PART I

The Virtues of Vocation
From Moral Professionalism to Practical Ethics
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Work and Flourishing: Williams’ Critique of Morality and its Implications for Professional Ethics

Many philosophical mistakes are woven into morality. It misunderstands obligations, not seeing how they form just one type of ethical consideration... [It] makes people think that without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life (Bernard Williams, 1985, p. 196).

Much contemporary moral philosophy... has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of a good as the object of our love or allegiance... So much of my effort... will be towards enlarging our range of legitimate moral descriptions, and in some cases of retrieving modes of thought and description which have misguidedly been made to seem problematic (Taylor, 1989, p. 3).

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand professional ethics, we first need to understand the nature of ethics itself. This assertion seems straightforward enough. But what if we, in modernity, have forgotten a large part of what ethics is? To put it more precisely, what if we have come to mistake one part of the ethical for the whole? Could we be suffering from an acute case of moral myopia? It is this very idea advanced by Williams and Taylor who take their place in a long tradition. In trying to help us see what a ‘peculiar institution’ modern morality is, Williams (1985, p. 174; cf., 1993 [1972], p. 9) echoes Hegel’s critique of Kant (Hegel, 1977 [1807], pp. 211–409; Hegel, 1991 [1821], sections 2–3), Nietzsche’s critique of slave morality (e.g. Nietzsche, 1969 [1887]), and Bradley’s defence of ‘My Station and its Duties’ (Bradley, 1988 [1876]). Even in the Anglophone, analytic tradition, the critique of the modern, moral
truncation of the ethical realm and recovery of a more robust conception of ethics has been underway for half a century: from the groundbreaking early essays of G. E. M. Anscombe (1958), Philippa Foot (1958a, 1958b), and Iris Murdoch (1956) through Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (2007 [1981], chaps. 1–9). Meanwhile the project of retrieval called for by Taylor has been advanced on multiple fronts: with the reassertion of the priority of the good and the ethical importance of the shape of a life as a whole; with the recovery of ancient conceptions of happiness, virtue, and practical wisdom; with the return of the thick language of so-called ‘secondary’ ethical terms and the reintegration of social, historical, spiritual and aesthetic questions into ethics. Ethical inquiry has of late become both more idealistic (exploring visions of human flourishing) and more realistic (attempting to reconcile ethical notions with human desire and a liveable moral psychology). As we work toward an expanded notion of professional ethics, let us take Williams as our chief guide, reconstructing his distinction between ethics and morality. When helpful, I will supplement Williams’ account with details from Taylor’s critique of modernity’s ‘cramped and truncated view of morality’ and his retrieval of substantive ethics (Taylor, 1989, p. 3).

RETRIEVING SOCRATES’ QUESTION

For Williams, the fundamental ethical question is neither ‘How ought I to act?’ nor ‘What are my obligations to others?’ Both of these questions, Williams argues, are far too narrow. If we are to capture the full range of the ethical, we need to return to Socrates’ question in Book I of the *Republic*: ‘It is not a trivial question’, Socrates chides his interlocutors, ‘what we are talking about is how one should live’. For Williams, this remains the most ecumenical invitation to ethical reflection ever offered. Socrates’ question, Williams writes, is ‘entirely non-committal, and very fruitfully so, about the kinds of consideration to be applied to the question’ (Williams, 1985, p. 5). It invites you to think about the shape your life is taking and to consider what it would mean truly to flourish as a human being, but this may translate into any of a variety of concerns, from the richness of one’s experiences to the nobility of one’s actions. One person may wonder if her work is truly original, while another wrestles with whether he has been generous to others. Others will respond in terms of authenticity, responsibility, wisdom, or piety. Part of what the question is asking is which ethical terms should be central in your deliberations, which ideals reflected in your choices.

In itself, Socrates’ question contains only two major assumptions: that ethics is practical, and that it is reflective. As a ‘particularly ambitious example of a personal practical question’ (p. 18), Williams argues, it is closely related to questions such as ‘what should I do now?’ and ‘what is the best way for me to live?’ (p. 5), and therefore retains their ‘radically first-personal’ quality (p. 21). In other words, it is an important fact about ethical questions
that they are always asked by a particular person, and it is understood that nothing would count as an answer that did not speak to that person. This is because the ethical agent is motivated by a concern for her own eudaimonia, by her desire to flourish. Someone might very well come to think that his flourishing was tied up with the cultivation of certain other-directed virtues, like kindness or compassion, but no ethical deliberation, in Williams’ sense, would ever lead someone to sacrifice his eudaimonia in the name of altruism. For Williams, a course of action ‘has to appeal to that person in terms of something about himself, how and what he will be if he is a person with that sort of character’ (p. 32). As a species of practical deliberation, then, ethical reflection is essentially partial, linked inextricably to a particular agent’s desires and aspirations.

At the same time, the reflectiveness of Socrates’ question makes it more ambitious than our everyday practical questions in two respects. The question of how one should live, Williams suggests, leads beyond a mere moment of decision ‘to press a demand for reflection on one’s life as a whole’ (p. 5, emphasis in original). Ethical reflection may be prompted by a specific choice I have to make, but its defining question is not, What is the right thing to do in this situation? Ethics is better represented by questions such as: Who do I hope to become? What is worthy of my time and effort? and, What is the best sort of life I can live? As you will recall, though, Socrates’ question was not ‘How should I live?’ but ‘How should one live?’ This is an important difference since, in the latter form, I am reminded that while this question is mine, it is also everyone else’s. Thus, ethical reflection not only pushes me to generalize beyond a particular context for action, but also invites me to generalize beyond my own experience. As Williams explains, Socrates’ question ‘seems to ask for the reasons we all share for living in one way rather than another’; it provokes us to think about ‘the conditions of the good life . . . for human beings as such’ (p. 20, emphasis in original).

For Williams, then, Greek ethics is constituted by the tension between its practical pull toward the personal and its reflective push toward the universal. To our modern eyes, this may look more like ambivalence about morality than ambiguity within ethics. This, Williams argues, is due to our modern moral prejudices, our tendency to equate egoism with the ‘narrowest form of self-interest’, and to reduce self-interest to the ‘pursuit of pleasure’ (p. 15). Hedonism is certainly one possible response to Socrates’ question, but as Greek ethics amply bears out, it is far from the only—or even the most likely—response. As Williams explains:

Neither Plato nor Aristotle thought of the ethical life as a device that increased selfish satisfactions. Their outlook is formally egoistic, in the sense that they have to show to each person that he has good reason to live ethically; and the reason has to appeal to that person in terms of something about himself, how and what he will be if he is a person with that sort of character. But their outlook is not egoistic in the sense that they try to show
that the ethical life serves some set of individual satisfactions which is well defined before ethical considerations appear (p. 32).

Greek ethics has an irreducibly first-personal quality. Even when one is reflecting about other-regarding virtues, Williams says, ‘it is still his own well-being that the agent in Socratic reflection will be considering’ (p. 50). Williams calls this egoism ‘formal’ to head off the mistaken impression that Socrates’ question calls for answers which are egoistic in content, inviting agents to think only of themselves. Once we distinguish between these varieties of egoism, we can see the practical pull and reflective push of ethics as a productive tension rather than a troubling contradiction.

Still, such a formally egoistic ethics may seem, if less crass, too individualistic. Here, too, anachronism blurs our vision. As MacIntyre and Taylor have convincingly shown, while ethics is rooted in the existential predicament and moral psychology of the individual, this hardly makes it individualistic in the modern sense. MacIntyre shows how the distinction between self and social role, definitive of modern individualism, is incompatible with virtue ethics (see e.g. MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], chaps. 3 and 15). Meanwhile, Taylor traces the rise of the modern self as atomized and interiorized; once we have come to see the self as a container, it becomes difficult to conceive of the good as something independent of the moral agent (Taylor, 1989, esp. chap. 11).

