Public Reason 14(2)-15(1): 3-18

On Vindication in Ethical Life[1]

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Abstract. This paper introduces reflection on the concept of vindication in ethical life. It distinguishes vindication from justification and asks how the reflective stances towards our ethical agency that they institute differ. It argues that these reflective stances, and the forms of accounting that each institutes are importantly distinct but also necessary elements of any ethical outlook, and ones that can be related to one another in more than one way. It concludes by relating this argument to themes from the 'morality critics', especially those of meaning in life and moral luck raised by Susan Wolf and Bernard Williams.

Keywords: vindication, justification, moral luck, meaning in life, challenge, pride, joy.

One question that can be asked of us, as ethical agents, is whether our actions are justified; a second question is whether our actions are vindicated by what, it turns out, we have done. Each of these questions constructs a reflective stance towards our ethical agency that involves giving an account of ourselves. But what are the features of these reflective stances? How, if at all, are the accounts each calls for different? In what kind of relationship do they stand? My aim in what follows is to address these questions. I will argue that these reflective stances, and the forms of accounting that each institutes, are importantly distinct but also necessary elements of any ethical outlook, and ones that can be related to one another in more than one way. I will conclude by relating this argument to themes from the 'morality critics', especially those of meaning in life and moral luck raised by Susan Wolf and Bernard Williams.

1] The ideas in this paper have been meandering around my mind for more years than would forgive the still provisional form of their expression in this paper. Important spurs were provided by reading Bernard Reginster's *The Affirmation of Life* (2006) and R. Jay Wallace's *The View From Here* (2013) and a first occasion was provided by an invitation from Jamie Draper to give a keynote address to the REAPP conference at the University of Reading in 2018. Since then various inchoate versions and spin-offs of this material have been presented at the Universities of Cambridge, Frankfurt, Leiden, Leuven, and Southampton as well as at IAS Princeton during a period as visiting professor there in 2021 and to the online Bernard Williams group. I am grateful to all these audiences for their efforts to help me clarify and develop my thoughts, however limited their success may have been. More particular thanks for encouragement, comments and objections are owed to Chris Armstrong, Duncan Bell, Sophie Grace Chappell, Didier Fassin, Rainer Forst, Thomas Fossen, Mike Gadomski, Anca Gheaus, Jonathan Havercroft, Tim Heysse, Cindy Holder, Paul Katsafanas, Avery Kolers, Matthew Kramer, Nikhil Krishan, Dorota Mokrosinska, Geraldine Ng, Matthieu Queloz, Ben Saunders, Joerg Schaub, Francesco Testini, Alan Thomas and Jake Wojtowicz as well as, most especially, my friend and colleague Tracy Strong who left us too early. The current version of this argument was presented at the Rousseau Lecture at ECPR House in December 2022. I am very grateful to Sorin Baiasu for the invitation and the interlocutors and commentators who participated in the symposium that followed – Matt Bennett, Allan Gonzalez, Sacha Mudd, Paula Satne, Joe Saunders, Jakub Szczepanski, Francesco Testini and Previn Karian.

This argument begins by sketching the contours of the concept of vindication through consideration of a series of examples. It then turns to lay out what it proposes are the forms of reflective stance towards our ethical agency that the concepts of justification and of vindication establish – and argues that these involve two distinct ideals of ethical life. In the third part of the paper, I aim to illustrate and support the claim that the forms of accounting (and ideals) that each of these reflective stances institute are necessary elements of any ethical outlook and that they can stand in diverse ways with respect to each other by distinguishing three different kinds of relationship that they can exhibit.

I. CONTOURS OF THE CONCEPT OF VINDICATION

When we think about vindication in the ordinary everyday sense of the word, we may have in mind cases like that presented by Terence Rattigan's play *The Winslow Boy* (set in the Edwardian era and loosely based on real events) in which a 14 year old boy (Ronnie) is accused of the theft of a postal order and expelled from the naval college he attends. The consequences of this event for his family's honour and the boy's future are significant. The family would be shunned by decent society and the boy marked by a permanent stain on his character. Convinced of his innocence, on the basis of his word alone, the family then engage in a long, uncertain and expensive quest for justice which demands sacrifices from them all in terms of the father's health, the brother's Oxford tuition and his future career in the civil service, and the daughter's marital options. They are eventually successful, and to their joy Ronnie's name is cleared. They affirm the value of their having acted as they did in the light of the value of the outcome that they have successfully realised; indeed, they can take pride in the outcome as something that they have brought about: "We did it!"

It is easy in the light of this kind of example to think of vindication as concerning successful struggles to overcome injustice or wrong; but while it may involve such features, it need not do so as a second example illustrates.

