one to shift to the impartial perspective, the effort is not as burdensome as Williams suggests, unless someone is deeply unfortunate. The psychopath has no abilities in this regard – and we can concede that she has no moral obligations either.

5.3.ii Is there high intrinsic value in the personal perspective?

Nevertheless, even if it is not that burdensome for the majority of people to make that shift in moral deliberations, it does not mean it is something worth doing. Perhaps this is one of those things on which the Individualist and the impartialist can never agree. The Individualist may think that one's own personal perspective expresses who one is, as a person who has her own (though not necessarily distinctive and different from others') perspective and character, and hence individuality. Moreover, she has little respect for the impartial perspective. Thus to ask her to abandon her own personal perspective amounts to taking away her dignity and rights as an individual person. Hence, the Individualist would think that the personal perspective is valuable enough to play a significant role in the argument from heavy costs. The impartialist, on the other hand, assigns it no special value. To the impartialist, one's own personal perspective is, at best, an expression of one's idiosyncratic taste, but, at worst, it is regarded as a moral weakness, for it distorts our judgments in moral situations, and encourages an individual to be egoistic and self-centred. She sees the personal perspective as harmful rather than valuable. Although Williams eloquently represents the case for Individualism, the value of personal perspective cannot be as high as he suggests. Those who hold their own perspective firmly are often being regarded as tenacious, stubborn, and even selfish, and it is a sign of maturity when a person is capable of adopting the perspectives of other people, and having empathy and understanding for them. (E.g. Gauguin for his wife, Jim for the 20 Indians.) In other words it is not regarded as a virtue to hold one's own personal perspective all the time, rather it is the ability to shift to the appropriate perspectives that is admirable. If this is the case, it would seem to imply that the loss of giving up one's personal perspective is not high enough to run the argument from heavy costs. On the contrary, the ability to shift to the impartial perspective is regarded by many as something worth having. It seems to me that unless someone is a committed Individualist, most people --- and that includes the agents in the case of tragic dilemma and in the case of possibility 3 --- would agree that the adoption of the impartial perspective, which supersedes one's own personal perspective, in moral deliberation is not an unreasonable or absurd demand upon an individual, but rather a respectable thing to do.

5.4 An evaluation of (B2)

As in (B1), the question at stake here is whether there is any high cost for revising the rich concept of agency and working to eliminate our disposition for agent-regret for non-voluntary actions. On the rich concept we mostly share, one is responsible for things which are not the products of one's will. As in the argument in (B1), one is asked to change from the way one has always been. Again, we can ask the questions that were raised in the previous section, namely, (i) how deeply entrenched are the rich concept of agency and its implications in us? (ii) Have the rich concept of agency and its implications got some high intrinsic value such that giving them up in moral deliberations would yield to a huge loss to the agent?

As far as the rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility are concerned, we do not have any statistics on the number of people actually holding this concept (as opposed to the restricted Kantian concept discussed in the last chapter), nor do we have any hard core scientific data on how deeply entrenched this concept is in the framework of the system of human beliefs. We have to use our commonsense and intuition to determine it.

5.4.i How deeply entrenched are the rich concept of agency and its implications in us?

The rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility seem to be held by the majority of people and are reflected in the practice of the laws in many, if not all, countries. Nevertheless, I have also argued that when an agent, who unreflectively holds the rich concepts, is exposed to, and is willing to seriously ponder certain philosophical theories, such as determinism or the Kantian theory of moral responsibility, she may be converted. She may become, say, more forgiving and has more understanding towards certain actions of others. For someone who endorses determinism, she will be convinced that given what are given, those people could not have done otherwise. Since those events are seen as inevitable, she will not see those people as the sole bearers of all the responsibility, but rather as those who happen to be the bearers of those causal factors. If she endorses the Kantian theory of moral responsibility, and if she is convinced that certain people do not have the ill intentions to bring about bad consequences, she is likely to withdraw her blame

on them. Of course, if someone has a vengeful temperament, then being convinced of those philosophical theories may be insufficient to change the way she feels about the culpability of wrongdoers or she may be muddled and allow inconsistency between her beliefs about those philosophical theories and her vengeful feelings which can only be justified by the rich concepts. My point here is that, given the appropriate character traits, as well as the willingness to ponder deeply, it is possible for one to be converted. Nevertheless, perhaps it takes a burdensome effort to make that conversion. I doubt we have enough data to answer this question, perhaps more research on human psychology is needed to answer this question. However, if it can be shown that it is a lot more beneficial to make that change than to stay the way we have been, then the ends can justify the effort one has to make for the change.

5.4.ii Is there high intrinsic value in the rich concept of agency and its implications?

This leads us to the argument from worth, is it worth it to preserve our rich concept of agency and its implication? Or would we be a lot worse off for giving them up? Unlike the discussion on (B1), there seems to be something peculiar, or even wrong, with choosing certain concepts based upon their utility. For, it is commonly thought that the most important thing about holding one concept instead of another is not what utility it would yield, but about whether or not it is true. A lie may be pleasing to the ears, but as soon as it is found out to be a false belief, it would be dispelled for sure. The problem here is that there is an old but unresolved philosophical dispute about the truth value of moral theories.