Another possible misunderstanding of the formal egoism of eudaimonistic ethics is that because everyone must answer Socrates’ question for themselves, that they could or should somehow answer it by themselves. This misunderstanding is aided by the tendency, in modern values-talk, to exaggerate both the amount by which people differ from each other on normative questions and the ease of taking a relativistic stance toward another. To bring discussion to a crashing halt, just utter the magic words: ‘these are my values’. What thinkers such as Taylor and MacIntyre have shown, though, is that even the most private deliberation is conducted in a relatively public language. Ethical reflection always takes place in a particular language, a language we learn from and share with others. Each language will have its particular qualitative vocabulary and ethical emphases, but this means that normative differences are more likely across social groups than between individuals. Indeed, as Taylor shows, even these social-cultural differences are relatively trivial compared to the tectonic shifts in our visions of human flourishing over time. Sources of the Self outlines a series of epochal ethical horizons from Greek antiquity to the present (Taylor, 1989, parts II–V). One lesson to be drawn from this is that, at any one time, our views on the most important matters (and especially on which constitute the most important matters) are remarkably uniform. Furthermore, when disagreement does occur, it is only meaningful against the backdrop of a shared tradition. Indeed, modern individualism—the idea that one should strive to become one’s own person, to challenge received ideas, and to think for oneself—is itself just one powerful, widely shared ethical tradition among many others.
The other point to make here is that the individual differences we do find are all the more charged for their rarity. Modern values-talk would make it seem as if rival answers to Socrates’ question could rest comfortably side by side. In fact, it matters very much to us whether family, friends, neighbours, and public figures hold different views of the good life. What appears to be moral relativism is often the scrupulous practice of a specific virtue, namely tolerance. And even those who do make a practice of not judging the actions of others with their own ethical norms tend to be far less forgiving of themselves. Nothing provokes a fresh encounter with Socrates’ question like learning that someone whom we respect and with whom we identify has a different understanding of what is most worthwhile in life. This is why, even though everyone has a personal understanding of what is good and where they stand in relation to that good, it is exciting and profitable (if also frightening and dangerous) to engage in dialogue with others about these understandings.

In sum, ethics grows out of first-personal, practical questions about who I want to be and how I should live. Ethics can be interpersonal, insofar as we reflect in dialogue and by means of a shared language, but it is never impersonal. It is rooted in the existential challenge that each of us must figure out what to do with the particular life we have been given. There is a push in ethical reflection to generalize beyond the present moment of a personal decision to consider one’s life as a whole, and to think about what constitutes the good life for human beings in general. At the same time, ethical ideals are always embodied in concrete ways of life and ethical language is inescapably thick and qualitative.

MODERN MORAL MYOPIA

I have already highlighted some of the ways in which this older tradition of ethics is hard to reconcile with our modern moral mindset. The eudaimonistic outlook may strike us as too religious, too aesthetic, too psychological, or just plain too self-centered to be considered properly ethical. This is because modern ethical thought has developed in what Williams calls a ‘peculiar’ direction. Indeed, Williams finds ethics so altered, and so narrowed, in modernity that he coins a separate term for it. He retains ‘ethics’ as his name for the older and broader tradition of thinking about the normative, and uses ‘morality’ to designate the newer and narrower approach. According to Williams, morality constitutes but ‘one particular variety of ethical thought’ (Williams, 1985, p. 174). As intriguing as this claim may be, it poses three immediate difficulties.

The first lies in seeing modern moral thinking as one thing, as a unified whole. After all, in the current scene we find not harmony but tense debates (abortion, euthanasia, etc.) and rival camps (consequentialism, deontology, contractarianism, etc.). Williams does acknowledge that morality ‘embraces a
range of ethical outlooks’ and thus cannot be considered ‘one determinate set of ethical thoughts’ (*ibid.*). At the same time, he maintains that there is a common ‘spirit’ that cuts across such divisions and debates (*ibid.*). It is simply that we are too close to perceive it readily. As Williams puts it, ‘morality is so much with us that moral philosophy spends much of its time discussing the differences between those outlooks, rather than the difference between all of them and everything else’ (*ibid.*). Thus, such seeming adversaries as consequentialism and deontology turn out to have more in common, relative to eudaimonistic ethics, than they have differences. In Kant and Mill, in the original position and the trolley problem, we ultimately find the same ‘general picture of ethical life’ (*ibid.*). For Williams, then, morality is ‘the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us’. Morality is our current ethical *horizon*, in the sense that a horizon cuts off one’s vision but also gives one the impression of surveying the whole landscape.

This brings us to the second difficulty. For now that we have started to see the unity of morality, it becomes difficulty to see it as one ethical system among many, since it seems to occupy the whole territory of the ethical. This is why thinkers such as MacIntyre, Taylor, and Williams turn to history, and Greek ethics in particular, to help them denaturalize such modern truisms as the equation of ethics with altruism and obligation. Hermeneutically sensitive work with historically recessed texts can reveal alternative horizons of ethical thought (I stress the quality of the engagement since historical texts may be read simply as confirming our modern prejudices). Once one acquires this broader historical horizon, the entire complex of morality begins to appear as but one narrow subsystem within ethics.

We have now made short work of two interpretive problems presented by Williams’ claim that morality is but ‘one particular variety of ethical thought’. The third difficulty will prove more complicated, leading us into the heart of the ethics/morality distinction. The problem is that Williams seems to consider morality both an ethical system and an anti-ethical system. On the one hand, he sees morality as the modern inheritor of the tradition running down from Socrates’ question; on the other hand he sees morality as a betrayal of that tradition, having banished Socrates’ question to the self-help section at the bookstore. This ambiguity is plain when we consider the relation to the two fundamental ethical assumptions contained in Socrates’ question. Morality does manifest an ethical lineage insofar as it emphasizes reflection in the realm of the practical, but it develops each of these core ethical notions in a fateful way. In the hands of morality, the practical attitude is transformed from something essentially partial to an instrument of impartiality. The invitation to reflection, meanwhile, is re-interpreted as a call to engage in a kind of public, procedural rationality. To see how the former reversal takes place, we must first understand the difference between ancient ethical reflection and modern moral deliberation. This will lead us into the notion of moral obligation until we return finally to impartiality and morality’s suspicion of desire.
Both ethics and morality accord a high place to reason, but our conception of reason has changed radically since the time of the Greeks. In the classical conception of ethics, rationality is substantive. It involves knowledge of what is good and a perceptual ability to see what those goods might mean in concrete situations. The former amounts to a kind of contact with the order of things rather than the exercise of an ordering faculty. The latter, practical wisdom, involves letting one’s ideals dictate what is salient in a situation even as one lets the specificity of the situation inform our ideals in ways we could not have anticipated. In contrast, the modern conception of rationality is distinguished by its expository and procedural nature. We now consider something rational, Williams argues, only if the reasons for it can be spelled out clearly in a widely accessible language. It is not merely the demand for articulation of reasons that distinguishes the modern approach to practical reason, but its further demand for a clearly stated procedure for organizing and assessing such reasons.