In 1984 Nick Faldo was a leading European golfer, having won five tournaments the previous year, but he had not seriously challenged in the majors despite getting into positions to do so. Convinced that his overall ability was sufficient to contest majors, Faldo embarked on the radical and highly risky strategy of completely rebuilding the long swing that he saw as his key weak point. As Faldo's golf began to deteriorate at alarming speed, a number of his sponsors jumped ship. Faldo's livelihood was becoming more and more precarious. He did not win another tournament for three years, but in 1987, to his joy, he won the first of what would turn out to be six major championships. Faldo's decision to rebuild his swing was vindicated and he was entitled to take pride in the fact that he did it (something he expressed by performing a rather tuneless quotation from the song "My Way" at his first major triumph). But notice that his course of action

would have been vindicated even if he had won fewer majors or even none at all (given the role that extrinsic luck plays in such events), as long as it was the case that he was able to seriously challenge in them and did not lose them or gift the win to another competitor (i.e., that his technique and nerve did not collapse under pressure as, for example, Greg Norman's did in the 1996 US Master's when he blew a six shot lead over Faldo in the final round).

The key elements across these two examples are that the course of action involved struggle (that the outcome was uncertain and that it required sacrifice for its achievement) and that the process of struggle realizes outcomes of value to the flourishing of the agent's life such that they have, all things considered, reason to affirm - or at least not regret - that they have acted as they have.[2] Whereas the outcome of value in the first example is the realization of an external goal (Ronnie's name is cleared), in the second example it is the realization of a transformation of the agent's powers (Faldo's ability to maintain a consistent swing under intense competitive pressure). If we imagine for a moment either that these outcomes could have been achieved by the relevant agents simply by wishing for them or that their actions had no relationship to the outcome realised, the concept of ethical vindication would have no application because there would be no achievement in which to feel joy or take pride. Perhaps it needs to be stressed here that these actors do not engage in their actions in order to experience joy or feel pride, rather they engage in their actions because what they are trying to realize is valuable to them, because they care about these matters.

It is important though not to be misled by two shared features of these initial examples, namely, that in both cases the value of the outcome is specified by a goal that is given in advance of the agent's conduct and the outcome is successfully realised. Neither of these are necessary for the exercise of one's agency to be vindicated.

Firstly, it can be the case that the goal is transformed in the process of struggle and the new goal is achieved. One example of this phenomenon is Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 3 in E-flat major which was initially conceived by him as a symphony in the same key, however his pursuit of this goal led him to realise that what he wanted to express did not work in this form and he abandoned it, reworking the first movement as a one-movement *Allegro brillante* for piano and orchestra. Another example would be that of a couple who commit to marriage and come to see through their joint efforts to

2] Does vindication require struggle? Matt Kramer has proposed the following counter-example to me: 'Suppose that I've been spending five pounds each week on lottery tickets and that I eventually desist from that pattern of behavior. Suppose that I then decide to resume my weekly purchases of lottery tickets, and a few weeks later I win the lottery. I can warrantedly feel vindicated in my decision to resume that pattern of behavior even though I have not engaged in any struggle. My decision was of course reached on the basis of a high degree of uncertainty, but the resultant course of action involved only a trifling sacrifice.' This seems plausible but I think it lacks the right kind of relationship of agency and outcome to be constitutively part of the flourishing of one's life.

realise a good marriage that they are best suited to live apart as good friends rather than together as spouses and part amicably.

Secondly, it can also be the case that although the agent's pursuit of their intended goal falls short, the process of pursuing it produces other outcomes of value that are sufficient to provide reasons not to regret the course of action undertaken. An example, which I owe to Adams (2010), is Claus von Stauffenberg's attempt to rescue Germany from Nazi rule by assassinating Hitler and leading a coup d'état on July 20th 1944. This attempt failed and led not only to Stauffenberg's death but also to that of hundreds of others who had collaborated or were suspected of collaborating with him. On Adams' reconstruction, Stauffenberg (and his co-conspirators in this project) 'seem to have been motivated in large part by the meaning that they hoped their deeds would have for others, believing that even if it couldn't succeed in its own terms, the plot against Hitler should be attempted for the honor of Germany, to show the world that some Germans stood up against Hitler's crimes.' (Adams 2010, 80) Although they failed to assassinate Hitler and bring about a coup d'état, their attempt to do so did succeed in showing the world that some Germans were willing to risk their lives to stand up against the regime. If Adams' supposition concerning their motivations is correct, then although they have reason to regret that they were not successful in realizing their intended goal, they need not have reason to regret undertaking the course of action on which they embarked (despite the very high price it demanded of them). They need not because their actions are expressive of the values that give meaning to their lives and, in performing actions expressive of these values, they do realize something that matters on the terms that motivated the external goal they have failed to realise.[3] If, all things considered, they have reason to affirm their actions, they can take pride in their conduct.

