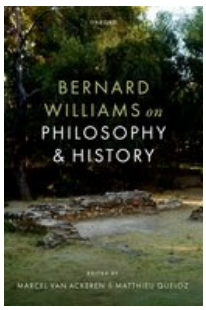

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CHAPTER

11 The Predicament of Temporality: Williams's Challenges to Kant's Practical Reason*

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Abstract

This chapter argues that Williams's criticisms of Kant's account of morality should be viewed in light of their disagreement about the function of reason. This interpretation unearths a fundamental challenge, due to the tension between the temporal features of human agency and the allegedly categorical authority of some normative claims. This is a predicament central to any theory of practical reason. For Kant its root lies in human embodiment, finitude, and fragility, and the remedy is the normative standard of reason, which plays a constitutive role in unifying the agent across time. By contrast, for Williams, mortality is the condition of possibility for valuing life, and agential unity is both unfeasible and undesirable, in the face of multiple sources of practical necessity whose significance is assessed from the present stance. The contrastive analysis of these views aims to identify their respective merits.

Keywords: Bernard Williams, Kant, time, rationality, morality, agency

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Williams credits Kant with having 'given the purest, deepest, and most thorough representation of morality' (1985: 174). This acknowledgement entails that there is an ordinary conception of morality,[1] which is largely coincidental with the Kantian ethics of respect for humanity: 'Kant's view not only carries to the limit the notion that moral worth cannot depend on contingencies, but also emphasizes . . . the idea of *respect* which is owed to each man as a rational moral agent' (Williams 1973: 235). Williams relentlessly denounces the mortifying effects of this conception of moral worth, which rests on a conception of rational agency that is equally divorced from contingencies.[2] His arguments have shaped the landscape of recent analytic ethics and made a crucial contribution to the scholarly reassessment of Kant's ethics, giving an unprecedented impulse to neo-Kantian ethics in Anglo-American moral philosophy. While the debate has primarily focused on

Williams's attack on the supremacy of morality, this chapter claims that these arguments are best appreciated as being aimed at the underlying conception of practical reason. It thus chooses an unorthodox perspective from which to assess Williams's dispute with Kant, refocusing on a dimension of contingency that has not received quite so much attention: temporality. Characters such as Elina Makropulos (Williams 1973: 81–100), Anna Karenina, and Paul Gauguin (Williams 1981: 20–39) are the best evidence that temporality is a central theme in Williams's work. In contrast to the Kantian approach to temporality, Makropulos illustrates that mortality is the very condition for valuing life, while the tragic choices of Karenina and Gauguin raise issues regarding the modes and requisites of agential integrity.

Here is the roadmap: in section 1, I explain the benefits of refocusing on temporality as a key aspect of
p. 198 Williams's critique of Kant's conception of practical reason. ↳ In section 2, I argue that Williams's rejection of the Kantian approach raises significant and intricate questions about diachronic rational agency, and I examine distinct arguments regarding (2.1) the structure of practical reflection and its deliverances, (2.2) the possibility of categorical desires that are at once temporal and unconditional, and (2.3) the consequent fragmentation of practical reason. In section 3, I explore different rejoinders, which build upon Kant's claim that reasoning is generative or constructive, and which rely on the purported integration between practical reasoning and appropriate normative attitudes. In section 3.1, I illustrate Kant's programme regarding the possibility of autonomous self-integration via the adoption of the categorical imperative (CI), which is the constitutive standard of reason. I surmise that this constitutive norm is not limited to individual self-organization, but it generates the rational collective called humanity. In section 3.2, I argue that Kant's insight is that reasoning can be subversive in that it generates distinctive modes of motivation, which explain rational action. In section 3.3, I point to some practical presuppositions that explain human (individual and collective) engagement in action in spite of past failures. These arguments show that Williams's criticisms of Kant are largely inconclusive, although they rule out some contemporary rendering of the Kantian project.

1 Thematizing the Predicament of Temporality

This chapter argues that the disruptive force of Williams's critique of Kantian ethics is best evidenced by bringing into focus the impact of temporality on rational agency and, consequently, the theory of practical reasoning. Temporality is a feature of contingency, but its role in this dispute is more important than it might first appear. For Kant, any empirical determination is contingent, and belongs to the phenomena, and since all phenomena are temporally structured, temporality must be a constitutive feature of them. Agents and actions are subjected to time in so far as they are phenomena, and temporality marks the phenomenology of practical choice. However, rational agents and rational actions cannot be seen entirely as mere phenomena: they are autonomous because and in so far as they are capable of reasoning.[3] For Kant, temporality is a predicament to which embodied rational agents are exposed. It imposes several conditions that impact on rational choice: finitude, mortality, and fragility. These features of the human condition play a key role in human self-representation and make humans vulnerable and sensitive to time in different ways. Our interests, concerns,
p. 199 personal relations, and fundamental projects arise, develop, and decline in ways that threaten to ↳ undermine our diachronic integrity and agential authority. Kant does not believe that this threat can be dismissed or overcome once and for all, but that humans—animals endowed with reason—can and should actively engage with it, by engaging in practical reasoning. Thus, the practice of reasoning represents the best response to the predicament of temporality, and the only way in which humans can achieve autonomy over time is by engaging in the activity of rational self-integration.

According to Williams, in order to warrant the requisite autonomy, Kant consistently pursued the view that 'the source of moral thought and action must be located outside the empirically conditioned self' (Williams 1973: 228). On this reading, the very notion of practical choice is predicated on the alleged atemporality of reason: the ascription of any empirical determination would make agency structured by the category of time. In so far as

Williams objects against the purity of Kant's conception of rational agency, he also rejects its atemporality and astoricity. Therefore, my change in focus from contingency to temporality does no violence to Williams's argument. On the contrary, this strategy brings to the fore some crucial aspects of Williams's dispute with Kant that have been underappreciated precisely because of the failure to properly thematize temporality.