Compare the place of argument in substantive ethics. It is certainly possible to argue within and across ethics, but such argument is always supported by, and indeed takes place in, thick, descriptive languages. This means that ethical argument inevitably takes the form of redescription. In other words, we tell stories in which the actors (ourselves and others) emerge as, for example, heartless, witty, or heroic. Such stories help us to determine not only if a particular evaluative term is fair, but also which ethical terms are most likely to be illuminating in the case at hand. It is not understood ahead of time that all actions will be judged, say, for their heroism. Rather, it is a particular narration—keyed to specific events and embedded in a community of discourse—that helps to convince us that a binary like heroic/cowardly fits the bill. This means that there is no limit to the number of considerations that might apply to a given case and no end to ethical argument. Ethical language is inescapably provincial—our rich languages of praise and critique grow out of concrete historical, social-cultural milieux, and the only way to become less provincial is through conversation, that is, through dialogical encounters with other evaluative languages.

Morality, one of whose hidden ethical ideals is cosmopolitanism, takes this freedom from provinciality as one of its highest priorities. Only it hopes to opt out of the slow and, as it were, horizontal route of conversation, attempting to fly free of provincial tethers through abstraction. Thus morality seeks a common procedure for adjudicating all moral claims in a single deliberative language thin enough to be applicable in all situations. Indeed, in morality one single concept comes to dominate our ethical thinking. ‘It is the mistake of morality’, Williams argues, ‘to try and make everything into obligations’ (p. 174).

In a moment, I want to consider how this places the moral agent in a special bind and how it impoverishes our vocabularies of admiration and disdain. First, though, let us note one apparent attraction of this view, namely that it would seem to offer us a way to escape from one of the painful aspects of ethical
deliberation. In the ethical conception, life is understood as inevitably tragic in the sense that we are constantly confronted with choices, choices in which something good will be left undone. As MacIntyre puts it:

One way in which the choice between rival goods in a tragic situation differs from the modern choice between incommensurable moral premises is that both of the alternative choices which confront the individual have to be recognized as leading to some authentic and substantial good. By choosing one, I do nothing to diminish or derogate from the claim upon me of the other; and therefore, whatever I do, I shall have left undone what I ought to have done (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], p. 224).

At first sight, morality might seem to be no different in this regard. After all, the ‘moral dilemma’ is the preferred genre of modern moral philosophy. On closer inspection, though, the difference between this tragic dimension of ethics and the conventions of what Edmund Pincoffs aptly calls ‘quandary ethics’ is clear (Pincoffs, 1971). Moral dilemmas, of course, offer no easy solution or perfect choice, but they do suggest that one should determine the right course of action. Enlightenment morality, MacIntyre argues, has taught us to search for a ‘principle of priority between moral principles’ that could help us select and justify the correct choice (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], p. 224).

The moral actor may be spared the anguish of the tragic choice, but through its peculiar psychology, morality imposes another difficult fate. To illustrate this difficulty, Williams asks us to imagine a case where there is a conflict over an everyday obligation. Imagine that an artist—we will call her A—has promised to drive out to visit her friend B one weekend. As the weekend approaches, however, A suddenly learns of a rare opportunity: there is to be a show in town that weekend of one of her favorite artists, a source of ongoing inspiration for her own work. This is no mere scheduling conflict, mind you. A and B, who were once quite close, have grown more distant of late, neither of them quite sure whether this is the cause or the effect of their getting together less often. Meanwhile, A has cancelled before, always for a good reason, but not without causing tension. Finally, let us add that though A and B share many interests and a good deal of history, A and B have never really connected around A’s love of art. Should A skip the show or cancel her trip? Let us compare moral and ethical ways of handling this sort of situation.

Viewed ethically, this is an example of ‘tragic’ choice between rival goods. A enjoys B’s company and wishes that they could recapture the intimacy they once enjoyed. A worries that cancelling will not only hurt B’s feelings but significantly strain this relationship which she values. It is important to see that, in this ethical light at least, this is not merely a question of maximizing one’s pleasure. The question for A is not merely which course will better satisfy her existing desires. There is a more fundamental question raised by situations such as this, one that we can sometimes dodge or postpone, but never entirely avoid. That is
the question of what desires and commitments we should have. One crucial theme running through neo-aretaic thinkers such as MacIntyre and Taylor is that modern morality has led us to see goods merely as desirabilia (anything we happen to desire), as if their goodness stemmed from our desiring of them.\textsuperscript{15} For the critics of morality, however, this is a fundamental error: goods are not valuable because we value them; we value them because they strike us as good. If the skeptic fixes on this phrase ‘they strike us’ and points out that this is no guarantee that they are truly good, then he has actually helped to make our case. For it is just this gap between genuine goods, to which I truly owe my allegiance, and ersatz goods that gets erased on the projectivist view. As Taylor puts it, some goods—he calls them ‘hypergoods’ to distinguish them from mere desirabilia—must ‘stand independently of our desires, inclinations, or choices [since] they represent standards by which these desires and choices are judged’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 20). Put another way, A’s conflict involves tensions in her descriptions of herself. On the one hand, her identity is partly woven around the description of herself as ‘B’s friend’. She wants to be able to continue thinking of herself as someone who is a member of B’s circle and as someone who is a good friend in general. On the other hand, she sees herself as an ‘artist’ and as the kind of person who would not miss this show. In this way, even a fairly simple conflict has the potential to put us in touch with the basic ethical questions: Who am I? What do I really love? What do I hope to become? What sorts of things are worth putting at the center of my life? This ethical reading does not tell us which course A should choose, but it does highlight what is at stake in A’s choice.

Williams’ worry is that such ethical deliberation tends, given our modern moral temper, to be short-circuited by the notion of obligation. While talk of obligations would not seem to be very natural or helpful in a situation such as A’s, once it gets a foothold it tends to take over entirely. If A views cancelling with B as the breaking of a moral obligation to keep her promises, Williams suggests, she will then be tempted to understand her desire to go to the art show as a rival obligation. Why? Because, as Williams observes,

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\text{... obligations have a moral stringency, which means that breaking them attracts blame. The only thing that can be counted on to cancel this within the economy of morality, is that the rival action should represent another and more stringent obligation. Morality encourages the idea that only an obligation can beat an obligation (Williams, 1985, p. 180).}
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Feeling the bite of conscience, A will search for an even more stringent obligation to nullify the first. The problem is that it does not really make sense to say that A has an obligation to go to this particular art show of which she just learned. Thus, A may resort to a common strategy of moral agents, what Williams calls ‘the obligation-out, obligation-in principle’, answering ‘the demand within the morality system to find a general obligation to back a particular one’ (p. 181). A may understand her choice as flowing from, for
example, a general obligation to support the arts whenever possible. The idea is that since her promise to the arts is more general, it supersedes her promise to visit her friend on this particular weekend and she can cancel her trip with a clear conscience.

However, as Williams suggests, this may be just the beginning of A’s problem:

Once the journey into more general obligations has started, we may begin to get into trouble—not just philosophical trouble, but conscience trouble—with finding room for morally indifferent actions. I have already mentioned the possible moral conclusion that one may take some particular course of action. That means that there is nothing else that I am obliged to do. But if we have accepted general and indeterminate obligations to further various moral objectives, as the last set of thoughts encourages us to do, they will be waiting to provide work for idle hands, and the thought can gain a footing (I am not saying it has to) that I could be better employed than in doing something that I am under no obligation to do, and, if I could be, then I ought to be: I am under an obligation not to waste time in doing things I am under no obligation to do . . . If obligation is allowed to structure ethical thought, there are several natural ways in which it can come to dominate life altogether (pp. 181–182).

Here Williams describes the knots which result when we try to live by morality alone, cramming all of the evaluative dimensions of life into the idea of obligation. And yet this extreme Calvinist logic—when all other work is done, one heads downstairs to move rocks from one side of the basement to the other—is not the only difficulty for the modern, moral actor.16 ‘Blame is the characteristic reaction of the morality system’, Williams notes, and ‘remorse, or self-reproach, or guilt . . . is the characteristic first-personal reaction within the system’ (p. 177).

