

AUTHORITY, OBJECTIVITY AND HISTORY IN ETHICS. A STUDY OF BERNARD WILLIAMS'S RELATIVISM

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the attitude we should adopt towards the historical processes that have shaped our ethical ideas by studying Bernard Williams's relativism of distance. This relativism, applied to the history of ethics, can be understood as saying that, in confrontations with ethical outlooks of the past, the language of appraisal is inappropriate and no real judgments are made. I argue that this relativism of distance is inconsistent with some other of Williams's meta-ethical views, in particular with his views concerning the authority of our ethical ideas. I also try to explain the representation of the history of ethics implicit in our respect for that authority.

Keywords

Internalism, relativism, objectivity, Bernard Williams, history, ethics.

How should we look back on the millennia-long history during which our ethical outlook and our way of life arose? We know that in the past strange and even appalling views have enjoyed widespread and sincere support. Nevertheless, we do not view our own ethical ideas as a simple matter of choice (as we choose a hobby or a career). Rather, we experience that certain demands are made upon us with unmistakable authority. If we do not object against the use in ethics of the predicate 'true', we may say that we are confronted with the (ethical) truth of an outlook. Or, to use a provocative expression by David Wiggins, however uncertain we may feel in ethical matters, at least on some issues (concerning equality and equal rights as against past ideas of hierarchy, for instance) we believe that "there is nothing else to think".

Given these aspects of our ethical lives, it seems only natural to view our own ethical outlook as the conclusion of a process of rational reflection, as the product of the growth of ethical knowledge; if our ancestors had only thought long, thoroughly and sincerely enough, we tend to think, they would have arrived at an outlook very similar to ours. At the very least, we imagine that the consecutive generations contribute to a common search for truth.

Against this flattering representation of the history of our ethical ideals Bernard Williams has strong objections; according to him, it betrays a radically misconceived conception of authority in ethics and, as a result, also of the kind of representation of the history of ethics that is in agreement with the specific character of ethical authority. In fact,

“[A] truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them in a way that vindicates them against possible rivals”¹.

A very quick comparison with the history of the natural sciences will explain this objection. In natural science there appear to exist certain ‘external’ procedures or criteria. That is to say procedures or criteria accepted by supporters of rival theories on the basis of which it can be shown which theory is preferable. Often we can even make sense of an older theory by means of the new theory, explaining why the older theory, although wrong, seemed plausible at the time. (In Williams’s terms: the new theory entails a “theory of error”). Consequently, “both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement”². In ethics, however, nothing comparable to what happens in the natural sciences exists. Even if agreement or convergence in ethical outlook does occur, it does not come about because alternative outlooks have been eliminated in accordance with such external procedures. In this sense, no ethical conception can be said to be “vindicated against possible rivals”. The history of ethics is not vindicatory: we have no vindication for claiming that people in the past were mistaken and that by amending their views something like they would ultimately have arrived at something like our own conception.

From this Williams concludes that with regard to ethical outlooks of the past only a relativistic attitude is appropriate. This ‘relativism of distance’, summarized and applied to the past, is the thesis that in confrontations with past outlooks “the language of appraisal – good, bad, right, wrong, and so on – [...] is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made”³. Such appraisals cannot be vindicated and therefore amount to nothing more than an empty compliment to ourselves (as if we are rational and astute enough to have discovered the ethical truth searched for all through the ages)⁴. The past must not be judged; it must be studied and interpreted⁵.

In this paper I will discuss this relativistic interpretation of the history of ethics. I shall adopt as a starting point Williams’s claims that in ethics external procedures or criteria on the scientific model are useless, if not unfeasible, and that the history of ethics is therefore not vindicatory. I will also accept the internalist interpretation of practical reason upon which, as I shall explain, these claims rest. My aim is to examine what interpretation of the history of ethics follows from these ideas. For instance, it is not obvious how we may reconcile Williams’s relativism of distance with a proper recognition of the authority of our own ethical ideas. Can we acknowledge this authority without expressing disapproval of past outlooks? Doesn’t claiming truth for at least some

¹ (Williams 2002), 20-2; see also (Williams 2000), 489-490 and (Williams 1995b), 179-180.

² (Williams 2000), 486; see also (Williams 1972), 32-33; (Williams 1996), 28-30.