While the purpose of this chapter is not exegetical, the strategy of centring on temporality brings numerous benefits to Williams's argument. First, it identifies a fundamental point of disagreement: while Kant considers temporality as a (practical and cognitive) predicament to which embodied rational agents are liable, Williams appreciates temporality as the condition upon which the meaning of life is based. Secondly, it accounts for Williams's reluctance to accept the 'mystery' of rational action, which happens over time but results from the legislative activity of pure rational will (Williams 1995b: 15n). Thirdly, it highlights that Williams is sensitive to the complex ways in which temporality affects human experience, and which—in his view—elude the Kantian approach. Human agents are embodied, temporally situated, and subjected to temporal constraints. However, they also represent themselves as extended through time; their choices are deliberated in the present, originated in the past, and projected into the future (Williams 1973: 86–7, 91). Temporality has disaggregating effects on practical reason, but it is also the condition upon which the meaning of life rests. Williams's ultimate point is that recognizing the temporal structure of human willing and agency requires a perspectival account of practical reasons, which is the view that practical reasons apply from specific temporal perspectives. In the face of the multifaceted experience of temporality, the model of the pure will seems both illusory and self-deceptive (Williams 1995b).

A further advantage of this argumentative strategy is that it relates apparently different strands of Williams's resistance to Kantian philosophy: the critique of the categoricity and unconditionality of moral obligations, and the disregard for emotions (Williams 1966/1973: 207, 225–9), personal attachments and fundamental personal
p. 200 projects (Williams 1981). According to Williams, Kant's 'universalistic ↳ and legalistic' conception of morality neglects these elements, which are central to the good life, and profoundly shaped by time. These different critiques run in parallel as they all track the alleged atemporality of the normative principles that are constitutive of the exercise of reason. While, for Kant, these principles apply to embodied as well as to disembodied rational agents, Williams urges that valuing human life is rooted in desires that enjoy a temporal dimension, and whose existence relates to embodiment. Williams's critique apparently echoes a longstanding debate regarding the alleged atemporality of the Kantian paradigm of rational agency (Williams 1985: 104, 184, 197).[4] Kantian rejoinders are based on an alternative conception of the role of the normative standard of reason, which organizes agency through time.

2 Williams's Critique of the Atemporal Model of Rational Agency

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams praises the *Groundwork* as an 'extraordinary book' and 'the most significant work of moral philosophy after Aristotle' (1985: 55), and yet it constitutes the main target of his criticisms.[5] Ultimately, Williams denies that the faculty of reason can entail all the benefits promised by Kant. He contests universality as the norm of reason and doubts that self-legislation is the organizing form of rational willing and rational agency. The appeal to universality is questioned in its formality, but also in its capacity to produce normative reasons for action.

The problem arises as early as at the stage of the agent's self-representation: 'Why should I think of myself as a legislator and—since there is no distinction—at the same time a citizen of a republic governed by these notional laws? . . . The argument needs to tell us what it is about rational agents that requires them to form this conception of themselves as, so to speak, abstract citizens' (Williams 1985: 63). One way to respond to Williams's line of questioning is to say that Kant's normative model is confined to 'rational agents as such';[6] but this cannot be the definitive answer if ethical theory is to address human agents. Humans are rational, but they

p. 201 are not 'rational and no more' (Williams 1985: 63). The expression 'rational agents ↳ as such' is almost unintelligible, since 'there is no way to be a rational agent and no more' (1985: 63).

Williams's dissatisfaction with the formality and abstractness of Kant's characterization of humanity in terms of the capacity for rational self-determination extends to contemporary philosophers inspired by Kant who have not taken advantage of the Hegelian objection that Kant's practical reason is a universal and empty form, temporally unhinged and ahistorical (Williams 1985: 104, 184, 197, 223n16). However, this dissatisfaction concerns, basically, the methods of transcendental philosophy, which is regarded as a shattering failure (Williams 1973: 236).

Thus, a pressing question is whether and how contemporary neo-Kantians meet the challenge of proving that rational agents *can* represent themselves as citizens and legislators of the notional republic, in a way that 'does not bring back the more extravagant metaphysical luggage of the noumenal self' (Williams 1985: 65).[7] Starting with John Rawls, the main strategy to respond to the metaphysical queerness associated with Kant's conception of practical reason is to leave metaphysics behind and to defend Kant's moral theory at normative level entirely (Rawls 1980), but Williams quickly rules out this methodological option, on the basis that it fails to vindicate the distinctive ambition of Kant's programme. If there is any hope of carrying on Kant's project, it must start with Kant's presumptions about the metaphysics of rational agency (Williams 1985: 64).

2.1 Critique of 'Reflective Freedom'

Since Kant's metaphysics and its contemporary normative correctives are both considered to be unpromising, Williams engages with Thomas Nagel's claim that bases practical freedom on the capacity of self-consciousness and reflection. Nagel believes that the acknowledgement of the reality of others is tantamount to the awareness of equal moral standing, which depends on the agent's metaphysical conception of him/herself (Nagel 1970: 14).[8] This metaphysical conception translates into an epistemic awareness of the equal value of oneself as well as others. The opposite is a form of practical solipsism.

Williams's assessment of this argument assumes that the kind of freedom entailed by the exercise of rational agency is 'reflective freedom as a thinker' (Williams 1985: 66). According to Williams, the appeal to the
p. 202 reflective stance trades on an equivocation between factual and practical deliberation, and ultimately fails to ↳ account for rational action. Kant himself has insisted on the risk of this equivocation (cf. section 3.1 below). Williams grounds his argument on the alleged asymmetry between factual and practical deliberation. In factual deliberation, the reflective self is unified with the pre-reflective self; they are both committed to seeking truth. Reflection imposes corrections and revisions of pre-reflective beliefs, but this is a process informed by the constitutive aim of truth, and the selection of beliefs in the face of evidence is a straightforward matter of rationality.