This reductive and severe moral psychology leaves A in a difficult bind, making it difficult for her to articulate what is truly involved in the choice she faces. When the good is reduced to the right and the right is reduced to complying with obligations, we may feel a sense of vertigo at our newfound inarticulateness about the good. It is hard to fathom how so many different vocabularies of evaluation, whole worlds of appraisal—as different, one from the next, as Oscar Wilde is from Pascal—could be collapsed into the single idea of blame. The reduction in our emotional lives to the single feeling of guilt is no less severe. Gone are the myriad moral sentiments (if I may expand that phrase) from ‘gut’ reactions such as pride, shame, longing, affection, and disgust to more complicated emotional states like envy, aspiration, dignity, awe, and commitment. Gone are all those rich qualitative distinctions—from Sextus’ disturbance/ataraxia through Rousseau’s amour propre/amour de soi to Ellison’s visibility/invisibility—those ethical phenomenologies so particular to a time, place, and writerly articulation that they can only be understood
through a rigorous hermeneutics and sustained empathetic engagement. Gone is all this rich diversity, replaced only by a digital moral logic: innocent or guilty.

We have now considered several key features of Williams’ critique of morality: its distortion of practical reasoning, its convolution of moral psychology, and its drastic collapse of the richness and range of ethical considerations into the black hole of obligation. There remains one crucial component of morality left to consider: its commitment to impartiality and suspicion of desire. And it is this topic that will lead us to the question of the nature of professional ethics.

**WHAT DO MORAL AGENTS WANT?**

For much of the history of ethics, questions about what and how one desires or loves have been central topics for ethical consideration. In modern morality, while still boasting a starring role, desire is now always cast as the villain. And desire does seem perfect for the part. After all, if duty is to be the hero, then inclination must be the foil, since these appear to be opposites. Desire is grasping and self-interested; morality is about checking self-interest in the light of impersonal or altruistic demands. The history of ethics, however, belies the claim that such conclusions are inevitable. Indeed, in many ethical systems, desire is thought of precisely as a guide to what is good. Here Williams offers the example of the scholastic motto ‘everything pursued is pursued as being something good’ (omne appetitum appetitur sub specie boni) (p. 58). How do we get from inclination as a guide to the good to inclination as the antithesis of moral duty? How do we get from desire as a central ethical concept to desire as morally irrelevant, even dangerous?

In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor traces just this history. Though Taylor’s history is rich in incidental detail, for our purposes we may concentrate on two key moments, two major shifts in our understanding of reason, desire, and goodness. In ancient ethics, Taylor reminds us, reason was also thought crucial for leading a good life but this meant something very different than what it comes to mean in modernity. For the ancients:

> We love the good, and the good we love is in the order of things, as well as in the wise soul, aligned with nature. But the second of these orders is not self-sufficient: we can only have order in the soul in seeing and loving the order of things. For Plato this means having a vision of the Good; for the Stoics this means seeing and affirming the course of the world. . . . Reason is understood substantively: rationality is the power to grasp the order of things, itself a reflection of reason (Taylor, 1989, p. 255).

What is striking about this conception is its distance from the logic of modern values talk. As noted earlier, we moderns are apt to say that something is
good because we value it, a crucial and highly problematic reversal of the idea found in the ancients that we cherish something because of its goodness. In classical ethics, the good is importantly outside and independent of our will, and it is this very independence that compels our allegiance and helps us shape our lives.

Consider, by way of contrast, what Robert Bellah and his colleagues discovered in their interesting study of US moral psychology (Bellah et al., 1985). They asked middle-class (and it seems mostly white) Americans from a range of professions why they made the choices they did in their lives. Invariably, their subjects responded that their choices flowed from their values. When pressed further, when asked why they held those values, they responded that these were the values they had chosen. Now the point is not to catch people out in a logical fallacy. The circular reasoning here is vicious because it impairs our ability to articulate our values and understand our choices. One subject, Brian, talks about an earlier time in his life as if talking about another person (pp. 5 ff.). As he sees it, his former self had one set of mutually supporting values and choices and his later self has another set. When asked what led to the change from one set to the next, he is at a loss. The person who chooses his values and whose values are backed only by choices will be prone to a feeling of arbitrariness and to a difficulty in perceiving the unity of his or her life.

In classical ethics, where our moral sources lie outside of us, the key questions are: Have we fixed our attention on what is truly important? Have we devoted ourselves to things truly worthy of our allegiance? Are our projects and desires oriented toward what is genuinely good? As these ideas are taken up and transformed by Christian thinkers, though, our moral sources begin to move inward. As Taylor puts it:

Christian thought introduces a change, well articulated in Augustine. This natural bent to love the good can fail; we suffer through a Fall from a perversion of the will. There are potentially two loves in us, a higher one and a lower one, charity and concupiscence (Taylor, 1989, p. 256).

In other words, there is a shift from emphasizing what one desires to how one desires. Of course, it makes sense in Christian thought to ask whether one loves mere worldly fame or eternal life, money or God, and so on. The point is, though, that even within the set of preferred objects, the question of motivation arises: it matters whether one is loving God for the right reasons. What Taylor wants us to see is that what was united in the classical Greek notion of eros, namely our wanting and our striving, begins to unravel into two rival notions: needy, appetitive concupiscence; and loving, giving caritas (in Greek, agape). To know whether I am living well, I must know if I am pursuing the right sorts of things; to know whether I am pursuing the right sorts of things, I must know whether the desire for them comes from the right part of myself.
And of course this is not the only change we see in Christian ethics. As Taylor points out:

This is one respect in which Christianity was radically different than pagan thought. The highest virtue was a kind of love, unstinting giving, whose paradigm exemplar gave his life for others. The centre of gravity of the moral life shifts (p. 258).

So, on the one hand, Christian ethics from the early Church Fathers all the way through Aquinas remains aretaic/eudaimonistic. The ethical task is still to answer Socrates’ question, to explain to the agent why a certain form of life is good for him. What is radical is its elevation of certain virtues, its elaboration of new virtues, and its supernatural idea of the human telos. What divides, say, Aristotle and the New Testament, then, is not whether their views are broadly speaking aretaic, but how they conceive of the virtues. Neither the similarity nor the gap between Greek ethics and Christian ethics should be exaggerated, a point which MacIntyre stresses in his colorful way:

The New Testament’s account of the virtues, even if it differs as much as it does in content from Aristotle’s—Aristotle would certainly not have admired Jesus Christ and he would have been horrified by St. Paul—does have the same logical and conceptual structure as Aristotle’s. A virtue is, as with Aristotle, a quality the exercise of which leads to the achievement of the human telos (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], p. 184).

The ethics of St Paul is still structurally eudaimonistic—faith, hope, and charity are offered as elements of a happy and admirable life, and not bitter duties running directly contrary to all inclination. At the same time, we see the seeds of modern morality’s categorical distrust of desire and ego in a thinker like Paul. ‘Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up’, St Paul says, and ‘seeketh not her own’ (I Cor. 4, 5).

As Taylor shows, one can trace this distinction between concupiscence and charity right into early modernity. For example, he finds in the hyper-Augustinianism of the Jansenists the worry that one may never know whether one’s prayer really flows from grace or from some self-serving motivation (Taylor, 1989, p. 356). From here, it is but a short jump to a similar secular, moral idea we find in Kant, whom Taylor finds drawing ‘heavily on Augustine’s model of the two loves, the two directions of human motivation’ (p. 366).