³ (Williams 1985), 161; (Williams 1981b), 142-143. Judgments concerning past conceptions of social justice is the one exception Williams is prepared to make.

⁴ (Williams 1985), 159-160; (Williams 2000), 488.

⁵ Compare (Williams 1995e), 146. Although Williams suggest that relativism of distance only applies to “fairly large scale systems or bodies or beliefs”. (Williams 1985), 162, ethical judgments concerning individual people of the past and their actions appear to suffer in the final analysis from the same problem as more general judgments: it “involves taking the people in abstraction from the social practices in which they lived, and so, often, we do not see them realistically” (Williams 1985), 162; cf. (Williams 1981b), 141-142.

of our ethical ideas entail that we condemn earlier outlooks as false? Or, conversely, what does the claim 'there is nothing else to think' precisely mean when applied to the past?

Searching for an answer to these questions, I will explain the background of Williams's relativism of distance (1.) and show that it rests on a number of premises that are implausible or in any case not argued for (2. and 3.). By way of conclusion I will present an alternative interpretation of the history of ethical ideas that is more in line with Williams's other meta-ethical views, and, in particular, with his analysis of authority in ethics (4.). By offering an internal criticism of relativism of distance, I aim to understand what the reflection upon the history of our ethical outlook may reveal about the relationship in ethics between contingency and validity or authority.

1. An internalist interpretation of practical reason and truth in ethics

Williams's relativism of distance, as is generally the case with his meta-ethics, rests upon an internalist interpretation of practical reason⁶. According to such an internalist interpretation practical reasons are internal reasons. That is to say, if we can "truly say of A that A has a reason to ϕ , then [...] there must be a sound deliberative route to ϕ -ing which starts from A's existing motivations"⁷. Williams's first statement of this internalism in 1980 reopened the debate about the possibility of a *pure* practical reason that dates back at least to the days of Hume and Kant. Since I cannot retrace every twist and turn of that debate here, I will only point out what seems to Williams himself the essential insight. For it is highly pertinent to the issue of the proper attitude towards the ethical outlooks of earlier times.

Of course, Williams does not deny that the concept of a practical reason has normative force; we can and must distinguish between the reasons an agent thinks he has and the reasons he really has. (If only because a person who is wrong about the world – who takes a glass of petrol for a glass of gin – may think he has a reason – to drink the glass – when he doesn't – wanting gin is not a reason to drink a glass of petrol)⁸. The central insight of this internalism is the thesis is that notwithstanding the normative force of the concept of a practical reason and notwithstanding the fact that we may distinguish the reasons an agent thinks he has and the reasons he really has, true statements about the practical reasons a particular person A has, should not be too general. They should say something distinctively about A; they should at any rate say something more distinctive than that there are reasons that would be discovered by anyone deliberating correctly.

"A has a reason to ϕ ' [...] should say something special about A, and not merely invoke in connection with him some general normative judgments. An externalist account that simply bases 'A has a reason to ϕ ' on 'A correct deliberator would be motivated in these circumstances to ϕ ' cannot satisfy that condition"⁹.

Even if we want to say that someone really has a reason to ϕ and not just that he thinks he has a reason, we must be careful that such statements are not too distanced from that particular person in his particular circumstances and with his particular motivations.

The same constraints apply to reason-statements in ethics: moral considerations "make sense only if they are related to other reasons for actions, and generally to [...] desires, needs and projects"¹⁰. That is the reason why external procedures, by definition independent of the existing motivations of the parties involved, are useless in ethics: they do not lead to practical reasons.

⁶ Compare (Hollis 1995), 173.

⁷ (Williams 1995d), 186.

⁸ (Williams 1995c), 38-39; (Williams 1981a), 101-102; (Williams 1995d), 191

⁹ (Williams 1995d), 191-192. Williams uses symbols; I have replaced them with the expression for which they stand.

¹⁰ (Williams 1993), XIII.