It is beyond the scope of our current discussion to go into this debate. However, I would like to point out that the consideration of utility or benefit of holding a certain moral theory or moral belief is not as unrelated to the concept of truth as might be commonly thought. For, unlike the practice of verification in the sciences, William James thinks that '[a] moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would

be good if it did exist.'¹³⁴ And this claim is supported by the pragmatism's conception of truth, that is 'an idea is "true" so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. That it is good, for as much as it profits, you will gladly admit. If what we do by its aid is good, you will allow the idea itself to be good in so far forth, for we are the better for possessing it truth is one species of good, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinate with it. The truth is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons.'¹³⁵

If James is right about pragmatism's conception of truth, then our deployment of the argument from worth is relevant. Since it is controversial whether or not moral beliefs, like religious ones, can be proved by objective evidence, James' conception of truth for that kind of belief becomes an attractive alternative to the conventional theories of truth¹³⁶ we used to have. Thus I think it is appropriate for us to grant his theory.

What kind of loss would there be, apart from getting used to the changes, for one to give up the rich concepts of agency and moral responsibility? Or, another way to put it is, what benefit/utility is there for holding the rich concepts? I would like to consider the consequences resulting from acknowledging the kind of agency that is deeply accidental or non-voluntary. As already mentioned in the last chapter, Williams' notion of agent-regret is related to the concept of agency insofar as an agent herself believes that there is a special relation between her agency and the consequence in question. Agents themselves, according to Williams, have the rich concept. Nevertheless, according to the restricted concepts of agency and moral responsibility provided by the Kantian, agent-regret at the accidental and non-voluntary levels is irrational, and hence should be dispensed with.

According to Williams' discussion of the 'lorry driver who, through no fault of his, runs over a child',¹³⁷ there is a loss for an agent if she adopts the Kantian concepts, because there is something valuable in having the sentiment of agent-regret even at those accidental and non-voluntary levels.

¹³⁴ William James, *The Will to Believe*, p.201.

¹³⁵ William James, *What Pragmatism Means*, p.223.

¹³⁶ I.e. the correspondence theory of truth, and the coherence theory of truth.

¹³⁷ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, p.43.

‘Doubtless, and rightly, people will try, in comforting [the lorry driver], to move the driver from this state of feeling, move him indeed from where he is to something more like the place of a spectator, but it is important that this is seen as something that should need to be done, and indeed some doubt would be felt about a driver who too blandly or readily moved to that position. We feel sorry for the driver, but that sentiment co-exists with, indeed presupposes, that there is something special about his relationship to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault. It may be still more so in cases where agency is fuller than in such an accident, though still involuntary through ignorance.’¹³⁸

In other words, even though the driver may not think that he is morally responsible for the death/injury of the child, he still thinks that *he* did it, and hence his hope to recompense.

Nevertheless, Williams has not expounded the value of the disposition of the sentiment of agent-regret even at the accidental and non-voluntary levels. Thus I have to find out about its value based on the implications of Williams’ discussion as well as our common sense, and to present it in the best possible light. It seems to me that although, according to Williams’ discussion, the lorry driver is not actually morally responsible for the ill consequence (or there is no fact of the matter), he perceives himself as having a special relation with the event insofar as he is causally connected with it in such a way that his agency is involved. His reaction, namely, his sentiment of agent-regret, shows that he recognizes this special relation, as well as his expression of the virtuous quality for being ready to bear the burden of responsibility (as opposed to finding excuses for himself in order to get away with it), and it also shows that he has the appropriate moral sentiment, i.e. to feel regret and remorse for the wrongs he has done. The last two qualities are vital for being a virtuous and moral person, and hence the sentiment of agent-regret is valuable for this reason.

Now, the Kantian may argue that the belief about the special relation between the agent and the event is mistaken, and hence should not be regarded as a valuable quality. Even if she and the consequence are related in a special way, the agent is still not at fault for she does not have the intention to bring about the ill consequence. Thus the other two qualities, though valuable for the making of a virtuous person, are inappropriate in this particular type of accidental and non-voluntary situations. Besides, the Kantian may

¹³⁸ Ibid.

continue, so long as an agent exhibits regret for things in which she was at fault, not exhibiting agent-regret in the accidental and non-voluntary situations does not show that she lacks a certain moral sentiment or the readiness to bear responsibility. Hence, the Kantian may conclude, the sentiment of agent-regret is not valuable at the accidental and non-voluntary levels.