These last examples, apart from illustrating the point that vindication need not be restricted to cases of successfully realising a goal that can be stated in advance of the action, should also draw our attention to an issue that we have not yet addressed. Thus far we have seen that the concept of ethical vindication has application when the agent in question has reason to affirm, on the basis of their values, the outcome to which their actions give rise. The entitlement of the agent to feeling vindicated is conditional on its being true that their actions gave rise to this outcome, but it also matters that the values that are realised in such outcomes are values that there is good reason for human beings under the situated circumstances of their lives to value ethically (even if they are not the values to which we ourselves are, or even can be,[4] committed). An action may fail to be vindicated either because the outcomes to which it gives rise are not ones which the agent has reason to affirm on the basis of the values to which they are committed *or because there*

3] I use the weaker formulation 'need not' here because a full account of whether they have reason to consider their actions vindicated would involve a wider consideration of, for example, they were negligent in, for example, their planning or coordination, and hence of the reasons for their failure to realise their external goal.

4] We can recognize the value of forms of life that are not available to us under the conditions of our lives.

is no reason to value the "values" on the basis of which the agent affirms the outcome. Thus, if we consider the Stauffenberg case, it matters here that we have reason to recognize the value of patriotism of the kind exhibited in this example[5] as a value to which ethical agents can reasonably be committed, as something that can be recognized as serving to give meaning and value to the lives of relevantly situated human beings. This does not require that we share their commitment to this value any more than acknowledging the value of works of art such as Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 3 demands that we share the aficionados' love of music. We may ourselves be largely indifferent to the value of both patriotism and music. It does, however, require that we have reason to recognise these values as values to which agents may intelligibly choose to commit themselves as ethical agents. Iago may see his actions as vindicated by the tragic outcome for Othello and Desdemona that he brings about since this outcome is expressive of his (evil) values, but we have no reason to endorse, and every reason to reject, his claim.[6]

To support this claim, we can remind ourselves that it is a feature of an action being apt for ethical vindication that it involves struggle (in the sense of overcoming resistances) and that one's agency stands in the right kind of relationship to the outcome. It is these features that allow agents to take pride or experience joy in what they have achieved and to express this in spontaneous avowals such as "I did it!". However, to take pride or joy in an achievement is to be committed to the view that the value of the outcome one has brought about is one that can and should be acknowledged by others as valuable, where 'others' here refers to humanity as transhistorical community. If we take pride in outcomes that our actions have brought about that are seen by our contemporaries as trivial or shameful, sustaining our self-assessment requires that we are committed to the claim that our contemporaries are, in some way or other, mistaken and that we can provide reasons that are intelligible to them as reasons for why they are mistaken. (Put another way, we call for them to undertake a re-evaluation of their values).

In summary, then, the concept of vindication refers to contexts of agency in which an agent engages in struggle to realise a goal (which may change though the process of struggle) and results in outcomes that give the agent reason to affirm (or at least not regret) their actions on the basis of their value-commitments and where there is general reason to recognise these outcomes as ethically valuable.

5] Avery Kolers and Cindy Holder have helpfully posed the question of whether the case of Robert E. Lee relevantly parallels the Stauffenberg example in some respects despite being directed at patriotically sustaining a regime built on slavery. Here the issue hangs on whether an agent in Lee's circumstances could reasonably be committed to the view that sustaining the institution of slavery was ethically admirable rather than utterly shameful. I don't think this is plausible.

6] As Matt Kramer rightly commented: 'A serial rapist might look back upon his spree of crimes with a feeling of vindication for his decision to embark upon them. He values the feelings of elation and mastery and sexual pleasure which he experienced through that spree. His pursuit of those feelings is coherent and intelligible, but it's obviously not ethically worthy. He ought not to feel any sense of vindication. Quite the contrary.'

REFLECTIVE STANCES: JUSTIFICATORY AND VINDICATORY

With this initial delineation of the concept of vindication in place, let us turn to the second task, that of demonstrating that the concepts of justification and of vindication make available distinct reflective stances towards our ethical agency. I will start with a provisional sketch of what is in play when we are asked to justify our actions or to vindicate our conduct, where the purpose of this sketch is to show that the questions of justification and of vindication involve different types of reflective stance towards our ethical agency that call for different kinds of accountings of ourselves, and this difference points to the distinct roles that each may play in our ethical lives.

One way to think about the concept of moral justification is to see it as responding to what we might call 'the circumstances of social morality' by which phrase I mean to highlight two features that, taken jointly, make morality both possible and necessary. The first of these is that we understand ourselves as agents who are capable of practical deliberation concerning what we should do and, at least much of the time, of acting on the outcomes of our deliberations. The second is that we are social beings whose actions can affect the conditions of each other's agency in ways that are consequential for our ability to pursue our own projects and for the maintenance of the conditions of social life. Taken together, these general features of human life both make possible and require morality as articulating 'a system of socially sanctioned demands' (what we owe to each other) that are 'also at least in some degree generally acknowledged as claims by those subject to them' and thus serve as inputs into our practical deliberations about what we should do (Strawson, 1974: 45).