Moreover, internalism implies a certain attitude towards people who remain deaf to any moral considerations. Internalism does not mean that we cannot criticize such people: most probably we have every reason to say that they are ungrateful, inconsiderate, sexist, inattentive, etc. We can even say that they overlook the ethical requirements of the circumstances in which they find themselves. What we cannot meaningfully say, however is that they have *a reason* to behave differently. On an internalist interpretation of practical reason, that does not add anything significant to the ethical disapproval we have already expressed, to the “many other things we can say to people whose behaviour does not accord with what we think it should be [...]. As for instance, that it would be better if they acted otherwise”¹¹. One of the merits of Williams's internalism is that it makes us pause and think about what we can meaningfully say about the practical reasons of other people.

From this internalism Williams derives two interesting conclusions with regard to the importance or ‘value’ of truth in ethics. Williams sees no objections against predicating ‘true’ of ethical judgments or statements, as we are used to do in every day language use. But his *first* conclusion is that truth and such things as “getting to know the truth, of continuing to look for the truth, asserting the truth because it's true, of taking steps not to deceive oneself into thinking that p is false when it is in fact true” have only relative value in ethics:

“People tend to say that, if it is important to have true beliefs, there can be nothing more important to have true beliefs about than questions of value. This simply assumes that the answers we need to questions about value must recommend themselves because they are truths.”¹²

In order to understand this, we ought to consider that ethical outlooks and in particular the ethical outlooks of traditional, pre-modern cultures consist mainly of descriptive so-called ‘thick’ concepts (such as coward, brutal, chaste, treason etc.) as against prescriptive ‘thin’ concepts, primarily found in the works of modern moral philosophers (such as ‘morally obligatory’ or ‘morally acceptable’ or ‘morally right’)¹³. When studying foreign outlooks, we may therefore be confronted with concepts that we do not normally use ourselves¹⁴, such as the virtue concept ‘chastity’. In such a situation we may after a while be able to discover the extension of that concept (which is not so difficult in the case of chastity); we may even discover what is, for the people using the concept, its point, its ethical significance. But at least in some cases we will find that we do not identify with this ethical point. After due reflection we decide that there are no reasons for us to use that concept ourselves, to structure our experience and to pursue or avoid certain courses of action by virtue of that concept's application (‘Do not do this, for it is unchaste’).

Even if we do not identify with the alien concept, however, we may still be able to determine what belongs to its extension and we may therefore be able to agree with people using that concept whether or not a certain statement built with that concept is true. The divergence between ethical outlooks is not always due to the differing truth-values of ethical statements, but rather to the value we attach to the truth of these statements. In this sense, the crucial issue is not the truth of ethical statements, but the significance of these truths¹⁵.

Secondly, it follows from Williams's internalism that the range of possible alternatives to our current ethical outlook is restricted. For Williams distinguishes between ethical outlooks that are ‘real’ or ‘conceivable’ alternatives to our own outlook and outlooks that are merely notional alter-

¹¹ (Williams 1995c), 39-40.

¹² (Williams 1995f), 232-233.

¹³ (Williams 1985), 140; (Williams 1995f), 235-236.

¹⁴ Williams uses the expression ‘to use a concept’ as a rule in the sense of ‘to identify with the concept’. See for instance, (Williams 1995a), 21, n. 8.

¹⁵ (Williams 1995c), 37-38; cf. (Williams 1995f), 236, 237.

natives. An alternative is real or conceivable, if it attracts us now – as we are now, in our particular situation, with our current motivations. An alternative is real or conceivable if we could, after deliberation starting from our existing motivations and without being the victim of any delusions, go over to that alternative. In other words, “the life of a Bronze Age Chief or a medieval samurai are not real options for us: there is no way of living them”¹⁶.

Although Williams does not explicitly associate this distinction between conceivable and notional alternatives with truth, the distinction does illustrate an important point about the role of truth in ethics. As a matter of fact, the content of the idea of an alternative to our current outlook is different in the natural sciences from its content in ethics. In science we must never exclude the possibility, however remote, that one day even our most established theory may be replaced by an alternative about which we are not able at the moment to say anything specific. For the value of scientific theories does not rest upon our believing that they will help us to grasp the truth about the universe now; their value lies in their contribution to the steady progress towards the truth, in being a meritorious but provisional attempt that one day may be abandoned¹⁷. Since in ethics any alternative to our present outlook about which we are not able to say anything specific is purely notional, the prospect that our current outlook will be replaced one day by such an alternative is notional too. We cannot view our own ethical outlook as a provisional attempt that will some day be discarded. Our present ethical outlook is not a contribution to the future inquiry into ethical truth.