It seems to me that the dispute turns on the differences of perspectives between Williams and the Kantian. The Kantian judges this from an impersonal, and hence detached, perspective, from which she can clearheadedly see that the agent bears no special relation to the consequence, except that she plays a determining causal role. Hence the Kantian can see that the agent is not at fault. Williams by contrast sees it from the perspective of the agent, say, the lorry driver, who is actually going through the experience and shock of running over a child. I think what Williams is arguing is that because of the intense nature of the experience, it is not psychologically possible for the agent himself to be detached from the experience and to figure it out that he is not really at fault, and hence that there is no need to regret. Subsequently, Williams seems to be saying that there is something disagreeable about the agent if she is able to adopt the impersonal and detached perspective too readily after being been through some terrible experience, such as running over a child. Granted that there would be a while before the agent can adopt the perspective of a spectator, Williams can then argue that the innate dispositions of the agent would be exhibited spontaneously in such a level of involvement. If the agent exhibits agent-regret in such a situation, it means that she possesses the two desirable qualities we've just mentioned that are vital for being a virtuous and moral person. Having argued in this way, I think Williams is right about there being something valuable about agent-regret even at the accidental and non-voluntary levels. Nevertheless, as just pointed out, there are two different perspectives being adopted in this dispute. Due to the differences of the two perspectives, Williams' argument, which is based on the subjective perspective of an agent, cannot be deployed to challenge the Kantian concepts of agency and moral responsibility, which is based upon the perspective of a spectator. Thus my critique of Williams' argument in (B2) is that although Williams has pointed out a very important aspect of our subjective experience of agency, this alone is not enough to refute the Kantian position.

Nevertheless, Williams's argument can still be considered as showing that the Kantian perspective is not inevitable.

5.5 An evaluation of (B3)

In (B3), Williams argues that instead of being rational and coolheaded and acting according to some system of value, very often, at the moment of decision 'we just act, as a possibly confused result of the situation in which we are engaged.'¹³⁹ Contrary to the rationalistic approach of rational deliberation (such as Rawls' 'above reproach approach'), Williams thinks this is 'very often an exceedingly good thing'.

As in the case with agent-regret, it seems to be a matter of perspective that determines the plausibility of Williams' view as opposed to Rawls'. For, from the perspective of the agent, who is being confused and overwhelmed by the situation which confronts her, it is difficult for her to stay coolheaded and rational. Quite often her reactive attitudes take over, and hence, 'she just acts'. It seems to me that the reason Williams thinks it is 'an exceedingly good thing' is based on some kind of romantic conception of spontaneity in which an agent just acts according to her nature without impediments, which, presumably, are the external values and norms that are imposed upon her. Acting in such a spontaneous way allows agents to be true to who they are, rather than having to be the 'janitors of any system of values'.¹⁴⁰

It is true that it may be particularly difficult for some people to come to act rationally and coolheadedly the whole time. Perhaps a lot of personal training and habituation are required to cultivate that ability, and perhaps, for some, despite personal training and habituation it is still impossible to make the change for some hardwired reasons. According to the argument from heavy costs, the difficulty in being rational and coolheaded in moral deliberation is a sufficient reason to exempt some people from the requirement of rational deliberation. Nevertheless, not everyone finds this approach too difficult, and perhaps only a minority of people can be entitled to that exemption. I don't think Williams can argue that it is in general psychologically unfeasible for us to act in the

¹³⁹ Bernard Williams, '*A Critique of Utilitarianism*,' p.118.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

rational and coolheaded or even a systematic way, since many people manage to do so; rather he has to convince us that there is a substantial loss in such an imposition to change the way we naturally behave and act. According to the argument from worth, the imposition of any system of values is not only an unromantic, but also an unreasonable demand upon an agent, for it does violence to her identity by asking her to act contrary to her nature.

Now the rationalist may concede that it is understandable for the agent who is overwhelmed by the situation to act impulsively without deliberating about the whole thing coolheadedly and deciding according to some system of moral rules. Indeed we may feel sympathetic towards her and exempt her from blame and punishment. However, contrary to Williams' view, this does not mean it is admirable even if it is our nature to be impulsive, irrational, and spontaneous. The argument from nature is not a convincing or appealing argument, because, some behaviours and desires may be natural to humans, e.g. men's urge to rape. However, even if we grant rape to be a natural behaviour, no reasonable person wants to argue that for this reason alone we should endorse it. Although being impulsive, irrational, and spontaneous is not as abhorrent as rape, some people may still see it as a weakness of character/will, or even, a sign of cowardice. In other words, it is not something worth preserving.

Thus, unless Williams can argue that there is something admirable in being impulsive etc. in practical deliberation, his advocacy of spontaneous action is not rationally or morally appealing. Now, Williams may argue that being spontaneous or impulsive does not mean that a person must act selfishly, indeed, quite often a lot of self-sacrificial acts can only occur due to the urgency of the situation in which the agent is unable to think in a coolheaded way. Had she got the chance to think clearly about the whole situation, it might be unlikely that she would sacrifice her life to save another human being. Undoubtedly, this type of heroism is greatly admired, nevertheless the means (i.e. being impulsive) it depends upon is not so reliable, leading to cowardice as well as heroism. When serious issues are at stake, we want some methods that are more reliable, like that of the rationalistic approach, to guide one's action. Hence the interest in moral theory and systems.

Nevertheless, in some cases where the information given to an agent is so limited, or in the cases of moral and tragic dilemma, where there seems to be no right answer to the question, a spontaneous and non-rational decision may be the only way for an agent to make her mind up. More on this at the end of next chapter.

Ch. 6 Which is the best world?