The question of whether our actions are morally justified can then be seen as instituting a reflective stance and form of accountability directed at our ethical lives as social beings who owe consideration to each other. It requires that an agent demonstrate that the practical deliberations that underwrite their actions acknowledge the claims of what we owe to each other expressed in 'a system of socially sanctioned demands' and, if not, to provide reasons that (fully or partially) excuse this failure. It is important to notice that it is integral to this kind of accountability that one should be in a position to apply the relevant deliberative considerations at the time of acting: it is, as Williams remarks, 'thought to be essential … to the notion of justification itself … that one should be in a position to apply the justifying considerations at the time of choice' (Williams 1981, 24).

To offer this kind of accounting of one's actions is, thus, to demonstrate whether the exercise of our agency is (or is not) 'above board'; where justification puts the agent 'in the clear' in the sense that no complaint or claim can be upheld against them in respect of their performance of the action concerned, and hence no sanction (formal or informal) can be legitimately applied to them in virtue of this conduct. This is, then, a form of accountability directed at our moral competence that underwrites a form of

self-valuing in which the agent is judged relative to an ideal of upright conduct, one who discharges the debts they owe to others.

What of the concept of vindication and the reflective stance towards our ethical agency that it makes available to us? One way of thinking about the concept of vindication is to see it as being responsive to two basic features of our ethical lives. The first is that our agency is characterised by the pursuit of valued goals through the exercise of limited, fallible abilities under circumstances that we do not control and cannot fully foresee. The second is that the outcomes of our actions (intentional or unintentional) matter for how our life goes, its flourishing, and whether we can affirm it.

The reflective stance that this concept would seem to make available is one in which the accounting that is asked of us concerns whether the value of our doing what we have done enables us to affirm our lives as ethical agents. But to flesh out this stance we need to recall the point that our experience of the value of our agency given natural expression in the cry "I did it!" is tied to overcoming resistances to the achievement of our valued ends. To will the goal is, in this sense, to will the resistances to the achievement of the goal. Suppose, for example, Faldo had been able to transform his swing simply by wishing it, that it had not needed requires the work, sacrifice and risk that was necessary for the realization of this end. Under such conditions, Faldo would not have enjoyed the sense of achievement that underwrites his ability to affirm the value of this course of conduct to the flourishing of his life.

It can sound paradoxical to say that willing the goal means willing resistances to the goal,[7] but this appearance of paradox is dissolved when, recalling that we are limited, fallible agents acting under circumstances we don't control and cannot fully foresee, we conceive of valuable goals as challenges. We can help draw out the significance of this by considering four features of challenges:

1) they involve overcoming resistances (no resistance, no challenge);

2) they must be possible for the particular agent, although whether they are possible may not be determinable prior to the attempt (if there is no practical possibility of you achieving X, then X is not a challenge);

3) their value is at least partially related to their difficulty (given two challenges distinguished only by their degree of difficulty, the more challenging option is the more valuable);

4) once a challenge is met (if it is the kind of challenge that can be fully and finally met), then, barring significant changes in the circumstances of one's agency, it is no longer valuable as a challenge (which is not to say it has no value).

The kind of accountability that the vindicatory stance involves thus concerns whether the agent is exercising, developing, and realising their abilities to achieve

7] I am influenced here by the account of will to power in Reginster 2006 as I reconstruct it in my review of his book (Owen, 2009).

valuable ends, whether they are pursuing what matters to them and in doing so realizing valuable goals that allow them to experience themselves as the authors of lives that they can affirm or, at least, all things considered, have reason not to regret.

However, the life-affirmation I may enjoy in the successful achievement of a goal ('Hurrah, I did it at last!') has as its flipside the possibility of regret in a variety of agent-related forms that range from regret at my failure to take up opportunities to pursue particular goals to regret at the disvaluable outcomes to which my conduct inadvertently gives rise (and the attendant reflections in the form of "if only I had/had not" can haunt a life to destruction). Note further that because vindicatory judgments are always retrospective (they pertain to what, it turns out, we have done), they are situated in the wider biographical narrative of one's life, and their character and significance can change as that life-history develops. In this respect, specific vindicatory judgments are always provisional, what strikes me now as a (perhaps shameful) failure to overcome a challenge may acquire value in virtue of being an experience that I come to see as a necessary element of the successful achievement of another goal, in which case the earlier failure may be (at least partially) redeemed. Conversely, as the example of Oedipus illustrates, successful achievements of particular goals may lead to an overall outcome of a life that is tragic (i.e, cannot be vindicated). Hence the remark attributed to Solon by Herodotus: 'call no man happy until he is dead' or more fully '"Yet keep yourself from calling him happy before he dies; he is lucky."