In practical deliberation, instead, the reflective self radically differs from the pre-reflective self. First, the former is not an agent at all, while the latter is a particular agent faced with a particular deliberative predicament. The deliberator belongs in the context of choice, suffers the pressure of time, and is divided between different clashing desires, interests, and concerns, all of which demand to be satisfied. Deliberation aims to rank and order these demands so that the agent can act on the best reasons. Supposedly, reflection assists in this practical task by requiring the agent to detach from all his/her current desires and to suspend their normative and motivational pressure. Williams believes that this marks a second crucial difference between the pre-reflective and the reflective self, in that the reflective agent acquires totally different reasons for action. Furthermore, Williams argues, the reasons acquired via reflective detachment aspire to be practical and action guiding, but it is doubtful that they actually are, as they are not anchored in the agent's current deliberative set. This is a third element that undermines the practical significance of reflective detachment. The reasons that drive the pre-reflective self are grounded in his/her deliberative set, while the ones that are

reached by mere reflection have no such grounding and thus no motivational support. The latter claim is integral to the entire argument and stands in stark contrast to the Kantian view (cf. section 3.2 below).[9]

Finally, Williams remarks that practical deliberation is first-personal in a way that factual deliberation is not. It is precisely this first-personal feature that warrants the practical significance of reasons for action: 'Practical deliberation is in every case first-personal, and the first person is not derivative or naturally replaced by anyone' (Williams 1985: 66). On the surface, this can be seen as a point of agreement with Kantians.[10] However, for Williams, the first-personal mode is also and *necessarily* agent-relative: it is rooted in particular interests, concerns, desires, beliefs, and outlooks, and therefore—claims Williams—is anchored in the agent's present
p. 203 deliberative set. Such perspectival elements belong in the contents of the ↳ agent's reasons for action, which play a pivotal role in explaining how such contents can guide the agent in action.

On the basis of these considerations, Williams claims a decisive theoretical advantage over the Kantian approach, as his proposal is better suited to explaining the practical significance of reasons. If this argument succeeds, it is a definitive blow to the Kantian approach, since Kant claims the transcendental method is the only one capable of identifying reasons that are objective and authoritative in the first person, as the unique way of vindicating the objectivity and normative authority of moral obligations (G 4: 441–4).[11]

It should be noted, however, that the comparative merits of the two models should be assessed considering also the evolution of Williams's reflection on the nature of practical reasons. While he holds that all the reasons ascriptions true of an agent are made true by the agent's current deliberative set, he offers different specifications of what he means by 'deliberative set' (cf. Williams 1979/1981, 1989/1995b, 2001). Williams's settled position is that: '*A* has a reason to ϕ only if there is a *sound deliberative route* from *A*'s subjective motivational set . . . to *A*'s ϕ-ing' (2001: 91). This formulation captures the relevant connection between an agent's reason to ϕ and a 'motive which will be served or furthered by his ϕ-ing', which is crucial to Williams's understanding of internalism about reasons (1979/1981: 101), and to his critique of Kant (Williams 1985). However, it also adds a complication that renders his internalism less straightforward than in its first stark proposition. This is because the qualification of soundness introduces a considerable ambiguity regarding the content of the subjective deliberative set of reasons. Presumably, the subjective motivational set is expanded to include all those reasons that could potentially explain something that this particular agent does in the circumstances, were she to deliberate soundly from her current 'S' (subjective motivational set). Interestingly, that equivalence need not be something known to an agent. This is to say that the counterfactual is true of the agent, now, but not its truth-makers given that they would be made true by some process of deliberation in which the agent has (*ex hypothesi*) not yet engaged. What warrants the relation that explains action is, however, the present motive, and thus the issue of temporality is of first importance.[12]

On the other hand, the qualification of soundness softens the disagreement between Williams's and the Kantian perspective on the nature of practical reasons. Indeed, in recent debates, Williams's argument based on the distinction between practical and speculative deliberation has met a curious fate. It has become something of an asset to a prominent variety of Kantian ethics championed by Christine M. Korsgaard. Korsgaard
p. 204 repeatedly uses this argument in an attempt ↳ to distinguish constructivist and realist conceptions of Kantian ethics (Korsgaard 1996b: ch. 4; 2002).[13] Correspondingly, Williams's critique has generated a divide between different ways of understanding and carrying on Kant's legacy.[14] Furthermore, Kantians have elaborated further on the importance of partial perspectives for an objectivist account of rational action.[15] In an absolute perspective, in which one is deprived of all perspectival mental states and attitudes, particular interests and desires, there is no drive to agency. Humans may have a hard time constructing reasons *sub specie aeternitatis*, in so far as this endeavour requires absolute detachment from anything they care about, and which is *for them* alienating and ultimately meaningless. Nevertheless, there is a deeper problem: the complete success of reflective detachment involves the denial of any subjective trait and, with it, the suppression of any drive to action, which makes this device inapt for making sense of rational action.

2.2 The Temporality of Categorical Desires

A second argument against Kant's morality concerns the temporality of categorical desires. Kant argues that moral obligation is a unique form of practical necessity by which humans respond to the predicament of temporality, which is a threat of desegregation. By contrast, Williams argues that categoricalness is not distinctive to moral obligations and, more importantly, that it is inextricably linked to temporality. First, temporality is not a plight, but rather the condition that makes sense of the way human life is infused with meaning and value, by way of the dynamics of desire. Desires propel the agent into the future and are the building block of a strategy aimed at dismantling Kant's theory of practical reason. Secondly, the temporality of desires explains the phenomenology of value and choice, in ways that evade the Kantian framework: that is, by displacing the centrality of moral obligations. These claims are established via the power of example.[16]