6.1 Possibility 3 and (A2)

We have now dispelled the worries posted by Williams' critiques in (B1), (B2), and (B3). And, as far as the critique from (A2) is concerned, we have already dealt with the first two possibilities. What we have left is the critique from (A2) regarding possibility 3, in which impartial morality is a project or commitment of an agent, but she is not committed to it enough for it to play a ground role in her life. In other words, in a situation of moral deliberation, she takes impartial morality into her consideration, for she is, to a certain extent, committed to it. Nevertheless, compared with other ground projects and deep concerns in her life, there is much less commitment for impartial morality. If we are merely concerned with conflict of two projects regardless of their contents, then the reasoning would seem to go something like this: if she is more committed to one particular project than another, the former will and may override the latter in practical deliberation. For even though there would still be some loss due to giving up the latter, i.e. a project which she is less committed, the overall loss is less by choosing the former than choosing otherwise. A simple comparison of the two possible consequences would reveal that the choice of the project to which she is more committed is more choiceworthy. Let's call this the simple comparison reasoning.

In the case of possibility 3 in which an agent's ground project is in conflict with her commitment to impartial morality (which doesn't play the ground role), if the simple comparison reasoning is applied, then it would seem to be the case that her commitment to impartial morality would be overridden in that particular situation. Hence, although there is some loss due to the fact that the agent's commitment (to impartial morality) is not fulfilled, the loss to the agent herself is not as high as losing the meaning of her life or her integrity due to giving up her ground project. Nevertheless, the particular situation envisioned in possibility 3 is inconsistent with the doctrine of moral supremacy.

I have saved the discussion of this type of situation until the end, for it appears to me that this is the most common type of moral problem faced by many of us, and hence it

deserves a lengthier discussion. It is a common problem because many of us, through our upbringing, have learnt the skill of acting in accordance with morality,¹⁴¹ and we are socialized in such a way that it becomes one of our commitments. However, it also seems to be the case that many of us merely regard it as a means which gets us through life and helps us to be accepted in society (as opposed to the deviants who are rejected by society). What this means is that although most people, in their day-to-day activities, manage to act in accordance with morality, not many of them actually commit to it deeply, and when a conflict situation occurs, and when the agent is not threatened by any punishment, it is tempting for her to choose what she truly wants, i.e. according to her ground project rather than her relatively secondary commitment to morality. In (A2), Williams' discussion of Gauguin can be seen as a support for choices of this kind. I think his Gauguin story exemplifies possibility 3, for Williams explicitly says that Gauguin is not amoral, so to a certain extent he is committed to morality; yet, clearly, his commitment to art (and perhaps his longing for a Bohemian lifestyle) is much stronger than that for morality. Moreover, he is not threatened by the possibility of punishment if he chooses to abandon his family. Thus, if he were to choose his family instead of art, it could be said that he chooses it not for the sake of avoiding punishment but rather for the sake of his love for his family and/or for the sake of being moral. To simplify the case, let's assume that he does not have much love for his family, and, if he stays, it would mainly be a matter of moral consideration.

For Williams' discussion to be successful, he has to be able to persuade us to employ the simple comparison reasoning. We shall be able to realize that the loss of giving up Gauguin's ground project is a lot higher than his giving up his formal commitment to morality; and thereby the demand, according to the doctrine of moral supremacy, to give up the former would be perceived as unreasonable and absurd to the agent, and to us, allowing us to infer the unreasonableness and absurdity of the doctrine itself. The question at stake here is how we can be persuaded to employ such simple comparison reasoning. I think the answer to this question lies not so much on the formal argumentation, but rather on the

¹⁴¹ Due to cultural and historical differences it may not be the impartial morality to which one is brought up, however, it serves the same purpose for our discussion concerning impartial morality for it is regarded as a subset of morality.

type of example that is being offered. The more we can identify ourselves with and feel sympathetic for the hero of the story, the more we are disposed to adopt his perspective, and to have empathy for the pain and suffering he experiences, and hence the more we are persuaded to employ simple comparison reasoning. Williams' Gauguin is a rather sympathetic character, especially for those who have a deep respect for art in general or the Bohemian lifestyle. Although not all of us are preoccupied by some grand artistic project like Gauguin's, his story is still universal. For we can still identify with the hero insofar as we have some projects which mean so much to us, though the ruling of morality tells us not to pursue them.

A conspicuous example of our modern times, which is also a subtext in the Gauguin story, is the temptation to commit adultery. It is such a common phenomenon that some people even convince themselves that there is nothing immoral about it, for some think people have their freedom to love. Perhaps each monogamous spousal relationship has its own story, and under some particular circumstances perhaps some cases of adultery are permissible. Nevertheless, *prima facie*, I think impartial morality would prohibit adultery insofar as, according to the Kantian moral reasoning, a promise to be faithful and monogamous is broken, and, according to the Utilitarian reasoning, it is bad insofar as more harm is induced, for the spouse who is being cheated upon is badly hurt (and sometimes the psychological harm can be a lot more devastating than some physical assault), and quite often it is thought that the harm induced to the spouse must outweigh the pleasure enjoyed by the adulterer and her new lover. Yet, when the adulterer believes that she has finally found the one she truly loves, and when this new found passion, which gives her meaning of life now, is at stake, that just seems to be an evident reason for her to defy the moral demands, and chooses what her heart truly desires. This is why Williams' Gauguin follows what his passion dictates.