According to Kant, the moral actor must not be inclined to do his duty or the action ceases to be moral. We are not acting from duty, Kant (1997 [1785], p. 13) argued, when some ‘direct inclination’ or longer term ‘selfish purpose’ leads us to act in accordance with duty. For Kant, we cannot even be motivated by ‘the promotion of happiness of others’ (p. 17). Moral actions must be motivated solely by respect for duty, by Achtung before the moral
law. Thus, if the shopkeeper in Kant’s famous example gives the correct change to the child because he thinks this is smart business practice, it does not count as a moral action. On Kant’s view, it would still be too consequentialist, if less egoistic, for the shopkeeper to desire the outcome that the child have the correct change to avoid being reprimanded by his parents. Meanwhile, the shopkeeper must also not be motivated by the desire to be a kind person (or a good Kantian). While our respect before the moral law does speak to our excellence (that we are rational beings with dignity) we are not supposed to listen lest it turn out that moral action be actually motivated by ‘vanity or . . . inner satisfaction in spreading joy’ (p. 14). Even actions that seem to have been entirely motivated by duty, Kant worries, may have a ‘secret impulse of self-love’ so that ‘even the strictest examination can never lead us entirely behind the secret incentives’ (p. 23). This leads Kant to the extraordinary claim that there may never have been a single moral action in all of human history (ibid.).

Earlier I mentioned that Taylor identifies two major transformations in our ethical understanding of desire and goodness. The first concerned the internalization of moral sources, the rise of *agape* and the denigration of *eros*; the second, early modern shift shows ‘*agape* . . . sliding into benevolence or altruism’ (Taylor, 1989, p. 314). Thus, Taylor charts the change from wanting the good, to wanting in the right way, to willing rather than wanting. By the time the Christian doctrine of love—with its charity/concupiscence distinction—had hardened into the Enlightenment’s calculus of self-interest and altruism, desire has become a guide not to the good but to the bad. As the inheritors of this austere tradition, the question ‘Was it for my own gain or the good of the other?’ is always at the center of our moral deliberations. We find ourselves defining duty in opposition to inclination and judging altruism by its distance from self-interest.

For Williams, the key is to recast this received idea in the form of an explicit argument, for when we do this we can see just how riddled with faulty assumptions it is:

1. Anything motivated by desire is directed toward pleasure.
2. The pursuit of pleasure is egoistic.
3. Ethical motivation involves a contrast with the egoistic.
4. [from 1–3] Therefore, desire cannot be the motivation for ethical activity.
5. The only motivation other than desire is a sense of obligation.
6. [from 4–5] Therefore, the ethical must be concerned with obligations.18

The argument may be valid but it is thoroughly unsound. According to Williams, ‘almost all of the assumptions of this argument are wrong’ (Williams, 1985, p. 49). About the first premise, for example, Williams notes that it is already false to think that the satisfaction of every desire issues in pleasure, but it is false to the point of incoherence to say that every desire
aims at pleasure. Some desires, Williams notes, aim at states of affairs that do not involve the agent at all. If a mother desires that, after her death, her children should find happiness, it is the outcome that is desired, not the pleasure one might take in imagining this outcome while still alive. Assumptions 2 and 3 are problematic as well, so the argument never makes it to the first conclusion (4). Even if it did, 5 seems wildly exaggerated and gives us little warrant for the final jump to 6. Our moral suspicion of desire has deep historical, cultural, and religious roots, but it is certainly not grounded by the argument above.

What is especially important for our purposes is to note how the historical formation of our opposition between altruism and self-interest, duty and inclination, dovetails with the rise of secular callings or professions. Taylor explains:

With the affirmation of everyday life, agape is integrated in a new way into an ethic of everyday existence. My work in my calling ought to be for the general good. This insistence on practical help, on doing good for people, is carried on in the various semi-secularized successor ethics, e.g. with Bacon and Locke. The principal virtue in our dealing with others is now no longer just justice and temperance but beneficence. With the internalization of ethical thought, where inclinations are crucial, the motive of benevolence becomes the key to goodness. (Taylor, 1989, p. 258)

As the Christian notion of charity travels from the world of Augustine to that of Bacon and Locke it changes in important ways. In particular, the new value on the horizon, according to Taylor, is an affirmation of the mundane world. The Christian idea of agape becomes ‘semi-secularized’, reworked as part of a new ethic of everyday life. And what is especially intriguing for our purposes is Taylor’s suggestion that there is an agapism built into the very logic of professionalization. With this in mind, we turn in the next section to a consideration of how Williams’ ethics/morality distinction maps onto the terrain of professional ethics.

FROM MORAL PROFESSIONALISM TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

The next question to consider is whether this moral cramp in our ethical thinking extends into the domain of professional ethics. Taylor has already provided us a hint, namely that the very idea of a profession was born of the same historical moment in which modern morality was taking shape. The concepts of altruism and professionalism seem to be intertwined. Consider, for example, William Sullivan’s rehearsal of the three conventional criteria for status as a profession:

(1) specialized training in a field of codified knowledge usually acquired by formal education and apprenticeship, (2) public recognition of a certain
autonomy on the part of the community of practitioners to regulate their own standards of practice, and (3) a commitment to provide service to the public which goes beyond the economic welfare of the practitioners (Sullivan, 1995, p. 2, numbering added).

About the first criterion, we will have more to say later.\(^{20}\) The second and third criteria together point the way toward professional ethics as it has traditionally been conceived. The second criterion has two parts: professionals ask for autonomy in the conduct of their practices, but in return they promise to regulate their own behavior. Thus professional associations adopt codes of ethics, showing that they respect the rights of their clients and the laws of the land in addition to the goals of their practice. The third criterion relates to these goals, which themselves have a moral component. And this Sullivan spells out, precisely as Williams and Taylor would predict, in terms of something beyond their self-interest, in this case represented by their pecuniary interest. If the code of conduct is the expression of the second criterion, the oath of office may be the expression of this third criterion.

Here we need to distinguish between the forms of expression and what they express. For the cynic will rightly point out that no code of conduct has ever made anyone better. At most such codes make the amoral and the immoral better at covering their tracks. So we could say that though they are completely ineffective at improving conduct, at least they describe good conduct. And yet, such codes are usually too streamlined, and indeed reductive, to be able to map onto the real complexities of practice. And of course here is where the philosophical study of professional ethics steps in to explore specific dilemmas of practice in a nuanced way. For example, should a teacher contact a social worker if a student, writing a journal under a promise of confidentiality, writes something that may be a reference to past abuse he or she has suffered? For our purposes, though, the lesson is the same. Whether boiled down into codes and oaths, or articulated finely in philosophy journals, the focus and limits of this activity we call professional ethics remains constant. The focus is on what professionals owe their clients and when these role-specific obligations are trumped by more fundamental moral norms. Professional ethics is typically understood as the attempt to delineate the boundaries of professional conduct in light of more general notions of right action.

There is no denying the interest and importance of such questions. No one doubts, for example, how pressing and complex are the debates over doctor-assisted suicide or whether public school teachers should teach about contraception. And yet, such concerns do seem to fall squarely within the modern ethical system we have, following Williams, learned to call morality. What we have heretofore called ‘professional ethics’ would be better described as ‘moral professionalism’.

This conclusion leads us to ask, what sorts of questions and concerns would occupy a genuinely professional ethics? What would it mean to connect
Socrates’ question with professional life? What does work have to do with human flourishing? If posing this question was the work of this first chapter, answering it is the task of the entire book. However, I would like to make several preliminary points here.