2. Relativism of distance

The main insight of Williams's internalism is that statements about practical reasons should not be too general; they should say something distinctive about the agent as well as his or her particular circumstances and motivations. As I have already said, I will assume that this principle is largely correct. For it is tantamount to a very sensible, even if rather obvious methodological guideline: in appraising past outlooks and in recording the reasons of people in earlier periods, we must guard against anachronistic representations of their situation, their motivations and their practical reasons. For instance, the realism of our picture of history increases considerably, as soon as we realize that a past ethical outlook cannot be but a *notional* alternative¹⁸. The fact of the matter is, of course, that a return to the past is prevented not only by all sorts of technical and social developments on which we have grown dependent, but also by the high level of reflectiveness and self-consciousness typical of contemporary society. We cannot consciously return to an older form of society with reduced reflectiveness, criticism and self-consciousness. Being aware that our ‘confrontations’ with past outlooks are merely notional, we fully appreciate that the past is really past.

What's more, Williams's internalism leads to an interesting analysis of how contingency and authority or validity are interlaced in ethics. *On the one hand*, external procedures on the scientific model haven't proven to be useless in ethics, since the significance or value of ethical considerations, true though they may be, must not be too general; they must fit in with the existing motivations of the persons concerned. Moreover, when we reflect on our own ethical outlook or when we deliberate on a possible course of action, we do not have to consider every possible alternative; it is sufficient that we consider only the conceivable alternatives. For in ethical reflection and deliberation we are only required to consider the limited range of alternatives that appeal to us now in our present situation and with our present motivations. Consequently, the aim of ethical

¹⁶ (Williams 1985), 161. Whether or not an alternative is merely notional is never just a matter of logistical problems; it is a matter of living the alternative being who we are, with our current motivations, cf. (Williams 1995e). For ease of exposition, I will sometimes call a confrontation with a notional/real alternative a notional/real confrontation.

¹⁷ See for instance, (Hookway 1995), 49.

¹⁸ (Williams 1995c), 139.

reflection and deliberation is to arrive at the truth about what appeals to us, about what our true motivations are.

Here we encounter the basic tenet of Williams's meta-ethics. The most important ethical question is not whether a certain ethical idea or outlook is true, but whether it is a truth that is important to us. Ethical reflection is not in the first instance a search for truth, but a search for the truths with which we are willing to live. In short, it is a search for self-knowledge. As early as in his first book, *Morality* from 1972, Williams expresses this point unambiguously, quoting approvingly, in order to explain what *morality* is about, this sentence by D.H. Lawrence: "Find your deepest impulse and follow that"¹⁹.

On the other hand, internalism does not diminish the authority of our ethical outlook nor cause it to be less unconditional. Quite the reverse, it restricts the range of ethically significant alternatives for our current outlook to conceivable alternatives. From an ethical point of view, merely our present ethical outlook and at the most those outlooks that are conceivable alternatives are real:

"We know that most people in the past have not shared [our outlook]; We know that there are others in the world who do not share it now. But for us it is simply there. This does not mean that we have the thought 'for us, it is simply there'. It means that we have the thought 'it is simply there' (That is what it is for it to be, for us, simply there)"²⁰

For that reason Williams rejects more current forms of normative relativism, since they defend the implausible claim that

"that ethical conceptions of right and wrong have a logically inherent relativity to a given society". [...] The fact that people can and must react when they are confronted with another culture and do so by applying their existing notions [...] seems to show that the ethical thought of a given culture [...] may still be making claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of it which is its 'own world'"²¹.

In short, Williams's internalism leads to a conception of ethics that acknowledges the authority of our ethical ideas while recognizing their contingency.

Williams rejects the possibility of an 'external' (or 'objective') justification on the scientific model and relativizes to some extent the value of truth in ethics, but he does not embrace a general normative relativism. His relativism of distance has only a limited validity: as the expression implies, it affects only notional confrontations, confrontations with outlooks that are too far removed from our own situation and motivations to be genuine contenders for adoption. In particular, it applies to confrontations with outlooks of the past. In other situations – when for instance a reaction is required or when we are confronted with a real or conceivable alternative – a relativistic suspension of judgment is rejected as inappropriate. The fact that an objective justification of our ethical judgments is impossible provokes different consequences in the case of a notional confrontation as against the case of situations demanding a reaction or a choice between real or conceivable alternatives.