So whereas the kind of accountability demanded from the justificatory stance is raised from the standpoint of the other to whom one owes moral consideration, the kind of accountability called for from the vindicatory stance is raised from the standpoint of one's attainable self, the future self who is liable to be haunted by the thought 'if only'. We may note that one reason that the figure of the older and wiser friend (e.g., Socrates) is a classic topos in philosophy is that they may exemplify this future standpoint in the present. The ideal of righteousness that emerges from the justificatory stance may then be contrasted to the ideal of life-affirmation that emerges from the vindicatory stance.[8]

All this is, in one respect, just a way of spelling out the claim that any ethical outlook involves both a form of accountability that concerns an agent's responsibility to others and one that addresses their responsibility to themselves (most basically to the conditions of their being able to affirm, or at least not regret, their lives). The contrast in its negative mode is, if you like, between a wrongful life and a wasted life (in the sense of 'wasted' that connects both to lack of development of one's potential and to meaninglessness). Roughly speaking, the justificatory stance recognizes that we are agents who have to work out ways of living together on terms each has reason to accept and the vindicatory stance acknowledges that each human being has a fundamental

8] This is not to say that the exercise of agency in the ways sketched is the only source of life-affirmation; on the contrary, joy in life can arise in more passive or receptive ways from encounters with art or nature. Thanks to Joerg Schaub and Paul Katsafanas for pushing me on this point.

interest in being able to see their life as meaningful and valuable in a way that connects to how they conduct it under the conditions of fortune that they encounter.

JUSTIFICATION, VINDICATION AND TYPES OF ETHICAL OUTLOOK

At this point, we can take up the task of reflecting on some different ways in which justificatory and vindicatory stances and their respective ideals may be related to one another. I will sketch out three broad modes of relationship in which they may stand: the priority of the justificatory over the vindicatory; the priority of the vindicatory over the justificatory, and the integration view.

Consider first an ethical outlook in which the justificatory stance and its ideal of righteousness has priority over the vindicatory stance and its ideal of life-affirmation. This can take two general forms. The first is one in which the latter is wholly subordinate to the former such that the character of the vindicatory ideal is itself restructured in terms that make it consonant with the justificatory ideal. This gives rise to a picture of ethics as 'impartial morality' in the sense that critics such as Wolf and Williams take to be problematic. This does not mean that the ideal of life-affirmation does not operate in this ethical outlook at all, rather it means that self-affirmation is pictured in terms of the successful cultivation of one's powers to will and act in ways that are morally justified. We might see the ethical telos of a holy will as one form which this might take and the moral saint (in Wolf's sense) as its embodied expression. This relationship of domination of the justificatory over the vindicatory generates what we may think of as a paradoxical relationship to vindication. I have argued that a natural expression of a course of action being vindicated is the spontaneous positive avowal "I did it!" that expresses first personal pride in the achievement. Notice though that the restructuring of the vindicatory ideal under the domination of the justificatory ideal makes the experience of pride in one's achievement a problem precisely because it would be to express a form of ethical partiality within the domain of moral impartiality in a way that the righteous moral agent cannot coherently do: the moral saint cannot experience pride in being a moral saint because taking up such a prideful relationship to one's own saintliness is incompatible with a saintly outlook in which it is grace that is the relevant relationship.[9]

The second way that the justificatory ideal can stand in a priority relationship to the vindicatory ideal is through a picture in which moral demands have general priority but there is space for allowing agent-centred personal prerogatives. How much space there is, what weight to allow such prerogatives, and indeed whether this can be sustained as a coherent ethical outlook at all are all matters of controversy. However, as Wolf notes, many of those responding to Williams' criticisms of 'impartial morality'

9] This claim may be too expressive of a Christian view of sainthood in which one's saintliness is conceived as a gift of grace rather than a personal achievement.

in its utilitarian and Kantian forms 'have agreed that of course morality should take account of the agent's possible sacrifices, weighing them in the balance against the goals and interests of others that morality is concerned to address and protect.' (Wolf, 2010: 56). Hence this does mark out an effort to articulate a form of ethical outlook that would allow ethical agents to enjoy a form of life-affirmation without generating the vindicatory paradox that marks the domination version of justificatory priority but maintaining the priority of the justificatory stance over the vindicatory stance.

What of an ethical outlook in which the vindicatory stance has priority over the justificatory stance? In its most dominating form, this would lead the character of the ideal of righteousness to be restructured by its subordination to the ideal of life-affirmation. This does not mean that the ideal of righteousness drops out of the picture rather its means that this ideal is reconceived in terms that relate to the agent's cultivation of their powers to realise their valued ends – we might see the ethical *telos* of *kalon* ("noble" or "beautiful" aka "fine") as one form this may take and the Homeric hero as one possible embodied expression of it. Thus, for example, Achilles takes Agamemnon to act unjustifiably towards him but the reasons that this is unjustifiable concern Achilles' personal excellence and contribution to the Greek cause. But less dominating forms are possible. So, for example, Machiavelli's political ethics of glory or Nietzsche's ethics of *amor fati* may be seen as prioritizing the ideal of life-affirmation but acknowledging the ethical demands of what is owed to others. Thus, in *Daybreak*, Nietzsche presents his project of re-evaluation as, in part, oriented to this task: 'we shall restore to men their goodwill towards the actions decried as egoistic and restore to these actions their *value – we shall deprive them of their bad conscience!*' (D s148), while at the same time stressing the following point:

> It goes without saying that I do not deny - unless I am a fool - that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I think that one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto.* (D s103)

The first remark expresses Nietzsche's commitment to the idea of life-affirmation; the second his acknowledgment of the demands of what we owe to each other. [10]

The third position may be thought of as an 'integrationist' view in which the aim is not to prioritize one ideal or the other but to integrate them as far as possible. The two primary exemplars of this view are Aristotle (and, following him, Aquinas) and Hegel (and, following him, Marx).[11] Central to this project is the aim of reconciling the autonomy and flourishing of the individual with the autonomy and flourishing of the community through an understanding of freedom as self-realization where acting

10] We might note, in passing, that the contrast between these first two types of relationship of justificatory and vindicatory stances and ideals denotes the two forms of ethical outlook that Nietzsche considers in his *On the Genealogy of Morality* – slave-morality and noble-morality.

11] I am grateful to Avery Kolers and Cindy Holder for pushing me on this point.

appropriately with respect to others is an integral part of individual self-realization and hence self-realization contributes to the flourishing of the community. Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor may be seen as contemporary representatives of this approach.

VINDICATION, ETHICS, AND THE MORALITY CRITICS

"Morality", in the sense subject to criticism by a diverse group of philosophers including Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, is understood in the sense of 'impartial morality' (whether in its Kantian, utilitarian or contractualist variants) that I have characterised in the previous section as an ethical outlook that institutes the lexical priority of the justificatory stance to the vindicatory stance. In historical terms, this ethical outlook is a product of European modernity bound up with the emergence of the state and the market as the primary poles of social life (as MacIntyre (2016) stresses) and the demarcation of egoism and altruism as basic action-orientations in social interaction. Rather than mapping this constellation in detail though, what I want to do in this final section is focus on the relationship of the vindicatory stance to two issues that concern all these thinkers, but which are drawn out most specifically by Williams and Wolf, namely, moral luck and meaning-in-life. I focus on these because they help not only to situate my sketch of the vindicatory stance as a dimension of ethical life in relation to the "morality critic" debates but because they also allow me further to clarify the place and character of the concept of vindication in ethical life.

An initial point to make concerns Williams' argument in 'Moral Luck' in which he imagines a fictional version of the artist Gauguin who confronts the fact that he has moral obligations to his family but also has reason to believe that if he stays in France to fulfil those obligations, then he will not be able to try to realise the artistic vocation that he sees as of fundamental value to his sense of his life. It is the case that Gauguin does not, and cannot, know whether he has in within him to be great artist, but he knows that his life will be haunted, perhaps to destruction, by the thought 'if only' if he does not attempt to find out. In Williams' fictional scenario, Gauguin abandons his family, travels to Tahiti to work on his art, and when he eventually returns is recognised as a major artist.

My first concern here is very narrow in that I only want to take up Williams' use of the concept of justification. He writes:

> The justification, if there is to be one, will be essentially retrospective. Gauguin could not do something which is thought to be essential to rationality and to the notion of justification itself, which is that one should be in a position to apply the justifying considerations at the time of choice and in advance of knowing whether one was right (in the sense of it coming out right). (1981, 24)

But does this idea of retrospective justification make sense? Williams' route to it by way of a lengthy detour through the phenomena of regret and agent-regret concludes by specifying the sense of 'justification' in 'retrospective justification' in terms of regret:

> [T]he project in the interests of which the decision is made is one with which the agent is identified in such a way that if it succeeds, his standpoint of assessment will be from a life which then derives an important part of its significance from him from that very fact; if it fails, it can, necessarily, have no such significance in his life. If he succeeds, it cannot be the case that while welcoming the outcome he more basically regrets the decision. [...] That is the sense in which his decision can be justified, for him, by success. (1981, 34-35)

The sense of 'justification' advanced in this remark is not, however, the sense of justification engaged in the earlier passage. It speaks to a situation in which the agent has, all things considered, reason not to regret their action, not to a situation in which the agent confronts the question of whether their conduct meets the requirements of rationally or morally upright conduct. But this is a matter of vindication rather than justification – a point that is illustrated by Williams' acknowledgment of the fact that those (Gauguin's family members) harmed by his decision retain justified grounds for complaint against him.[12] Nor need we, as art lovers grateful that we have Gauguin's art, regard Gauguin's decision as morally or rationally justified; we need merely acknowledge that his actions were vindicated, and that in virtue of the artistic value brought into the world by his decision hold that, all things considered, we have reason not to regret his decision. The problem, I think, with Williams' use of the concept of justification in 'retrospective justification' is that it elides the distinction between justification and vindication – and in doing so suggests misleadingly that 'justification' and 'retrospective justification' are part of the same game. This misleading impression is reinforced when, for example, Williams offers remarks such as the following on questions of moral self-indulgence and of dirty hands:

> One issue that does notably arise with both of these questions, but which, again, I shall not discuss, is the extent to which, and the ways in which, actions offensive to morality can be retrospectively justified – perhaps even morally justified – by success; and what, if they can, may count as success. (1981, 42)

This is ironic since Williams' primary concern was with trying to demonstrate that the claims of 'morality' (understood here in the sense specified by our consideration of 'moral justification') on our lives are not, and cannot be, all that the proponents of impartial morality, and hence of the priority of the justificatory stance, take them to be.