First, we need to be wary of the problem that it is possible to adopt a virtue-theoretic approach to professional ethics without significantly challenging the narrowness of morality. Virtue-ethics can sometimes appear in a highly moralizing guise. Mentioning that we are attending to character along with principles and consequences is not enough. For it is quite possible simply to dress up a discourse of moral obligation in talk of professional dispositions, without indicating a shift to a genuinely aretaic or eudaimonistic view.

What I have tried to show is that central to a genuinely aretaic professional ethics is the question of how practices contribute to the lives of their practitioners. When it comes to the idea of professional life, we encounter the trademark moral dichotomies between inclination and duty, self-interest and altruism. Codes of conduct most heavily regulate the spaces where the professional’s self-interest, understood as basic if not base appetites, is likely to lead to abrogation of duty. Thus, some who might be willing to go along with Williams and Taylor on the general ethical point, that self-regard and (not simply other-treatment) is a prime normative consideration, might still miss the implication of this for professional ethics. The notion that the flourishing of the practitioner is of ethical import is perhaps even harder to grasp given the logic of professionalism we have just reviewed.

For example, even Mike Martin’s Meaningful Work (2000), a book which explicitly promises to rethink professional ethics in the spirit of Williams’ insights, fails to address the questions of professional ethics as I have defined them. Martin barely touches on the way vocations provide meaning in the lives of practitioners. Focusing on how personal ideals help professionals do the right thing and serve the good of their clients, Martin largely neglects the question of how professional ideals might be vehicles of the practitioner’s own ethical quest. For that matter, even Williams himself does not seem to have drawn the implications of his own critique of morality for professional ethics (see e.g. Williams, 1995).

Thus we confront the question anew. What does work have to do with human flourishing? Or to put the matter more skeptically: even if Williams is right that all individuals must confront Socrates’ question, why think that they should confront Socrates’ question qua architects, doctors, or teachers? The simplest reply might run as follows: ethics, as we have come to understand it, concerns the task of thinking about and shaping one’s life as a whole; how we spend our time is of central ethical interest; work takes up a high percentage of our time; therefore, one’s choice of work is a central matter of ethical concern. But let us consider the matter in more detail, beginning with the idea of justice.
At first blush, the concept of justice would seem to lead us away from the eudaimonistic conception of professional ethics we are seeking and right into the heart of moral professionalism. Is my work just? This question seems simply to ask how my professional conduct impacts my clients and others impacted by my practice. However, there is another way of posing the question, and of understanding justice. For we might also ask: Does my work do justice to myself? In this version of the question, justice becomes an educational concept, one which Robbie McClintock calls ‘formative justice’ (McClintock, 2004, pp. 72–99) McClintock contrasts formative justice with the more familiar, distributive justice as follows:

Issues of justice arise when a need or desire for something exceeds its supply, forcing deliberation about what each recipient is due. Issues of distributive justice stem from having to allocate a finite supply of public goods among a larger multiplicity of claimants. Issues of formative justice have to do, not with public goods, but with human potentials. In education, possibilities exceed feasible achievement, forcing choices. A person cannot actualize all her possibilities; nor can a group. Which ones will receive what effort? By exercising formative justice, a person selects among her possibilities and allocates a finite supply of talent and energy, of motivation and discernment, in pursuing these goals (p. 77).

McClintock traces this concept of formative justice back to Plato’s Republic but warns that we will not find it there if we come to the text with presentist notions of politics, education, and justice. As Jonathan Lear has pointed out, Cicero’s translation of Politeia as Res Publica was a fateful one, shaping its reception as a work about the ideal state.21 In contrast, Lear argues, it is a work about Constitutionality, about what it means to be well constituted, about how complex unities such as selves, groups, and cities hang together and fall apart. Readers who approach the Republic already convinced that justice means distributive justice and education schooling, will be prone to see the work as a work of political theory about the ideal state, structured around a questionable analogy between polis and psyche, with sprinklings of psychological insight and educational policy. For McClintock, the educational import of Republic is not found in Plato’s specific curricular recommendations. The entire work concerns the search for an ideal of formative justice, an ideal by which an individual or a group might decide how to do justice to its possibilities and potentials. There is indeed a coherent question of justice on both sides of the isomorphism. Answering Socrates’ question requires deciding what parts of yourself you will cultivate and what parts you will, by choice or necessity, ignore or stifle. Like the ruler of a city, you must find a way to do justice to the various parts of yourself. ‘Guided, well or poorly, by formative justice’, McClintock writes, ‘each person exerts educational effort to bringing his or her mix of aptitudes to their full employment in pursuit of sustainable fulfillment’ (McClintock, 2004, p. 78). The word ‘employment’
serves as a nice reminder that work in particular figures prominently in Plato’s definition of justice. Justice, Socrates tells his interlocutors, is ‘doing one’s own work’, practicing that ‘for which he is naturally best suited’ (Plato, 2004, p. 119 [Bk. IV, 433a]). How one chooses to make a living, or even what forms of work one chooses (paid and unpaid) hardly exhausts the range of questions relating to formative justice. But that they are central is not hard to see.

Still, someone might object that though all individuals must confront Socrates’ question and though their choice of work is relevant to that question, such extra-moral, existential-vocational reflection is still something separate from professional ethics. The skeptic might insist that after work I am free to reflect on my career choices and any other existential questions as I please, but during work I must worry about the moral norms guiding and constraining my practice. To head off this objection, we need first to recall two related points.

First, ethical reflection requires that one try to grasp the unity of his or her life. Second, this is precisely what is so difficult in modernity, which works in myriad ways to obscure that unity. As Macintyre has noted, part of what makes modern life so inhospitable to eudaimonistic ethics is the way it invites us to carve up our lives into developmental stages, to divide our time between labour and leisure, to hive off public roles and private selves (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], p. 204).

With these reminders in hand we may now read the objection itself as one more example of such partitioning, in which the agent is asked to be moral from 9 to 5 and ethical on the weekends, to develop a public morality and a private ethics. After all, while it is important that it is my choice to be an engineer, lawyer, or social worker, the choice is not just about me. What makes the choice a good choice for me is in part the way it allows me to join a community of practice where, and perhaps only where certain features of the good life become visible and realizable. It is in the midst of our communities of practice that we can fully realize and reckon with what it means to think of ourselves as an engineer, lawyer, or social worker.

Let me close this preliminary case for the ethical significance of vocation by returning to Williams and taking up his notion of a ‘ground project’. It was this idea—that personal projects played an important role in ethics—that helped Williams launch his assault on morality’s monopoly in modern ethics. Personal projects are neither fleeting and lowly impulses, nor abstract and impersonal principles, meant to constrain the former. Rather they are a concrete expression of an individual’s understanding of and attempt to lead an excellent and meaningful life. Williams’ argument is that morality must but cannot accommodate this idea of ground projects. The argument begins with a thought experiment concerning what Williams calls ‘categorical desires’. He asks us to ‘imagine a person rationally contemplating suicide, in the face of some predicted evil’ who nonetheless chooses to go on in life (Williams, 1981c, p. 11). In this case, Williams observes, he must be ‘propelled forward into [life] by some desire (however general or inchoate)’ (ibid.). This suggests the existence
of a class of ‘categorical’ desires and a reversal of the conventional wisdom that being alive is a condition of having desires:

Most people have many categorical desires, which do not depend on the assumption of the person’s existence, since they serve to prevent that assumption’s being questioned, or to answer the question if it is raised. Thus one’s pattern of interests, desires and projects not only provide the reason for an interest in what happens within the horizon of one’s future, but also constitute the conditions of there being such a future at all (ibid.).