Incidentally, the issue of spousal relationship and adultery is related to the theme of luck that is discussed earlier. It seems to be a matter of luck who one meets and falls in love with, and whether that love is reciprocated. And even when a spousal relationship is formed, the loving feeling of the two people is so unpredictable, depending on factors which are beyond the control of each one of them, e.g. it depends on whether the two

people are really compatible, whether there are some external temptations which steal the heart of one or both of them, etc. This may be one of the major reasons why the Kantian sees the marriage vow as an unbreakable promise, a 'solemn constant' that resists the brutal changes of this unpredictable world that seems to be dictated by some 'blind fate'.

The Individualist, on the contrary, does not care for some invincible strategy to resist luck; rather, she will act in accordance with her desires and projects. Thus, to a certain extent, the Individualist sees the impartialist, such as the Kantian, strategy to minimize the unpredictability of luck as an impediment to one's conatus. This explains why the impartialist and the Individualist deal with the issue of adultery differently. Let's investigate which approach is better.

6.2 The method of comparison

In this section I would like to compare two different worlds in which cases of adultery are of concern. One world follows Kantianism, which is a version of impartial morality, the other, Williams' Individualism. And, for the sake of simplicity and universality, I will suppose that everyone holds and acts upon the same principles in each of these worlds in spite of the differences of roles different people play. Thus, e.g. everyone in the Kantian world, whether one is tempted to adultery or one is the spouse of such a person, makes the same Kantian moral judgement regarding adultery.

My strategy here is to compare and contrast these two worlds with the hope that the best¹⁴² possible world can thereby be identified by our intuition. This will shed light on Williams' argument in (A2). Moreover, by identifying the best possible world, perhaps one can shape one's ground projects accordingly and make such a world an actual world. Such a method of comparison may appear to resemble that of consequentialism. However there is no systematic procedure to determine which possible world is better, as I do not intend to seek for any universal value into which all the different types of goods can cash. The reason I use the method of comparison is that by doing so I do not have to evaluate

¹⁴² I use the notion of 'best' loosely here without implying whether it is morally the best or it is the best in some other way, such as people in that world are in general the happiest.

Williams' argument in (A2) by presupposing an impartial or non-impartial perspective, for that would be begging the question.

Williams' adherence to Individualism might lead him to reject such a method of comparison, for such a method does, to a certain extent, require the reader to step outside her own world, and to adopt the perspective of a different world which is totally alien to her. If Williams is tenacious about his stance against the method of comparison, then it is his own problem, for he would no longer be doing philosophy which is a discipline which encourages an individual to toy with different ideas and possibilities.

Now, before I go into each of these stories, I want to note that each monogamous spousal relationship is particular in its own way, and it is not my intention to make the gross generalization that all adultery is wrong or all right. Indeed, some spousal relationships are so dysfunctional and abusive that they are not worth rescuing, and thus it seems understandable, and even acceptable, for people affected to seek love elsewhere, although some may argue that they should end one relationship properly before they enter into another one. To make things simpler, I shall avoid controversy of this sort, and focus on the type of spousal relationships in which there is an overt commitment or agreement (though not necessarily in the form of marriage) between the couple to stay monogamous, and that there is nothing seriously wrong with the relationship, viz. it is not the case that it is a lot better for both parties to end it instead of dragging on. In other words I am only concerned with the type of 'mediocre' case in which the partners may feel something lacking or insufficient in their relationship, but they do not find it destructive enough to call a halt to it. I shall attempt to present the stories of the two worlds by considering the feelings and perspective of the different members involved. There is one last point I would like to make before going into each of these stories, namely that I am not asking whether or not monogamous spousal relationship is the only permissible form of sexual and intimate relationship. Rather, my focus is on whether if one has already entered such a relationship, one should faithfully sticks to the relationship as Kantianism tells us, or be an Individualist and pursue her love of her dream.

6.3 Two possible worlds

6.3.i The Kantian world

For a Kantian, adultery is categorically forbidden, as a promise would be broken and an overriding commitment unfulfilled. The consideration of pursuing an affair as an agent's ground project would be regarded by the Kantian as self-deception and self-indulgence, viz. she is using it as an excuse to get away from her duties to her spouse and to justify the affair. The Kantian may acknowledge our human weaknesses for being tempted and self-deceived. However, acknowledging our weaknesses does not mean we should yield to them.

What would the world be like if everyone adopts (or tries to adopt) the Kantian morality? Is it an agreeable world? As far as the general sentiments of spousal relationship is concerned, unlike Williams' world, the meaning of a life-long spousal relationship is preserved. In theory, it is a 'simpler' world in which spousal relationships are more stable, for people are less likely to consider or to pay attention to external temptations once they are committed to a spousal relationship. Thus, in theory, people would be expected to focus more of their attention and energy on their spousal relationship. Hence people in such a world have more security and stability as far as their relationship is concerned; however, people in such a world have their unique problems too. Since they believe that one can only make the decision of entering a spousal relationship once in a life time, they need to worry a lot about whether they have found the right person. If everyone in such a world is a non-risk taker, and tries to adopt the 'above reproach approach', chances are that none of them may be able to allow themselves to enter an intimate spousal relationship because it is doubtful that she could find any guarantee that a relationship with this or that individual would work out fine (if she insists on having a certain quality in a relationship). Thus it would be a world full of single, but lonely, people with a few couples who are so lucky to have the chance to meet the right partner and have the recognition that she is the one. Would such a world full of singles a happy world? Perhaps Dr. Samuel Johnson has a better insight about it, he thinks, 'Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures.'