Wolf's reflections on why meaning in life matters helps to indicate in this context that the dimension of human life that pertains to the pursuit of activities of value that

12] While Gauguin has, all things considered, reason not to regret that he has done, it does seem to me he can regret that doing what he has done entailed the moral harm to his family that it did and acknowledge that he owes them recompense. I am grateful to Matt Kramer for pressing me on this point.

we value and that give meaning to our lives picked out by the concept of vindication relates precisely to Williams' key point, namely, that there must be a point at which it becomes "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 the world at all." (1981, 14) The concept of vindication is consonant with Wolf's argument that meaning 'comes from active engagement in projects of worth, which links us to our world in a positive way' and 'allows us to see our lives as having a point and a value even when we take an external perspective on ourselves' (Wolf 2010, 58). On this view, what gives meaning to our lives thereby gives us reasons to live.

Importantly, however, Wolf also highlights the point that it is unhelpful and obfuscatory to attempt to situate this active engagement in projects of value within the terms of the self-interest/morality framework that "morality" (in the targeted sense) aims to impose. In pursuing projects that give meaning to our lives, we are not pursuing happiness (Wolf, 2010 & 2015: 107-126). An example: when Wittgenstein contracted prostate cancer in 1951, he went to stay with friends in Cambridge and, when he wasn't expected to survive the night and with other friends due to visit the following morning, he made his famous final utterance: "tell them I've had a wonderful life". It has been proposed that this remark must have been intended simply to ease the burden of his friends since much of his life seemed both starkly lonely and intensely unhappy. But the facts of loneliness and unhappiness need not undermine the truthfulness of Wittgenstein's avowal, on the contrary they can serve as markers of the struggle that he underwent to realise what mattered to him – and read in the light of his remark that "Man has to awaken to wonder … Science is a way of sending him to sleep again", the avowal of a 'wonderful' life may have marked a precise and appropriate form of affirmation of the philosophical life that he led.

Wolf puts this point by noting that insofar as pursuit of our projects give meaning to our lives, it is because these projects 'have an independent value that draws us out of ourselves, linking us to larger community or world in a positive way':

> When we act or want to act in the context of these attachments out of love or passion for their objects, we do not do so purely or primarily for our own sakes (not even, therefore, for the sake of being able to live a meaningful life), but at least partly for the sake of the person or project or value that is the object of our love.
>
> If we keep these features in mind, the moralists' injunction that the agent should sacrifice that which gives meaning to his life for the sake of morality is liable to take on a hollow ring. (Wolf 2010, 56-7)

What does Wolf mean here? It is certainly the case that in pursuing our projects – and especially our ground projects (in Williams' sense) – we are doing so because we value the project and understand its value in terms that are not reducible to self-interest, but at the same time the successful realization of (independently) valuable

outcomes through this project is integral to our flourishing and our relationship to it has an ineluctably first personal form expressed, for example, in the spontaneous cry "I did it!". If we read Wolf's use of the phrase 'for the sake of' in instrumental terms, then Wolf's surely correct point is that our relationship to our projects of value does not take the form of aiming at a meaningful life and asking what projects will serve as means to this end. But if we read "for the sake of" as denoting a constitutive relationship between our projects of value and a meaningful life, then acting out of love for, for example, art (Gauguin) or sport (Faldo) just is acting for the sake of a meaningful life. Given her objections to the self-interest/morality framework, I take it that Wolf's concern is to reject the view according to which our pursuit of our projects is pictured in instrumental terms. Gauguin's and Faldo's pursuit of their ground projects is, at once, the pursuit of goals that have independent value and the pursuit of meaningful lives that they can affirm.

This brings me to a second point where engagement with Wolf's work raises a question for what I have characterised as the vindicatory dimension of ethical agency. In sketching this dimension, I have stressed the centrality of 'valuable goals as challenges' and advanced some perhaps overly bold claims about the relationship of vindication and pride and joy in achievement. The question is thus whether 'active engagement in projects of worth' necessarily involves that one is taking up challenging goals?