The difference between the two cases is obvious. In the latter case we face a practical problem:

¹⁹ (Williams 1972), 79; cf. Williams's remark taken down by (Jeffries 2002): "If there's one theme in all my work it's about authenticity and self-expression. [...] It's the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you [are] and others aren't".

²⁰ (Williams 2000), 492. In his comment on the statement by D.H. Lawrence mentioned above, Williams leaves no room for doubt that 'finding your deepest impulse' is not a matter of mere choosing: "The notion that there is something that is one's deepest impulse, that there is a discovery to be made here, rather than a decision; and the notion that one trusts what is so discovered, although unclear where it will lead – these are the point", (Williams 1972), 79.

²¹ (Williams 1985), 158-159; cf. (Williams 1972), 20-25; (Williams 1981b), 14; (Williams 2000), 492.

we deal with a situation in which we must respond actively or with an alternative that we might adopt and the question therefore arises what to do. In the case of a notional confrontation such a practical question does not arise at all. When no practical problem arises therefore, appraisal and judgment is according to Williams inappropriate. In such a situation our ethical convictions have no authority. Accordingly, Williams's relativism of distance rests upon an (implicit) premise according to which an ethical outlook only has authority if and when we deliberate about what to do²². History is beyond the competence of ethical judgment. With regard to historical developments only an externally or objectively justifiable judgment is appropriate.

3 Ethics and interpretation

Williams's relativism of distance rests upon the implicit premise that our ethical convictions have no authority when we are studying and interpreting history. Most likely, it is the influence of this idea that prevents Williams from arriving at a convincing analysis of the interpretation of alien ethical outlooks and concepts.

In a recent paper²³, Williams considers the situation of an interpreter studying a language called L. As explained above, even an interpreter who ultimately comes to the conclusion that he cannot himself use a certain ethical concept of L, may nevertheless be able to understand its use.

“Someone can come to understand this ethical language L without its being that person's own language. That's the ethnographic stance. A person who is exposed to the society can, for instance impersonate an L-speaker. The visitor to the society is let us say an L_o-speaker. He impersonates L-speakers, becoming indistinguishable from an L-speaker, even to himself. There are whole days perhaps in which his world is the world of the L-speaker. In this case he will in speaking follow the rule of truthfulness-in-L. Reverting to his role as external commentator, he may remark that the utterances of a given L-speaker are true.

What he can't do is to generate a Tarski-equivalent right hand side in his own language L_o for the claim that (e.g.) 'X is chaste' is true in L. The reason he can't do this is that, given the way in which we set up the case, the expressive powers of his own language are different from those of the native language precisely in the respect that the native language contains an ethical concept which his doesn't. If we suppose that his ethical language is based largely on thin ethical concepts, you might say the expressive powers of his language are weaker [...]

Granted the fact, which I find undeniable, that different societies thick concepts are not simply homogeneous, don't simply map on to each other, we have a perfectly coherent account of what truthfulness in L is and what its relation can be to the language of an observer²⁴.

What attracts the attention in this quotation is the fact that Williams (misled by Tarski?) appears to have a remarkably static, a-historic conception of a language, as if a language is something like a fixed store of concepts. For why does Williams think that the interpreter cannot say what the speaker is saying? Why can't he use the unfamiliar concept of the native speaker? Of course, it is possible that “the expressive powers of his own language are different from those of the native language precisely in the respect that the native language contains an ethical concept which his

²² (Williams 1981b), 141; See also p. 142: “to stand in merely notional confrontation is to lack the relation to our concerns which alone gives any point or substance to appraisal”. Or (Williams 2000), 491: “there is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas [...]; and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from”. This passage at least suggest that the historical study of ethics does not take place ‘within the framework of our ideas’.

²³ (Williams 1995f), 238-240.

²⁴ (Williams 1995f), 239.

doesn't". If, however, the interpreter learns a new concept, not only discovering its extension but also its ethical point, he may come to appreciate that point; he may discover that speakers of L point by means of that concept to something ethically important and significant – significant also for the interpreter. In short, the interpreter, learning something ethically significant, acquires a new concept²⁵.