The first proposition is based on Makropulos's case, which imposes a reflection on the tedium of immortality. For the sake of argument, I focus on the point that immortality is intolerable because it is meaningless, and it is meaningless because immortality necessarily muffles and eventually extinguishes the propelling force of
p. 205 desire.[17] Williams identifies categorical desires as the source of meaning and ↳ the drives of future agency, which 'propel forward into longer life' (1973: 86–7, 91). What makes desires categorical is not that their objects are special (e.g. moral interests), but rather that they play a grounding role: 'some kinds of desires are unconditional or categorical in a distinctive sense, they are fully categorical, and one's existence itself wanted as something necessary to them' (1973: 86). The desirability of life supplants the transcendence of reason: 'The question of life being desirable is certainly transcendental in the most modest sense, in that it gets by far its best answer in never being asked at all' (1973: 87). The undesirability of immortality is not merely contingent, but necessarily related to the dynamics of desire.[18] Rather than the appeal to a transcendent (and allegedly atemporal) reason, it is a human psychological mechanism that explains how categorical desires lose force. Boredom is an effect of the absence of change, which is to say that the categoricalness of desires is bound up with temporality.[19]

Thus, Williams's notion of categoricalness does not serve the purpose of responding to the predicament of temporality by allowing for agential authority over time. Kant uses categoricalness to make reasons invulnerable to time: moral obligations are inescapable because and in so far as they are rational requirements. By contrast, Williams relates the categoricalness of desires to their temporality, and shows that moral obligations can be divisive and alienating rather than providing the unifying ground of human identity.[20] The effect of his argument is to denounce not so much the extraordinary demandingness of morality as its deeply alienating effects, which depend on its being disconnected from the agent's real desires, concerns, and projects.

These effects, along with Williams's second claim regarding the role of temporality in practical reasoning, are brought to the fore by a broad repertoire of difficult choices. Gauguin and Karenina are required to deliberate while driven by the propelling force of categorical desires that diverge from moral obligation (Williams 1981: 23–4, 26–7).[21] These agents experience a conflict between reasons grounded in their current personal projects, which they regard at the time as the foundational source of meaning of their lives, and reasons deriving from
p. 206 past commitments and obligations to others. This conflict is divisive because moral obligations ↳ command with unconditional authority, but they seem unreasonable in the deliberative stance. Gauguin's and Karenina's categorical desires have arisen over time and, possibly, will decline over time. However, while they are in force, they infuse their lives with categorical meaning and thus undermine the rational authority of moral obligations towards their families.[22] Note that neither Gauguin nor Karenina has any expectation that their desires should diminish the authority and importance of moral obligations; thus, they feel bound by categorical forces that are pulling them in different directions.

Apparently, the main culprit is the Kantian claim that moral obligations are the only kind of practical necessity, categorical imperatives, which hold true for all rational agents at all times because their authority is grounded on reason.[23] However, this is only a consequence of a broader claim that highlights the fragmentation of

practical reason, the different sources of which exert different forms of authority across time. At the same time, Williams unveils a weakness specific of the Kantian project. If moral obligations lack rational authority, then their authority must reside in social power and external enforcement by way of incentives and sanctions—something at odds with Kant's claim about the autonomy of reason. This is how the critique of the sovereignty of moral obligations relates to and culminates with the critique of morality as a peculiar institution centred on the 'system of blame' (Williams 1985: 177).[24] However, the driving point is that by advocating for the plural sources of practical necessity, Williams opens the possibility of radical conflicts within the domain of reasons.

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2.3 The Fragmentation of Practical Reason and Temporally Anchored Deliberation

Williams's novel conception of categoricalness provides the materials for a third argument that targets Kant's conception of rational deliberation. While Kant emphasizes the lawful and unifying activity of reasoning, Williams's view is that practical reason is fragmented, and its motivational force derives from categorical desires that are effective in the present. The resulting view is that rational deliberation is anchored in the present deliberative set. In his view, then, reasons constructed via the appeal to the reflective stance fail to account for rational action precisely because and in so far as they are temporally disconnected. His whole argument rests on the assumption that in order for reasons to be action-guiding they must be present or rooted in the agent's current deliberative set. This assumption explains the nature of the conflict experienced by Karenina and Gauguin.

These are best described as *intrapersonal diachronic conflicts* of values, due to the fact that the agent acquired different categorical desires over time, and thus developed radically different views of what is, for them, a life worth living.[25] How should intertemporal conflicts be assessed? In the limiting cases, such as that of Karenina, it is no longer clear why past reasons (to stand by her husband and son) are rationally overriding, given her unconditional love for Vronsky. Williams's view is that the 'correct perspective on one's life is from *now*' (1981: 13).[26] This affirmation establishes a temporal bias to the present which is built into the very idea of intentional action. If reasons have a hold over the agent only when they are anchored in the present deliberative set, then categorical desires are not really categorical in any interesting sense: there is nothing beyond the fact that for *some* time, they infuse life with meaning, and for that period of time they provide the basis for action.

These cases represent a peculiar challenge to Kant's conception of morality because they are not morally indifferent but experience the burden of moral obligations as external constraints that threaten to undermine the meaning of their life.[27] On Williams's construal of the predicament, in this case, moral obligations (e.g. to stand by the family) lose not only their motivating force but also their *supreme* authority because they have no normative grip on the agent. These agents are fragmented across time: their diachronic integrity—rather than their morality—is at stake. At least in its practical function, reason fails to ensure the unity of reasons. The
p. 208 principles of reason may still have a synchronic function, and provide agential ↳ unity at any one time, but they do not have a unifying function over time. Most importantly, synchronic unity is predicated on the contingency that past deliverances of reasons are coherent with current motives. Practical reasons are as sensitive to time as desires are. It follows that practical reason defines a heterogeneous and fragmented domain, in which no single paramount kind of interest has the utmost importance and thus deliberative priority across time. The predicament of temporality is the predicament of having even a single practical reason being unified throughout one's life.

The cost of this approach, which privileges the present deliberative stance, is the loss of diachronic *rational* authority. Nagel objects that Williams's approach fails to make sense of action at a distance, across time and across people. Williams's point is that this is a cost that should be borne, as it promises an explanatory advantage.[28] By referring to reasons that accord with the present ranking we are in a better position to explain the relationship that rational agents hold with themselves and their actions, because and in so far as this

ranking relates to the present agent's motivational set. The option of searching for absolute reasons is more costly as it forgoes the explanation of acting on reasons.