Certain interests and desires develop in the course of leading a life and as a result of exploring the world, but here Williams reminds us of the transcendental function of care and concern. As Jonathan Lear, paraphrasing Heidegger, writes: ‘The ‘fact’ that we care, then, is not simply an important fact about what we are like; it is a structuring condition of the universe of our possibilities’ (Lear, 2000, p. 33).23 That some desires serve this transcendental function does not make them rare or mysterious. With his concept of the ‘ground project’ Williams shifts from the level of logical possibility and function to that of psychological reality and detail. As Williams points out, it is not uncommon for ‘a man [to] have, for a lot of his life or even for some part of it, a ground project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life’ (Williams, 1981c, p. 12).

Thus, Williams upbraids moral philosophy for forgetting to take into account the crucial factor of what makes life worth living, of neglecting ‘the question of why we go on at all’ (p. 10). It is this basic existential fact that shows the limits of the idea (in its consequentialist or deontological variants) that impartiality is essential to morality. Williams explains:

A man who has such a ground project will be required by Utilitarianism to give up what it requires in a given case just if that conflicts with what he is required to do as an impersonal utility-maximizer when all the causally relevant considerations are in. That is a quite absurd requirement. But the Kantian, who can do rather better than that, still cannot do well enough. For impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win. And that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in that world at all (p. 14).

And yet, it is precisely this idea that partiality could be of ethical importance which morality finds impossible to digest.
To this end, Williams works to distinguish the partiality of ground projects—that it matters crucially whose projects they are—from the potential egoism of such projects:

Ground projects do not have to be selfish, in the sense that they are just concerned with things for the agent. Nor do they have to be self-centered, in the sense that the creative projects of a Romantic artist could be considered self-centered (where it has to be *him*, but not *for* him). They may certainly be altruistic, and in a very evident sense moral, projects; thus he may be working for reform, justice, or general improvement. There is no contradiction in the idea of a man’s dying for a ground project—quite the reverse, since if death really is necessary for the project, then to live would be to live with it unsatisfied, something which, if it really is his ground project, he has no reason to do (p. 13).

What Williams is pointing to is that it is not only selfish and self-centered ground projects to which morality must object. Modern morality will struggle to value even philanthropic ground projects. To be sure, the philanthropist wants the philanthropic results, but he also wants to be the person achieving these results (or the person making this particular contribution to a larger collaborative project). In the framework of morality, this fact is either to be regretted (since many would say that the true altruist always works anonymously) or ignored as irrelevant.

In contrast, Williams points out three different levels on which it matters ethically whose project a project is (pp. 12–16). First, even if someone’s array of projects is not particularly distinctive, the fact that it is this particular individual pursuing them still gives him or her ‘distinctively, a reason for living this life, in the sense that he [or she] has no reason to give up and make room for others’ (p. 15). Second, one’s choice of projects does typically differentiate one from others thus helping one answer not only the question ‘Why go on?’ but also the question ‘Who am I distinctively to become?’ Third, Williams points out that such individuation is not only a good for the one individualizing but is a collective good since it is a pre-condition for love and friendship, two indisputably precious human goods predicated on the non-intersubstitutability of human beings (pp. 15–17).

Certainly not all ground projects are professional practices and not all professions (or all parts of any single profession) suit themselves equally to becoming a project in this ethical sense. Nonetheless, we have now made a preliminary defence of the notion that professional ethics, if it is not to be reduced to mere moral professionalism, must include the question of the place of the practice in the practitioner’s own quest to lead a good life. In the next chapter, we will extend this analysis of the relation of work and flourishing through an examination of MacIntyre’s conception of a practice. In the subsequent chapters of Part I, we will turn to Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer to further fill in our answer to the question ‘How
does work contribute to the quest to lead a good life?" One important question raised about this eudaimonistic conception of professional ethics will have to be deferred until the beginning of Part II. For when it comes specifically to the practice of teaching, this analysis of the first-personal dimension of ethics raises a specific objection: even if there is a place for eudaimonistic considerations in professional ethics as a whole, isn’t teaching—as a helping profession, a profession built around the needs of others and often demanding self-sacrifice—best understood as an altruistic calling? The question of why self-interest can and must be defended precisely in a ‘helping profession’ such as teaching will be the topic of Chapter 5.

NOTES

1. Other notable attempts to expose the peculiarity of modern morality include: Pincoffs, 1971; Stocker, 1976; Wolf, 1982; and Taylor, 1989, esp. pp. 78–90.


4. Though I would like to develop the ethics/morality distinction narratively in the text, the reader may appreciate a methodological discussion up front. In what follows, I will adopt Williams’ terminology, using the term ‘ethics’ for the older and broader conception of thinking about the normative and the term ‘morality’ for the particular sub-system that comes to dominate ethics in modernity. Readers should not be distracted by Williams’ admittedly arbitrary choice of terms here. Ethics comes from the Greek *ethikos*, and morality from the Latin *moralis* (coined by Cicero to translate *ethikos*) but both had a similar range of meanings centering around disposition or custom (see Williams, 1985, p. 6). Hegel made a similar decision, to use *Sittlichkeit* as a term of art for a substantial ethics rooted in communal life in contrast to the thin, rationalistic *Moraltät* he saw in Kant (even though Kant himself used *Sittlichkeit* for Morality). For commentary on Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit-Moralität* distinction, see Taylor, 1979, pp. 82–94 and Habermas, 1990; Taylor (1989, p. 64) links Williams’ project with Hegel’s.
The fact is that both modern, English terms (and their modern, western equivalents in various languages) will tend to have (what Williams calls) moral shadings if he is right about the widespread modern reduction of ethics to morality. Indeed, when we compare phrases like ‘the moral life’ with ‘Senate Select Committee on Ethics’ (which handles things like disclosure of travel expenses) we see that in modern parlance ethics is sometimes the narrower term. What matters is that we mark the distinction simply and consistently and then develop it in detail.

Thus, Williams’ clear if arbitrary formulation seems superior to those of Taylor and MacIntyre. Taylor’s concern to reopen moral philosophy to questions about identity and ideals, issues of desire, emotion, and attention, and a vocabulary that is richly qualitative or unabashedly spiritual, is not at all dissimilar from Williams’ project. Unlike Williams, though, he chooses to retain the word ‘moral’ to name both the narrower and the broader versions of moral philosophy. This leads Taylor to adopt cumbersome phrases such as ‘morality in a narrow sense’ and confusing formulations such as his claim that ‘morality’ is only one of the ‘three axes’ along which we do our ‘moral thinking’ (Taylor, 1989, pp. 3, 15). MacIntyre, like Taylor, seems to want to keep both ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ in play as terms admitting of broader and narrower uses. Thus, he uses both ethics and morality in describing the tradition he seeks to recuperate and the enlightenment project he repudiates.

I will sometimes refer to that which Williams, Taylor, and MacIntyre seek to restore as ‘substantive ethics’, but this has its problems as well, since I do not mean to suggest that the only narrowness in the morality system is its procedural quality. Meanwhile, as my Introduction and Part titles indicate, I will also use the phrase virtue ethics to mark the older, broader approach to the normative. Here again, though, it is important to get clear on just what sort of distinction this entails. For example, it is not enough to list, as most introductory texts in ethics now do, virtue ethics as one species of ethical theory along with consequentialism, deontology, contractualism, etc. If virtue ethics means simply a modern meta-ethical position in which character is stressed over principles and consequences, most of the important contrasts will be lost. After all, the point of the revival of virtue ethics has been to critique modern meta-ethical assumptions showing how, from (what Williams calls) an ethical vantage point, these various rival moral theories are actually united on key issues. Indeed, another reason to be wary of adding ‘virtue-theory’ to our list of modern moral theories systems is that what unites such disparate figures as Murdoch, Taylor, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and Williams (who after all disagree on a great many very important issues) may be precisely their anti-theoretical stance (see e.g. Clarke and Simpson, 1989). Meanwhile, it is not just the term ‘theory’ but even the term ‘virtue’ that can be misleading. After all, ‘virtue’ remained a term in currency in modern moral thinking. The English term virtue can sound quite moralistic indeed. The work of philosophical retrieval would be easier if terms were simply lost; instead they become distorted. Schneewind, for example, offers an excellent treatment of the idea that the true ‘misfortune of virtue’ is not neglect, but rather its very uptake by modern moralists (1997). See note 19 of the Introduction for a discussion of examples of narrow virtue-ethical approaches to professional ethics.