The result is, however, that 'his' language is not exactly 'our' language any longer, the language he and we who have stayed at home, shared. His language has become richer because of his contacts with the speakers of L. Something similar may also happen to an interpreter whose "ethical language is based largely on thin ethical concepts"; he may for example learn the difference between cruelty and cowardice and find out that it is possible to differentiate by means of these 'thick' concepts between actions that are in a different sense and for different reasons morally unacceptable.

Keeping this more dynamic conception of language and interpretation in mind, let us review once more the situation of an interpreter who learns a new concept the ethical point of which he understands but cannot share. In this case the interpreter decides not to include the concept in his language. If he were convinced of the ethical relevance of the native concept, he would have included the word in his own language. Interpreting an ethical outlook (entering into its meaning) and judging (appraising its meaning) are inextricably bound up with each other: we discover the ethical significance by defining our position towards it²⁶.

4. History and ethics

Williams's relativism of distance rests upon the implicit premise that while studying history we should set aside our ethical convictions and take an external point of view. Furthermore, Williams appears to have a static conception of interpretation, language and the concepts 'stored' in a language. That is why he does not realize that by trying to understand an unfamiliar ethical outlook inevitably raises the question whether some of its concepts are ethically relevant to us or the converse question whether the people we are trying to understand miss the concepts with which to express ethical truths that are important (in their circumstances). The interpreter cannot avoid an appraisal of the ethical relevance of the ethical outlook by the very fact that he is trying to understand it. Since we cannot suspend our judgment, as Williams requires, that judgment cannot be disposed of as an inappropriate way of affirming our ethical self-confidence, as a vain act of self-glorification.

What applies to interpretation of individual ethical outlooks, applies to the study of the history of ethics: while studying an ethical outlook of the past we must also appraise it. Granted that a history of ethics studies the developments within and the succession of ethical outlooks, we will learn how people gradually come to appreciate the ethical relevance of the same things as we do, how values and norms were discovered with which we can identify and how in (philosophical) reflection the words or concepts are coined to express these concerns. From this evolves a particular interpretation of the history of ethics. Writing the history of ethics, we piece together a story in which a selection of past outlooks and ideas are narratively related to each other and to

²⁵ As Williams knows of course, see (Williams 1995f), 237.

²⁶ Deze argumentatie mag niet verward worden met een argumentatie die Williams overweegt in (Williams 1995e), 141-142, 149-150. Daarbij wordt op grond van de filosofie van de interpretatie van Donald Davidson en de rol die het principe van welwillendheid (charity) daarin speelt geargumenteed dat er een gemeenschappelijke natuur van de mens bestaat waarop we dan een universele ethiek zouden kunnen opbouwen. Williams voert daartegen terecht aan dat het inzicht in de gemeenschappelijke natuur van mensen, gesteld dat we dat kunnen verwerven, te weinig concreet zal zijn om als basis voor een bruikbare ethiek te dienen, zie bijv. (Williams 1995e), 142. Mijn argument doet geen beroep op de idee van een gemeenschappelijke natuur.*

our present outlook in terms of what – according to us – is their ethical significance. From this they derive a certain historical meaning in virtue of the fact that together they display an ethical development in the direction of our own outlook.

Moreover, we may assume that we have good (enough) reasons for our judgment about the ethical significance of past outlooks. In other words, in judging the past we claim that there is nothing else to think. Consequently, the history of ethics involves a complex relationship with the past: 1) past outlooks derive historical meaning from a historical account that depicts them as constituting a development in the direction of our present outlook, that 2) may itself be influenced by this study of the past, but 3) about which in the end we claim that there is nothing else to think. In short, we portray the outlooks of the past as consecutive contributions to a common search for (ethical) truth.