What about the lucky ones? As far as those who enter into spousal relationships are concerned, it might be the case that later even though one of the spouses has found her true love, someone other than her spouse, who can really ground her life, being an austere Kantian, she has to give up this new found love, and be faithful to her spouse. An example of this kind of belief can be found in Edith Wharton's novel 'The Age of Innocence' in which the hero of the story painfully gives up his affair with the woman whom he loves very much in order to be faithful to his wife and to maintain the well being of his family. His life without his beloved may be barren and empty. However, in that world (of the nineteenth century), he is regarded as having made the right choice, and having the moral strength to resist temptation and to control his own emotions. In Williams' world, by contrast, he would be regarded as a coward for not pursuing what his heart most desires. For he might be successful in playing the role of a perfect husband, but he is actually living his life a lie.

It is hard, if not impossible, to generalize a conclusion about whether happiness in the Kantian world can outweigh its pain, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the Kantian would argue that this is not really a matter of whether the happiness of the adulterers can outweigh the pain of the spouses that are being cheated upon, but a matter of the adulterers doing the wrong thing. Thus if the hero of 'The Age of Innocence', by giving up his affair, leads a barren and meaningless life, this does not make his wish to have an affair right. Indeed, if dwelling upon his passionate affair and being emotionally detached from his relationship with his wife make him feel that his life is barren and meaningless, he may be regarded as a pitiful figure who is plagued by his own self-indulgence. In other words, it is his problem if he suffers, not because he has chosen the wrong thing (i.e. to be faithful to his spouse).

Nevertheless, some would think that the remark above is cruel and unsympathetic. Indeed, in some extreme cases in which there is no more love in one's spousal relationship, and the agent stays with her spouse merely for the sake of duty, this sounds like a very unpalatable reason, perhaps even to the agent's spouse, to stay in a relationship. In the rescue story in Williams' PCM, the wife would prefer that the reason her spouse rescues her is not because it is something that is demanded by the ruling of impartial morality, but simply because he loves her! Likewise, we could imagine the spouse of our story here to

wish her husband to stay in the marriage not because it is what impartial morality demands, but simply because he loves her. She would, at best, regard him as respectable for giving up what he truly loves in order to do the right thing.

6.3.ii The Individualistic world of Williams

The Individualist in this world would think that the case of adultery, such as the story in the *Age of Innocence*, is a good exemplification of his point about how unreasonable and absurd demands (such as lifelong fidelity in marriage) can be derived from the mechanical reasoning of impartial morality, for it leads to tremendous, but unnecessary, suffering for the hero. This is the major reason why the whole enterprise of impartial morality is regarded as flawed, especially its doctrine of moral supremacy, for in some situation in which one's (non-moral) ground project is at stake, it is thought to be unreasonable to suppress it for the moral demand. Is this an agreeable world? Let's examine what the people in this world are like first.

In such a world, everyone believes that she has the freedom to overturn a previous commitment or promise if she has found her ground project to be something else, in this case, her new true love passion. This does not mean that everyone in such a world is promiscuous, or that adultery *per se* is a non-moral issue, but rather that people in that world are not expected to be stuck in a relationship forever merely because there has been an overt agreement of monogamy between each couple. and if one, let's call her x, has found someone else who can ground her life even though she is already in a monogamous spousal relationship, she is still free to pursue the new found passion without any blame. Moreover, her decision is not restricted by some kind of rationalistic deliberation, or the 'above reproach approach'. In other words, she may be uncertain whether or not the relationship with her new found love would work out; nor can she tell whether or not she would eventually be happier to commit adultery. Unlike the Kantian world, the world she inhabits encourages her to be carefree and to take the risk. The spouse who was being cheated upon, let's call her y, would usually feel very hurt by such an incident; however, in Williams' ideal world, she too believes in the ground project thesis, and thus believes that if her lover, x, has finally found someone, let's call that person z, who can ground x's life,

she is entitled to cheat and possibly to leave the relationship without the moral scruples of how wrong it is to commit adultery and of how much pain y would experience as a result.

Is such a world a good one? There are several aspects we have to consider. They include: the consideration of the general sentiments about spousal relationship and what effects would be brought about by those sentiments in such a world; the consideration of whether the happiness derived from pursuing x's true love could outweigh the pain of y that is derived from such a situation of adultery, and the consideration of extreme cases in which a lot of pain is being inflicted upon y due to it. As far as general sentiments about spousal relationships are concerned, since, by universalizing the Individualistic value, everyone places the same importance upon one's own projects, the concept of a committed life-long monogamous spousal relationship would have lost its meaning in such a world.