With these caveats about both ‘virtue’ and ‘theory’ in mind, I am content to call my project a virtue-theory of work or virtue ethics of professional life (with special reference to teaching). At times, I will opt for the uglier terms aretaic (an English neologism made as an adjectival form of the Greek aretē, meaning excellence or virtue) and eudaimonistic (a neologism from eudaimonia, meaning happiness or flourishing—see note 6 for more on this) since these terms evoke virtue ethics while also reminding us to be wary of our parochial conceptions of its key ideas.

5. This is Williams’ translation of Republic 352d (see Williams, 1985, p. 1). Cf. C.D.C. Reeve’s translation (Plato, 2004 [c. 380 B.C.E.]).
6. *Eudaimonia* is sometimes translated as happiness, but it is unlike modern concepts of happiness in important respects. *Eudaimonia* does not refer to fleeting moods but to the shape of one’s life as a whole. Furthermore, whereas happiness is typically understood as a subjective experience, *eudaimonia* refers to objective qualities of that life. Whereas it might seem strange to challenge a person’s self-report about a person’s happiness or lack thereof, it might well be others who have the clearest perspective on whether a person is truly flourishing. Williams suggests ‘well-being’, but this term too seems to have been overtaken by largely subjective connotations (see Williams, 1985, p. 34). In what follows, I will sometimes refer to flourishing and sometimes simply retain *eudaimonia* untranslated to remind us of its distance from our preconceptions. To some, flourishing may sound too naturalistic—after all, we speak of the flourishing of plants. Thus, it may be helpful to keep in mind the phrases ‘faring well’ and ‘living well’.

7. I explore this topic in greater detail later in the chapter (see pp. 31–).

8. Here I refer to Wittgenstein’s famous private language argument and to Taylor’s helpful application of it to the case of qualitative languages in his discussion of identity and ‘webs of interlocution’ (see Wittgenstein, 1973 [1953]; Taylor, 1989, pp. 35–39). The private language argument is explicitly treated in §143–75 of the *Investigations*, though Kripke makes the case that it is the sections leading up to §143 that are truly key to the argument (see Kripke, 1982).

9. MacIntyre and Taylor are both excellent on this point (see, e.g. Taylor, 1989, pp. 39–40; 1991).

10. The original position refers to the famous device employed by John Rawls (see, 1999, pp. 10–18 and 102–170). The trolley problem is a famous moral dilemma; see, for example, Thompson, 1985. In what follows, I draw primarily on Williams to characterize modern morality. However, the reader should also consult Taylor’s brilliant ‘portrait of a wide trend in modern moral philosophy’ and MacIntyre’s powerful indictment of the culture of emotivism (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], chaps. 2–3; Taylor, 1989, pp. 78–90).


12. Here I mean conversation both in its literal sense, i.e. talking with someone who tells different kinds of stories or belongs to another community of discourse, and in the metaphoric sense described by Gadamer encompassing encounters with texts, times, or aspects of the world which are partially alien to our sensibilities (see Gadamer, 2004 [1960], pp. 313–322).

13. If Williams is right that we cannot live without confronting Socrates question, and Taylor is right that to lead a life requires some sense—even if entirely tacit—of what is highest and where we stand in relation to such substantive ideals or ‘hypergoods’, then critics of morality face a riddle. For if modern morality truly invalidates and excludes such ideals, then how do modern moralists get on with their lives? The solution for both Williams and Taylor is to show how morality’s preferences for thin universalisable rules and principles, and for altruistic duties and obligations, reveal an attachment to hidden ideals of true substance and unmistakable historico-cultural origin. The reference here to cosmopolitanism comes from Taylor’s discussion of Habermas’ discourse ethics (Taylor, 1989, p. 85). Williams points out another hidden ethic lurking within morality, the ideal of purity (a fact noted by Taylor in the passage just cited) (Williams, 1985, p. 195). Compare MacIntyre’s discussion of the unmistakable stamp of Lutheran Pietism on Kant’s moral philosophy (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], pp. 43ff.).

14. Williams outlines this basic scenario, asking the reader to fill in the detail, which I have done (see Williams, 1985, p. 180).
15. For MacIntyre’s critique of emotivism, see MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], chaps. 2–3. For Taylor’s critique of projectivism and his defence of ‘moral ontology’ and the independence of hypergoods, see Taylor, 1989, Part I.

16. Thanks to Katie McMillan Culp for this memorable way of capturing the essence of Calvinism.

17. On ataraxia, or freedom from disturbance, in skepticism and other schools of Hellenistic ethics, see, e.g. Nussbaum (1996, esp. chap. 8). For Rousseau’s distinction between healthy self-regard and that which is artificial and corruptible see his note in the *Discourse on Inequality* (Rousseau, 1997 [1754], p. 218; quoted in Neuhouser, 2008, p. 30) and his definition in Book I of *Emile* (Rousseau, 1979 [1762], pp. 92–93); Rousseau develops the distinction and its implications throughout *Emile*, but see especially Book IV; helpful commentaries on Rousseau’s concepts of self-love include: Bloom’s introduction (in Rousseau, 1979 [1762], pp. 3–28); Dent, 1988, chaps. 2-3; O’Hagan, 1999, chap. VII; and Neuhouser, 2008. For the definitive exploration of what it is like to live inside a bubble of structural misrecognition, see Ellison, 1995 [1952].

18. Here I have taken the liberty of formalizing Williams’ narrative description of this argument (see Williams, 1985, p. 49).

19. Again, I have taken some liberties with an example provided by Williams (see Williams, 1985, p. 50).

20. I think Sullivan hedges here, mixing in some of what he hopes professionalism will mean with his statement of what it has meant. Though apprenticeship surely has been a crucial means by which all practices have sustained themselves, it is this codification of knowledge that has been key in earning the prestige of a profession. To have a body of detachable, transferrable knowledge standing behind you lends prestige. This idea has tended to valorize knowledge that over know-how, forcing practices to redescribe how they actually operate and to generate a body of research to legitimize themselves. If the key to success in a practice is practical wisdom, an idea we will consider later, than this can be learned only through experience and apprenticeship, and this idea is hard to reconcile not only with the huge apparatus of the professional schools but especially with the basic logic of professionalization as the rhetorical strategy for establishing, in Andrew Abbot’s term, jurisdiction (see Abbot, 1988). I return to these issues in Chapter 8 (see below, pp. 254–256 and 273–278).


22. In what follows, I am drawing primarily from Williams, 1981c. However, an equally important source for this line of thought is Williams, 1981b. Compare Williams, 1981a; and 1973, chaps. 3–4 and 15.

23. I explore this theme in detail in relation to Dewey’s concept of purposiveness in Chapter 4 (see below, pp. 121–125). See also Lear’s brilliant exploration of what it might mean to live one’s way through to a new horizon of possibilities when one’s cultural frame has collapsed (Lear, 2006a).

24. For a fascinating investigation which makes this need to make room for oneself central to its philosophical anthropology, see Becker, 1997.