3 The Kantian Project of Rational Self-Integration

In the following sections, I present some rejoinders to Williams's arguments. They are intended to establish that the previous critiques of Kant are misplaced, although they may still have some bearing on some recent neo-Kantian theories of reflective detachment. In fact, Kant does not propose reflective detachment as such, and he is adamant that practical and epistemic deliberation differ.[29] In fact, he focuses on the same concerns as Williams (cf. *Reflexionen*; Allison 1990: 195). To gain an adequate appreciation of this difference, Kant holds, we need to understand the specific role played by the norm of universality in speculative and practical cognition, respectively. Similarly, Kant's view is that reasoning is generative of a distinctive moral incentive, known as respect.[30] In section 3.1, I illustrate the role of the CI as a mode of autonomous organization, rather than an
p. 209 exercise of detachment from the influences of desires. I surmise that this constitutive norm ↳ is not limited to individual self-organization, but generates the rational collective called 'humanity'. In section 3.2, I argue that Kant's insight is that reasoning can be subversive in that it generates distinctive modes of motivation, which explain rational action. In section 3.3, I point to some practical presuppositions that explain human (individual and collective) engagement in action despite past failures.

3.1 The CI as the Form of Autonomous Self-Organization

A common thread among neo-Kantian approaches to practical reason is the appeal to 'reflective detachment' as a source of rational authority.[31] In a way, this is not surprising because Kant focuses on cases in which moral motivation arises from the act of discarding desires and demoting self-interest (G 4: 440). However, it is misleading to characterize these reflective modes in terms of detachment as the purpose of engaging in them is not merely to remove oneself from current motives, but to organize one's conflicted mind and thus constitute it in action autonomously.

Practical reflection is aimed at action, and action requires the elimination of any conflict between motives. However, this necessity is not only pragmatic, since rational agents aspire to integrity, and not only express, since rational agents also constitute themselves in action.[32] Arguably, practical reflection is intended to organize one's agency in time and across time, not only as individuals (*uti singuli*), but as eligible members of the kingdom of ends. These complex functions are all fulfilled by conforming to the CI, which is not merely a deliberative test, but the very form of reflection. It is the constitutive norm that governs the very activity of practical thinking, which basically consists of the agent's activity of self-constitution, a form of mental representation that is both efficacious and increasingly self-transparent. Persons constitute themselves as persons per se through rational activity that is public (Engstrom 2013: 148; see Bagnoli 2013b: 171; 2017).

If the main point of the CI is self-constitution, then it is reductive and misleading to understand it as a form of synchronic individual deliberation. In fact, this norm attends both the diachronic and collective dimensions of human agency. According to Kant, human beings 'necessarily represent' themselves as rational ends in themselves, in so far as they hold that rational nature is an end in itself, and they represent themselves as
p. 210 rational (G 4: 429). This subjective principle of ↳ human action commits them to treat all rational agents the same, but also to consider irrelevant the particular temporal instantiations of rational agency, in so far as the mere temporal location is morally irrelevant. Thus, the CI constrains deliberation in two ways: across time and across persons (in dealing with others and with ourselves at future times).[33] Both diachronic and collective human agency require the work of reasoning as we cannot expect shared rationality to arise naturally: that is, without the exercise of rational will. However, the constraining effects of the CI do not have any alienating consequences. Importantly, incentives are incorporated into the subjective maxims of action.[34] The normative

power of the CI consists of transforming the subjective maxim into a law that can be accepted by a totality of rational wills. This is the device by which self-legislation is also and at the same time co-legislation in the temporally extended and socialized sense which represents the structure of the kingdom of ends, and thus always includes dealings with all rational agents and across time.

Secondly, this understanding of the CI shows that some objections against the allegedly individualistic features of Kant's humanity are misplaced. Following in the footsteps of Hegelian critics of Kant, Williams remarks that the emphasis on the 'purely moral' conceals the fact that ethical life lies outside the individual (1985: 191). However, the main function of the CI is not to set aside the urgency of present desires and allow for purity of the will, but to select motives that can form the stable basis of shared rational agency, and around which the notion of humanity is built.

Humans engage in practical reasoning to determine what is rational to do independently of the pressure of current desires because they represent themselves as finite but extended over time. They care about their future, and the future of what they care about. The CI warrants a sort of rational action that is not determined by its historical root or by the impellent desires and needs of the moment. Importantly, its function is not only to achieve mere consistency in time, or a form of stability that relies on the contingent stability of character, or on traditions and habits. Rather, the CI attains a distinctive form of stability, marked by autonomy.

To support this claim, Kant's conception of practical reason presupposes both a consistent relationship with and an abstraction from time. Human agents act in time, and necessarily so. Thus, action is situated in a temporal succession. On the other hand, to act freely is to act without any determining link with previous motivations. For an action to be free, the past may incline to but not determine action. Rather, free action is originated by the activity of agency. Importantly, this origination is not unruly, but it is governed by norms
p. 211 whose authority does not ↳ depend on temporal constraints. Such norms are at once constitutive of the exercise of rational agency which happens in time and is not conditioned by temporality. However, action must also be explicable in terms of its relation to future and past states, but the relation between an agent and his/her action does not belong in time just because it is a normative relation of authority.[35] While the work of practical reason is not in itself subject to temporal relations, its operation is a matter of setting aside essentially temporal items and establishing connections through time—so that practical reason ultimately has an effect in time, and its main function is to allow agents to achieve integrity over time.