Undoubtedly, people of our era, especially those in the West, are losing its meaning gradually, and in Williams' world which, to a certain extent, resembles our world, an intimate relationship is a gamble with nothing to guarantee its duration. And if people in such a world have the same needs as ours, such as the need for security and stability which is embodied by the longing for a stable relationship, and the faithfulness of one's partner, then the deterioration of the concept of a life-long monogamous spousal relationship may increase the stress and anxiety of many who are in a spousal relationship already. Ironically, like the Kantians, the Individualists who are too faint-hearted are put off from entering this kind of relationship. Another disadvantage is that in such a world most people would neither assume nor expect that a spousal relationship can last for a life-time. Rather, such a relationship may be thought as a trial and error experiment. Predictably, one would be less committed to one's spousal relationship, and would tend to invest less in it, and hence it is easier for one to give it up, for one is less prepared to try to save the relationship by fixing the issues within it. Rather, one would be more prone to think that the problem comes from not having the right partner who can really ground one's life, and hence one will be more tempted, and even encouraged, to seek elsewhere for the 'true love', instead of focusing all of one's energy to improve one's current relationship. This kind of attitude, in turn, would increase the incidence of breakups of spousal relationships, and hence more sufferings will occur as a result. (On the other hand, the previous claim may be questioned

by arguing that precisely because one does not take it for granted that this kind of relationship could necessarily last forever, one has the incentive to make an ongoing effort to maintain and improve it. Perhaps the different reactions to the same belief can be explained by the attitudes of the observer, her pessimism or optimism.) However, there are two things that Williams' world contributes, which does not depend upon the observer's attitude, namely, (1) the pain that is derived from the inhibition to pursue one's true love passion will be reduced, for, unlike many people in the previous eras, x in Williams' world is not trapped by her spousal relationship if she finds her true love to be someone other than her current spouse. Whereas, (2), y's pain will increase, for her heart will be broken by x's betrayal.

Nevertheless, in Williams' world, unless someone takes stopping her spouse's (or, for that matter, anyone's) heart from breaking as her ground project,¹⁴³ the mere fact that the heart of her spouse (or anyone) is breaking is not a sufficient motivation for her to refrain from pursuing her own ground project. Even in the extreme case in which the cheated spouse, y, would commit suicide or become insane, although it is quite likely that x would feel bad about breaking her spouse's heart, no reasonable moral ruling can demand her to refrain from it unless avoiding that kind of consequence is also x's ground project. So, this is a rough sketch of Williams' world, in which everyone is, according to Individualism, responsible for pursuing her own ground project, for the ground projects of others, such as y's wish for the love and faithfulness of x, do not constitute a reasonable demand on the agent x, unless if the ground projects of others also happen to coincide with her own ground projects.

¹⁴³ One with the sentiments of Emily Dickinson may hold such thing as her ground project, cf. the following poem of Dickinson:

If I can stop one heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

6.4 Which is the better world?

As we can see both possible worlds have their virtues and defects. What we have to consider next is whether we can tell that one world is clearly better than the other. Can the happiness derived in the Williams' world outweigh the pain and suffering that are inflicted? Can the predictability of the Kantian world outweigh the frustration? There seems to be no straight forward answer, nor simple subtraction of these two types of emotions. For the judgement of each case seems to be different, depending on the state of the spousal relationship that is in danger, as well as other factors, such as one's temperament and the cultural values one adopts. For instance, a fun-loving, adventurous person may find the Kantian world too stringent, dull, and unromantic, whereas someone who believes in promises and commitments may find Williams' world too insecure, unstable, and even immoral.

If we can merely rely upon one's subjective preference to decide which world is better, perhaps we can never reach a consensus for it. However, if we can find some devastating defect, or internal incoherence of any of these worlds, then it is a sufficient reason to give such a world up. Both worlds have its own flaws, let's examine if they are devastating enough.

In the Kantian world, as already mentioned, if everyone holds the 'above reproach approach' seriously, and is non-risk taker who wants to be 100% certain that the relationship will definitely work in order to avoid regret in the future, then it is not easy for anyone to get into a spousal relationship in the first place. Is this flaw serious enough? I think it depends on whether the means to rectify the flaw would force one to give up some of the basic Kantian principles. The origin of this flaw comes from the certainty requirement (e.g. the above reproach approach) for decision making. It is an important principle to combat unpredictable outcomes due to luck. However, if the deployment of this principle prevents one from starting a relationship, then it defeats the whole purpose. Thus it is reasonable to relax this certainty requirement. It won't be a devastating blow to the Kantian world, for the certainty requirement is not an intrinsic requirement of the Kantian theory or impartial morality in general.

There is, on the contrary, a problem with Williams' world that is intrinsic to his adherence to Individualism, and this will explain why the Kantian world is more preferable despite its rigidity.

6.5 The hidden condition in Williams' world

Since Williams' world is so unstable and insecure, spousal relationships in such a world would be so transient, it makes one wonder whether this kind of fleeting relationship can ground one's life at all. Indeed, the more serious question is: is such a world full of Individualists feasible at all? It must be pointed out that for the group of risk-taking Individualists, such as Gauguin, to pursue their ground projects (e.g. an affair), another group of people, such as Gauguin's wife, who are docile, caring, and stable has to be assumed in the background.¹⁴⁴ In Gauguin's story, for example, without the background of a family and stable system, can Gauguin be so carefree to leave for Tahiti knowing that his wife would be, and has to be, there to take care of the children? Without such a stable background, Gauguin cannot afford the luxury to leave while maintaining a non-immoral status, for his children may be led astray without anyone to take care of them.