Wolf's argument would seem to support an affirmative answer to this question. When she introduces the idea of acting out of 'reasons of love' with respect to activities, her examples – for instance, agonizing over the article she is trying to write and struggling to get it right – highlight the point that it is the value of the activity that leads the agent 'to sacrifice ease and exercise discipline in pursuing her goal' (2010). Sacrificing ease and exercising discipline are ways in which we develop our abilities and overcome resistances in pursuing a goal. It is important to notice here that taking up 'goals as challenges' does not mean that one necessarily conceives of the goal as a challenge (although one may) nor that one is engaging in pursuit of the goal because it is challenging and requires the development of one's abilities. Rather one is pursuing the goal because it is valuable.

But two questions arise at this point. First, isn't this talk about challenges all a bit strenuous? What is wrong with wanting just to be? Or to have periods of downtime? Second, what if the agent in question has become a virtuoso practitioner of the activity such that the immediate challenge that her goal poses is no longer difficult for her?

With respect to the first question, the goal of living a simple life is a goal, often quite a challenging one involving considerable self-discipline. To "just be" (in a sense that does not reduce to pure hedonism) is a goal that can be vindicated precisely because it makes demands on one's agency. What, though, of downtime, of taking it easy? We can certainly envisage periods like family summer holidays where we aim simply to let

ourselves relax and recharge[13] – and it may seem odd (unless one finds it really hard to relax or not work) to take pride in this achievement. There are two slightly different points that are relevant here. The first is that the vindication of one's ethical agency is not the only source of life-affirmation. Relaxing and being receptive to, for example, the wonders of nature or of art or of everyday family life can be sources of affirmation that are not ethically vindicatory in character. If we see the desire to 'just be' expressed in terms of downtime and an openness to such sources of life-affirmation, then this the state of 'just being' is a valuable but not ethical vindicatory state. The second is that downtime insofar as it is oriented to recharging, to summoning the renewal of the energies need to pursue one's ground projects, is not vindicated by being successfully realised, rather its vindication is part and parcel of the pursuit of one's valuable goals. It is not an object of freestanding vindication but rather of dependent vindication.

Turning to the second question, we can note that the central issue here concerns the distinction between commitment to a challenging activity and commitment to ensuring that the activity remains challenging, and relatedly the state of boredom.

To get at this question, consider the feelings of frustration and boredom we experience when we are stuck performing an activity that we long ago mastered but are prevented from advancing beyond. Consider, for example, being stuck doing basic mathematics (e.g., multiplication tables) at primary school. However much one loves doing maths, it can be hard to sustain that love in contexts of utter boredom. So what does the bored child (or sensible teacher) do? One thing they might do is to create rules that make it more difficult by, for example, introducing a time-challenge: 'how many questions can I do in under a minute without slips?' This kind of response is a maths-loving response where the love is expressed by trying to make the activity more challenging by requiring a heightened level of attention. The bored child is acting in a way that is designed to sustain their love of the activity. This kind of example suggests that love, meaning, and challenge are related such that if an activity one values ceases to be challenging then it could cease to be a source of meaning but also that loving an activity will be expressed by attempting to sustain its challenging quality.

But we can also think of examples that concern challenging activities where the activity involves a range of skills and demands a level of attention – e.g., writing a philosophy article or making a complicated dessert – such that one can experience pride and joy is just exercising and sustaining the skills and attentiveness required to perform the activity well. It is, we might say, an intrinsically challenging activity (so we may value the ideal of effortless performance in relation to such activities precisely because of the challenge posed by such an ideal and the demands that it makes on us).

13] Although as Matthew Kramer rightly pointed out to me, "Downtime" spent with one's spouse and/or children is not altogether uninvolved in the meeting of challenges. Rather, it is partly constitutive of one's efforts to meet the challenge of sustaining a robust and loving marriage and/or the challenge of sustaining a close-knit family.

In these kinds of cases, boredom does not denote that the activity has ceased to be challenging, rather it discloses that what one values has changed.

From these reflections, we may say that if it is reflection on Williams' work on moral luck that helps make clear the place of vindication in ethical life; it is Wolf's reflections on meaning-in-life that deepen our appreciation of its ethical character.

CONCLUSION

The argument I have offered here has aimed to clarify and characterise the place of vindication in ethical life. I began by trying to sketch out the contours of the concept of vindication in order to be able to distinguish the reflective stance that this concept institutes from that constructed by the concept of justification. I have then proposed that whereas moral justification involves a stance towards one's ethical agency oriented by the ideal of upright conduct, vindication involves a relationship to one's agency oriented by the ideal of life-affirmation. This led me to the claim that these two stances and their respective ideals can be placed in more than one kind of relationship to each other – and I sketch out three general forms that this relationship may take. Finally, I situated this focus on vindication in relation to some of the concerns of the "morality critics", particularly Bernard Williams on moral luck and Susan Wolf on meaning-in-life. There is no doubt much more that could be said, and it must be acknowledged that this argument still has a rather provisional character, but I hope that it provides a basis for further investigation of the salience and significance of the concept of vindication for ethical life.

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