3.2 The Subversive Effect of Reasoning

Williams presses the case that the predicament of temporality arises because agents are temporal subjects, and their reasons appear to be temporal items which, like their needs and desires, are destined to vanish. Kant's main rejoinder is based on the categorical imperative, which captures the requisites of rational action that do not depend on arbitrary or external factors. However, the predicament of temporality puts pressure on Kantian theory to demonstrate how practical reasons that are not sensitive to time can be motivating. This concern is not allayed by the previous explanation about the constitutive function of the CI. Williams instils doubts that universal and temporally unanchored reasons may be of any practical guidance: he points to cases in which the CI has alienating effects, rather than working towards self-integration.

Kant acknowledges the gap created by reflection but opposes Williams's view that rational deliberation must be temporally anchored in order to be action-guiding, which would lead to a form of imprudence.[36] However, Kant's practical reflection differs from reflective detachment in so far as it *produces* a moral incentive, which reorients the will away from self-love, and thus furthers attention to others. Kant's argument is that practical reasoning generates a distinctive moral incentive, named respect, which carries the subjective awareness of the moral law (G 4: 400, 401; C2 5: 71–89).[37] The first important function of respect is precisely to provide the sort of first-personal authority that Williams found lacking in Kant's account of moral obligations.

p. 212 Secondly, respect marks a sort of moral motivation distinctive to the finite rational agent (C2 5: 79, 82), whose will does not naturally conform to the objective law (C2 5: 72, 74), and for whom reasoning proves necessary.[38] The normative role of respect is subversive, in that it can contrast desires and inclinations that exist prior to engaging in reasoning and set them aside as lacking normative authority. Respect is the moral feeling that subverts the ranking of maxims, and allows the human agent to act on reasons, even in the presence of contrary motives. Thus, respect establishes the possibility of moral action irrespective of the current pressure of desires. This is the counterpart of the claim that establishes the normative power of reasoning in order to counteract past patterns, habits, and desires.

Thirdly, in deliberating about future action as much as in deliberating with others, agents *must* presume that reasoning has this subversive effect, and does not merely confirm past patterns. This normative power establishes the practical freedom from one's past, a crucial dimension of autonomous (individual and collective) agency. Respect is tantamount to the subjective experience of autonomy, and it is built into one's self-representation as an autonomous agent. This is the straightforward answer to Williams's issue about being a citizen of the notional republic: such a description is operative in humans because it belongs in the first-personal conception of oneself as an autonomous agent. Due to this difference, Kant's view is not vulnerable to Williams's objection in the same way as the neo-Kantian conception of reflective detachment is.

Of course, Williams dismisses Kant's theory of respect as the sole moral incentive, because of its dubious underpinnings.[39] Admittedly, Kant's argument is partly based on the distinction between moral and pathological feelings, which does sound somewhat obsolete; however, this is not a sufficient ground for rejecting Kant's view that practical reasoning produces novel incentives. Williams's objection is circular precisely because it denies the motivating and generative function of reasoning.[40] The claim that reasoning is not generative entails that all rational actions are motivated by a pre-existing desire, which resides in the agent's deliberative set (Nagel 1970: 28–9). On Williams's view, intertemporal and interpersonal distance can be bridged only by the contingent persistence of desires, which are the only drive to future action and shared agency.

By contrast, Kant sees the activity of reasoning as being explanatorily prior to incentives.[41] Even though
p. 213 motivation presumes the presence of desires, desires are ↳ not always present as the original drives of action: some desires are generated by reasoning. Action is explained by reason, in so far as it is brought under the control of normative principles. Practical reasoning generates efficacious reasons because respect works at the same time as the incentive to morality and as a normative constraint on the contents of reasons. The appeal to a moral incentive does not establish that reasoning always produces a decisive moral motive for action. In animals endowed with rationality, it does not, and to presume that this is always the case would be contrary to the facts. However, it is also incorrect to assume that reasoning never motivates anyone to do the right thing, in the absence of prior motives.

The Kantian contention is that there is a structural connection between motivation and reason, which is constitutive of humanity (Nagel 1970: 14, 31–2). To this extent, humans are not fully free to be amoral or unsusceptible to moral demands, because the latter are rooted in or constitutive of their distinctive form of agency. This is the modest sense in which moral obligations are inescapable. This sense of inescapability is not incoherent with the painful experience of the predicament of temporality. The recognition of the inescapability of moral obligations may be quite burdensome—as the cases of Gauguin and Karenina illustrate—but it is not alienating, in the proper sense, not because these agents harbour a deep moral motivation or are altruistically oriented, but because they are sensitive to motivations generated by reasoning. This generative aspect of reasoning is perhaps the most misunderstood feature of Kant's theory of moral obligation.

3.3 Affective Orientation towards the Future

By and large, Williams's critique of Kant calls attention to the role of desires, emotions, and sensibility in a theory of practical reasoning, which is shown to require an appropriate 'ethicized psychology'.[42] However, his condemnation of Kant's moral psychology is not fully justified, and his uncharitable attitude can partly be explained by his focus on the *Groundwork*. Kant's mature moral psychology prominently includes future-oriented practical attitudes which directly respond to the concerns about interpersonal and diachronic rational agency.

Humans act under the idea of freedom: that is, they must assume that they are able and free to determine rational ends for themselves, and that they can exercise some deliberative control over their inclinations,
p. 214 desires, and instincts, having at ↳ least some capacity to resist their pressure (G 4: 448). These are necessary presuppositions for practical reason, and they inform deliberation for the future. If humans were convinced that their past would determine them, then how could they engage in action? Given the conflicted minds of animals endowed with reason, there is no expectation that the moral incentive will always prevail. In fact, the predicament of temporality exposes humans to the recurrent experience of failure.