What's more, leaving aside the ethical issues about which we are undecided, we seem committed to viewing the history of ethics as a common search for truth *that has come to an end*. For another very valuable insight following from Williams's internalism is the thought that in ethics nothing corresponds to the scientific ideal of detachment as a result of which we always take into account the possibility of having to replace even our best theories. Whatever may be the exact meaning of the expression 'a search for truth', in ethics it cannot imply that the merit of our current ethical outlook amounts to it being a contribution to the future search for truth, a mere attempt of which we hope that it will some day be replaced by a more correct view. That is the reason why we claim, concerning ethical ideas about which we are not in doubt, that there is nothing else to think. Since we cannot look upon our own outlook as a provisional contribution to the future search for truth, we must regard the history of ethics as a search for truth that ends with our outlook. In this sense, our ethical outlook presupposes a claim that transcends its location in history.

What do these conclusions concerning our representation of the history of ethical ideas imply about the contingency and the authority of our own ethical outlook? In order to answer this question, we should be aware of the interconnection of and the peculiarities of the authority of our ethical ideas on the one hand, and that of historical interpretation on the other hand.

1) In contrast to relativism of distance, I argued that our ethical ideas do have authority when we are studying history, that we cannot avoid appraising the past and that, furthermore, we claim regarding this appraisal of the past, as we do with other ethical judgments we feel certain about, that there is nothing else to think. But what is the content of that claim? If in studying history we cannot but take up an ethical point of view, we must at any rate abandon any ideas of objectively justifying our judgment of the past, for instance by means of external procedures or criteria. Moreover, Williams's internalism and particularly his distinction between conceivable or real alternatives and notional alternatives has the virtue of helping us to maintain our distance from the past: in earlier times ethical concepts were used and ethical truths were thought to be significant that are so alien to us, that they could never be part of any ethical outlook with which we would consciously choose to live. Having accepted Williams's internalism, we cannot claim that our judgment of the past was 'at some level' anticipated in the past, that our outlook answers questions already raised by our ancestors.

The judgments that we cannot avoid while studying the history of ethics are tantamount to the following: *we* have come to the conclusion that the people of the past have overlooked something that was – at the time – ethically significant. Basing *our* judgment upon *our own* outlook, we believe that it would have been better if *they* had in *their* circumstances taken into account things that we think are ethically relevant (and find the concepts to express these things). To use an expression by Richard Rorty, our judgment about the past and the outlook upon which it is built, is "frankly ethnocentric". Granted that we view past outlooks as contributions to a common search for truth which has ended with our own outlook, our frankly ethnocentric judgment (there is nothing else to think but the way we do) sums up 'a frankly ethnocentric' representation of the history of ethics.

2) When studying the past we seem committed to a frankly ethnocentric conception of history. This frankly ethnocentric representation of the past summarized in that judgment, however, is an *historical* representation, claiming *historical* truth. This in turn implies two things. *On the one hand*, we have assumed that our study of the history of ethics is carried out with all the skill, technique and accuracy that distinguishes great history. Our representation of the history of ethics as a common search for truth is therefore a true interpretation of the past enjoying the kind of objectivity that is typical of historical interpretations. As Williams himself puts it: “we should resist [...] the idea that we can choose the way we see the past”²⁷.

On the other hand, every sincere and perceptive historian knows that no such thing exists as the one true or correct account of the past. Knowing an account to be an historical account is to know that different accounts of the same subject are possible. We do not expect from historiography “the truth about the past”, but true accounts that “make sense of the past – to us”.

“What makes sense of the past to us may not make sense of it to others. This applies to people in the past: we know, historically, that their interpretations of their past differed from our interpretations of both their past and ours. It applies to people of the future. If the “truth about the universe were discovered, future people would have no reason to change it [...] I do not see how anyone could reasonably think a large-scale interpretation of history might be in this position, or why they should want it to be”²⁸.

An historical interpretation is itself an historical, momentary occurrence

Realizing that our ethnocentric representation of the history of ethics is an historical representation, we become aware that it is only one historical interpretation among others, one effort at making sense of history at a particular moment in time. One way of clarifying the striking interrelation between the contingency and authority of our ethical ideas is to point out two things: on the one hand, our ethical ideas presuppose a claim that transcends history and an interpretation of the history of ethics as a search for truth that has come to an end with our own outlook. On the other hand, the very fact that this claim presupposed by our ethical outlook implies a historical representation undermines the absoluteness of these claims, since any historical representation is always part of a long history of historical representations.

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²⁷ (Williams 2002), 261.

²⁸ (Williams 2002), 258.

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