If we look at the text of *'Moral Luck'* more closely, we can also see that in Williams' world, not everyone has the privilege to be an Individualist. For instance, Anna Karenina, in Williams' essay, is not so fortunate. The stable society does not allow a married woman to pursue the love of her dream, the pressure from being socially rejected is one of the major factors contributing to her suicide. Williams' text also seems to suggest that only the elite, the talented males, such as Gauguin, have the privileges to pursue their ground projects; while the mediocre, women, such as Anna Karenina, have to comply with the social conventions in order to provide a stable background for the privileged group.

This leads us to think that the talks of ground project, retrospective justification of success, and meaning of life are in part 'new permissions and exemptions. The Gauguin story is nothing new: it is simply the old story of male mobility and honour and female rootedness and dishonour.'¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ This observation was made by Catherine Wilson.

¹⁴⁵ Catherine Wilson, *Immanence and Imposition*, ch.7.

Is Williams really taking us back to the old, oppressive world in which the privileged group of males dominates the obedient group of females? He does seem to think that adoption of equal treatment, allowing females to pursue their projects as males do instead of being bound by the traditional domestic role, are 'too much to ask'. He appears to think that, unlike men, women are limited by biology:

'the strongest kind of sociobiological "cannot" would mean that the question never came up at all. As soon as [the sociobiologist] permits "can," then the philosopher says "is does not imply ought" and we have rooms for free choice. What the sociologists say here is, "Look, when we say "can't" we do not mean "absolute can't." What we mean is "can't without terrific costs that any group of human beings will count as costs." That is, there is a Spielraum for human beings, an area in which it is possible for human beings individually --- or even for a time societally --- to do things of a certain kind, but it is so against the grain that some things are just, to use the phrase used by Tom Nagel, too much to ask. Or it might just be that it is too hard and will not work. Someone will come along and say, "Look it is possible to treat women just like men, at least almost just like men. But if we try to adopt this equality of treatment everywhere, there will be anxiety, disaster, collapse, --- results which everybody knows are unacceptable to human society." This is certainly a respectable form of claim.'¹⁴⁶

This shocking passage of Williams confirms that he is not, contrary to what it seemed, advocating for a free world in which everyone is encouraged to pursue her own projects, for that would give rise to 'anxiety, disaster, collapse'. It is clear that Williams' world, actually envisioned, is not universalizable, for an oppressed group of stable class is assumed in his world, and hence he cannot convince us all, theoretically, that his world is morally better.

Although the kind of elitist world Williams has in mind is not theoretically unfeasible, it is morally obnoxious to many people, except, perhaps, to some who are in such a privileged position already. Despite his portrayal of a pleasant and attractive life in his world, it is so only for the privileged few. For those who are not so privileged, it is already an obvious and sufficient reasons for them to reject such a world. But even for those who are so privileged, it does not seem to be respectable for them to endorse it.

This seems to me to be a sound reason for us to prefer the Kantian world of impartial morality to William's world of Individualism.

Ch. 7 Conclusion

The major goal of my thesis has been to defend impartial morality from Williams' attacks. I started the discussion by exploring the underlying motive of impartial moralist, namely, to combat the threats presented by luck. After a brief examination of a variety of methods to combat them, I presented and interpreted Williams' arguments against impartial morality. Two objectives can be found in his arguments, (i) to show that the theory of impartial morality is flawed and unfeasible, and (ii) to adhere to Individualism. I have shown that most of his arguments cannot refute the theory of impartial morality. His argument in (A2) seems plausible insofar as one's ground project is at stake whereas one's commitment for impartial morality is not strong enough to supersede the former. Nevertheless, the Individualistic world implied in Williams' writings is too unstable for it to be a feasible possibility if Individualism is universally applied, and there is evidence which shows that he does not believe in Individualism for all. I doubt his is a world which many people would find agreeable. This does not imply that the world of impartial morality is the best possible world. However, it is morally better than Williams' world, for justice and equality would be seriously addressed in the former. I imagine more people would be happier in such a world, and hence it is more choiceworthy.

Nevertheless, Williams' discussion of ground projects shows that there is a need for some kind of modification in impartial morality. This can be done by, for instance, putting moral weight upon seemingly non-moral ground projects in moral deliberation. After all, it does not make sense to demand one to lead a meaningless life, in which one has to give up one's ground projects, for the sake of being 'moral' according to the conventional exposition of impartial morality. For the pain to suppress one's ground project can be so much that it can no longer be regarded as a non-moral consideration that is in conflict with a moral one, but is itself a moral necessity. The details of how impartial morality can be modified is, of course, a project of its own.

¹⁴⁶ Williams, "Conclusions" in Stent ed., *Morality as Biological Phenomenon*. Quoted in Catherine Wilson, *Immanence and Imposition*, ch.7.

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