Kant is well aware of the psychological drawbacks of being a temporal and fragile subject. This awareness is particularly acute in his reflections on history, in which failures are perceived as not merely recurrent, but pervasive and cumulative. To counteract their despairing effects, Kant brings to the fore the practical attitude of rational hope. The interesting feature of his conception is that it differs from outcome-oriented hope, and from any optimistic expectations or wishful thinking. Its credentials are wholly practical rather than speculative, and its function is not merely to strengthen the human will that has been weakened by past failures. Rather, hope invests oneself and others with the responsibility to try and resist, thereby providing novel grounds for action. Hope entitles rational agents to enjoin action, even when the history of failures is so bruising (TP 8: 309). This is another way in which Kant envisions individual and collective agency as being organized over time, by virtue of engaging in practical attitudes (PP 8: 368). In contrast to theories that rely on the conservative pressure of desires, and that anchor deliberation in the present, the Kantian approach points to practical attitudes as modes of authorizing action at a distance, across time and across persons. In contrast to theories that rely on character traits or traditions, it allows for modes of self-integration that make room for normative change and radical departures from past experiences.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that by refocusing on the predicament of temporality we can gain a better insight into the nature and depth of Williams's critique of Kant. Williams celebrates mortality and contingency. Kant's ambition is to provide normative tools to manage the predicament of temporality, suggesting that humanity is bound together not only by interdependency, desire, and habits that are easily placed into patterns, but also by rational attitudes and norms that design rational action anew. This dispute reveals a radical disagreement regarding the capacity of reasoning to provide the normative and motivational structure of agency: while Williams relies on the force of current desires, Kant identifies the potentially subversive force of reasoning as a generator of
p. 215 motives.[43] I have argued that Williams ↳ does not offer any decisive argument to dismiss the Kantian account of practical rationality. In fact, he seems to lack the resources to explain how rational agents can exercise their rational authority over time and across persons.[44] In spite of the traction of Williams's arguments, Kant's thesis remains a lively research programme. However, its success is predicated on articulating the integration of reason and normative attitudes coherently with empirical psychology. To this extent, Williams's objections have set the normative standard for any plausible Kantian theory of practical rationality.[45]

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Notes

Footnotes

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1 ‘[T]he Kantian conception embodies, in a very pure form, something that is basic to our ideas of morality’ (Williams 1981: 36). See also Williams (1973: 235; 1993: 7, 91).

2 In his view, the philosophical disregard for emotions, individuality, and difference are all but a by-product of a conception of reason divorced from contingency (Williams 1973: 225–9; 1995a, 1995b: 246, 1995c), see also Williams 1963. On the importance of emotions and affects in temporalizing one’s existence, and associated varieties of estrangement, see Moran 2022.

3 Reasoning emancipates humans from the influences of alien causes (G 4: 440–1, 446). Autonomy consists of the capacity to be motivated independently of needs and desires, and even in contrast to them (Allison 1990: 97; Nagel 1970).

4 See Hegel’s critique of Kant’s conception of reason as a ‘dimensionless activity, as a pure concept of infinitude’ which is ‘held fast in opposition to the finite’ (Hegel 1802). Allison notes Williams’s deep affinities with Hegel’s critique, but does not comment on temporality (see Allison 1990: 47–53, 81, 191–8). Williams’s resistance to Kantian moral philosophy is in line with Murdoch’s comment that ‘The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value’ (1997: 366). While it is doubtful that the slogan captures Kant’s conception of the rational will, it is certainly apt to describe recent variants of Kantian ethics.

5 Analytic philosophy has predominantly considered the *Groundwork* as the paradigm of Kantian ethics, and neo-Kantians have taken this work as the main measure of reference.

6 ‘The normativity of reasons requires the perspective of a rational agent as such as the standpoint from which all reasons, including those grounded on what motivates an agent from his own point of view, are ultimately assessed’ (Darwall 1983: 113).

7 Williams’s point is reminiscent of Mackie’s objection of queerness, which is applied to Kant as much as to G. E. Moore (see Mackie 1977: 40 ff.; cf. Bagnoli 2015).

8 ‘If he acts *on* reasons, then he must not only be an agent but reflect on himself as an agent, and this involves his seeing himself as one agent among others’ (Williams 1985: 65, see also Williams 1995a).

9 This is hardly Williams’s finding: Kant himself has formulated the problem of how a purely speculative principle can motivate.

10 As rational deliberators ‘our relation to our actions and choices is essentially authorial: from it, we view them as our own’ (Korsgaard 1996a: 378). Williams brings together the claim that deliberation is first-personal, in the sense that it is authoritative in the first person, and the claim that it is personal or agent-relative.

11 For Williams, authority derives from conjoined categoricalness and self-address (Williams 1981: 54).

12 I would like to thank a referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

13 Korsgaard believes that the epistemological model is misguided when applied to ethics (see Korsgaard 2009: 302–26; 2008a: 234, 30–1, 55–7, 67–8). For a different assessment of Kant’s conception of practical knowledge, cf. Engstrom (2009, 2013); Bagnoli (2013b).

14 The very distinction between realism and Kantian constructivism has been questioned on different grounds (see Bagnoli 2022).

15 Nagel (1986) is perceptive of this problem, and replicates an issue raised by Kant.

16 For a thematization of the use of examples in Kant, see O’Neill (1986).

17 ‘Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless, I shall suggest; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life’ (Williams 1973: 82).

18 ‘In EM’s case, her boredom and distance from life both kill desire and consist in the death of it’ (Williams 1973: 91).

19 Likewise, Millgram (2004) argues that (1) all final ends are bound to become boring after a time, and (2) this is not regrettable. Correspondingly, he considers the capacity for boredom as being among the top-level components of

rationality. With regard to the inescapability of moral obligations, see Queloz (2022: 195–6).

20 Cf. Korsgaard (1996b: 102).

21 'The limiting case of this might be that the promised life held out some hope just to that desire mentioned before, that future desires of mine will be born and satisfied; but if that were the only categorical desire that carried me forward into it, at least this seems demanded, that any image I have of those future desires should make it comprehensible to me how in terms of my character they could be my desires' (Williams 1973: 91–2).

22 The significance of this essay is generally appreciated as a contribution to the issue of moral luck, but the temporal aspect is crucial to the phenomenology of choice: 'Momentous decisions such as those of Gauguin and Anna Karenina . . . are especially dramatic examples of this simple truth, cases in which an agent's choices set in motion causal processes whose final shape cannot be known at the time when they are made, where those processes in turn determine the standpoint from which the agent will later look back on them' (Wallace 2003: 137).

23 'Kant understood practical necessity in terms of a reason for action that was not conditional on any desire at all, and he thought that there could be such a thing because he believed that the reasons of morality were based on reason alone. That is why he identified practical necessity as being uniquely moral necessity, and why, for him, unconditioned possibility and unconditioned necessity ultimately coincide, so that he could be led to say that the only truly free acts were those done for the sake of duty' (Williams 1995b: 17). 'Practical necessity is in no way peculiar to ethics. . . . The fundamental point is that a conclusion of practical necessity is the same sort of conclusion whether it is grounded on ethical reasons or not. . . . [P]ractical necessity, even when it is grounded on ethical reasons, does not necessarily signal an obligation' (Williams 1985: 188). Williams aligns with Murdoch on this point. 'If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at . . . The ideal situation . . . is to be represented as a kind of "necessity"' (Murdoch 1997: 331). See also Frankfurt (1999).

24 'The institution of blame is best seen as involving a fiction, by which we treat the agent as one for whom the relevant ethical reasons are reasons. . . . This fiction has various functions. One is that if we treat the agent as someone who gives weight to ethical reasons, this may help to make him into such a person. . . . The fiction of the deliberative community is one of the positive achievements of the morality system' (Williams 1985: 193). See Queloz (2022); cf. Bagnoli (2011) on Kant's argument that sanctions and emotions take away from the obligatoriness of moral obligation.

25 From within Williams's theory of reasons, analogous changes may be due to self-correction: that is, the engagement with a sound deliberative route that corrects previous inconsistencies, cf. section 2.1 on the qualification of 'soundness'.

26 The contrary view treats bias to the present as a form of imprudence (see Korsgaard 2014: 7).

27 In general, it is questionable whether Kant took the threat of moral scepticism as seriously and saw it in the same way as contemporary philosophers do (see Timmermann 2007, 129–30; Stern 2013).

28 Williams acknowledges this cost in rejecting Rawls's model of the agent as a 'trustee of one's own future self' (Williams 1981: 49).

29 Kant does acknowledge a close kinship between practical and epistemic spontaneity (see Allison 1990: ch. 2). However, the practical function of reason is distinctive, and it can be appreciated instead in the 'direction of existential dependence' (Engstrom 2009: 119). In the case of theoretical cognition, the object of knowledge affects the mind, and thus it is 'given from elsewhere' (2009: 119). Conversely, objects of practical cognition (or objects of the will) are produced by the very act of cognition, and thus they do not exist prior to and independently of the act of cognition.

30 I use the term 'incentive' as a subjective determining ground of a will, which does not yet conform to the objective law (C2 5: 72, 74).

31 The notion of reflective detachment is absent in Nagel (1970), while it is the main polemical target in Williams (1985). It is also questionable that this is the central device at work in the process of objectivity in Nagel (1986). However, reflective endorsement is a key mechanism at work in Korsgaard (1996b) as 'our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question' (1996b: 92–3, 129, 229–31; cf. Korsgaard 2008: §7.5.1; Williams 1996; Nagel 1996). It remains questionable whether this mechanism can adequately serve as the source of agential authority without a subsequent stage of reflective endorsement.

32 Unity of agency is a practical need and 'it is not based on a metaphysical theory, nor on a unity of which you are conscious' (Korsgaard 1996a: 369, 370–3, 378; 1996b: chs 3–4).

33 See Korsgaard (2021: 186).

34 As Allison notices, Williams's objection of alienation gains traction proportionally to discounting the 'incorporation thesis' (see Allison 1990: 192). According to Kant, we must 'incorporate' our incentives into our maxims if we are to act on them.

35 See Kant's discussion of the third antinomy (A536/B564, A445/B473; cf. Wood 1984). On the interpretation of Allison (1990: 25–8), the apparent oddity is resolved by reference to two criteria: the explicability of the unity of experience as an ordered flow (A446/B474) and the activity of rational agency, which is not subjected to the order of time (A551–2/B579–80). The compatibility of such criteria depends on the success of transcendental idealism.

36 'In almost anyone's account of imprudence, present desire uses its unchallenged incumbency to silence representatives of

the future self' (Korsgaard 2014: 7).

37 I leave aside here the complications associated with this claim but see Bagnoli (2021).

38 For analogous reasons, it is risky to have other motives to cooperate with the law (C2 5: 72, 75); the main risk is that their interference may destroy the moral worth of action (C2 5: 93, 96–7).

39 Williams opposes Kant's distinction between pathological and moral feelings (1973: 260). The 'mystery' of the inescapability of moral obligation is exposed as involving a sort of misrepresentation and illusion (1985: 177, 191, 196), while claiming paramount importance (1985: 182) and deliberative priority (1985: 183; 1995b; cf. Bagnoli 2015).

40 'No purely rational process can require a man to move from I-desire to non-I desires' (Williams 1973: 265).

41 Nagel argues that desires can be explained by practical reason rather than vice versa; they therefore do not constitute its condition of possibility. The structure of (practical) reason explains motivation by desire (Nagel 1970: 33–4). Due to my constructivist understanding of Kant's conception of practical reason, I prefer to talk of the priority of reasoning over desire.

42 To ethicize psychology is 'to provide a psychology that gets its significance from ethical categories' (Williams 1993: 43), and to define 'the functions of the mind, especially with regard to action . . . at the most basic level in terms of categories that get their significance from ethics' (1993: 160).

43 Nagel underlines that this is not a psychological explanation of moral motivation; rather, it is what explains one of the core elements of motivation.

44 It could still be objected that this view relies on a form of motivational dualism, which for Williams marks a powerful and deeply rooted misconception of the good life (Williams 1985: 196); but there are ways of arguing for this claim coherently with non-reductive naturalism, see Bagnoli manuscript.

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