Breakfast with Miranda Fricker: an Interview by Johnna Blystone, Nam Son, and Gabriel Thomas

Transcribed by Abhishek Manhas, edited by Nam Son

One morning in late October when—as the hour neared nine—remnants of the chilly nocturnal breaths responsible for having gilded Wooster's sidewalks in beds of oak foliage the night before were starting to dissipate, the four of us made our way downtown to The Leaf for some food and warmth. Upon our entrance, the restaurant appeared unbusy, its air aggressively perfumed with eggs, coffee, cheese and a low murmur of muted conversations. We sat down in a nice, roomy booth, ordered some food, and began our discussion.

This interview was conducted by Sapere Aude's treasurer and editor, Gabriel Thomas; philosophy major, Johnna Blystone; and the present narrator, Nam Son. Our distinguished interviewee is Julius Silver Professor of Philosophy at New York University and Co-Director of the New York Institute for Philosophy, Dr. Miranda Fricker.

Nam Son. Perhaps we should start with a question about your lecture yesterday . . .

Dr. Fricker had given the 17ᵗʰ annual Lindner Lecture in Ethics at the College of Wooster the evening before in Wishart Hall, on the dynamic historicism of Bernard Williams.

Nam Son. . . . I am wondering how Bernard Williams's defense of internal reasons plays into the following idea from the lecture— that reflection "destroys" ethical knowledge by turning it into historical knowledge. I am also curious to know if the idea rather appeals to an objectivist standard, since it implies the possibility of putting our moral judgments out there for everyone to reflect on and to say, "that's right" or "that's wrong." It seems to me that if this should be the case, then his position might not be a relativist one after all.

Dr. Fricker joked that she might need her steamed milk, which she had ordered as a supplement to her coffee, before she could answer the question.

Miranda Fricker. There are actually different questions in what you just said, so maybe we can start with internal reasons. And I can hardly believe that I'm doing this before I've had any coffee,

because the concept of internal reasons is one those really difficult things to explain!

Basically, his conception of practical reasons, including ethical reasons, is that there is no such thing as a reason which is a consideration that applies to you externally. From items that either are in your subjective motivational set already—so, things you already care about that motivate you to do or to not do—or those that *would* be there, once you have fixed your beliefs and your practical reasoning in a really minimal way . . .

At this point the waitress interrupted us to bring out our food, smelling hot and tasty. Now armed with her hot latte, Dr. Fricker continued.

Miranda Fricker. . . . As I was saying, with his conception of internal reason, in order for me to count as having a reason to do anything, there has to be some connection with a motivation that's either already in my motivational set, or that would be there if I corrected the false beliefs or bad reasoning.

Now that *sounds* like a highly subjectivist conception of what your reasons are, and sometimes people read it as if this account were saying, "whatever motivates you is your reason." But Willliams would say that this is not strictly true. Very often, there will be someone who seems to us to have bad practical reasons or bad ethical reasons, and yet it will turn out that they do have some motivations *from which* there would be a sound route to the reasons we think they should have; they are just not seeing it. So we can easily be mistaken about what our own reasons are. It's not just, "my reasons are whatever I want them to be," no. Actually, you do have certain basic motivations, and it can be difficult to discover what they are! You'll have to iron out your false beliefs, get enough information, think it through *imaginatively*—Williams said that too.

And then at the end of the day, if you're talking to someone who just doesn't value *x* as much as you do and prioritizes something else—if, at the notional end of this very long

discussion, you really both don't have any false beliefs or errors in your practical reasoning—then it turns out, you *are* people who value different things! And it's just hot air to say that, well, there are external reasons for you to value this thing more than that thing. There aren't any. *This* person does not have any reason to behave in *that* way.

But Williams was also ready to say this: evil people—really morally bad people, etc.—what is so bad about them is that they *don't* have any reason to behave better. Most of us when we behave morally badly, we do have reasons to behave better, hence our feelings of shame and so on. But those people don't. And we just have to face that and live up to it, rather than engage in a rationalistic fantasy that there are reasons out there that apply to them anyways. *That* was the fantasy, he thought.

So that was his view of practical reasons in general, including ethical ones. Now, you were asking me, Son, how that relates to the business of rational reflection being capable of destroying ethical knowledge. And I think it *does* relate to it, indirectly, because his internalism about reasons is part and parcel of his overall non-objectivist position about ethical values and values in general.

As I was putting it yesterday, slightly worried that I'm imposing an "-ism" on Bernard Williams that might have annoyed him—so please forgive me, Professor Williams—I basically see it as all of a piece, that our reasons, values, and the concepts we use accordingly to make discriminations in the world, are *all* a social construct. They are all an artifact of human beings living together in a particular time and place. So *if* there were external reasons, that would be a complete misfit with this social constructionist picture, and *if* there were external reasons, it would not be possible for rational reflection to destroy ethical knowledge, because ethical knowledge would be understood as going with objective reasons, external reasons that apply to me regardless of anything I would ever be motivated by.

Furthermore, whatever concepts that we would use to make discriminations in the world according to those reasons *could not* be destroyed—because they would be real and externally given! So, Williams's non-objectivism about values and the internal reason thesis are all of a piece.

I thanked her for the comprehensive answer. The four of us then gave ourselves time to eat and engage in more informal topics, until Gabriel—now newly vitalized by his bowl of fruit—pulled us back into philosophy.

Gabriel Thomas. There is this one piece by Bernard Williams that I am familiar with, *The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.* I am doing my senior thesis on the idea of Death as a necessary evil, and this piece, needless to say, is incredibly influential. Now, the internal reason that we talked about earlier seems to connect with categorical desires and how they fit into personal identity. Am I right in thinking this?

Miranda Fricker. Yes, absolutely, that's right. What's interesting is his use of the word, "categorical," in relation to categorical desires, is deliberately provocative, because the word belongs to Kant—and the idea is that there are reasons that apply to you no matter what. They are, exactly, external reasons. They apply regardless of your desires, your interests, your habits, *merely* in virtue of the fact that you're a rational being.

So Williams said: Look, some of our desires are unshiftable. They're part of who we are, and part of what makes our lives make sense, part of what makes my life *my* life, and not your life. In using the word "categorical" there, it's very much provocative and on purpose. He thinks there can be—in the case of reasons too—reasons which he might use the word "categorical" to describe in the sense of *practical necessity.*

One of his long theses that he also argues for is this: Kantianism in the loose sense of the morality system, misreads the nature of practical necessity, i.e., when a human being *just* must do something, or just cannot do something. So if your

conscience makes you hold fast—even though everyone is telling you, you've got to betray this friend because everything hangs on it for you, your whole future, etc., and you say, no; I can't do that; I'm just not going to betray that person—that is functioning for you as a piece of practical necessity. Now, to someone else, it might not be functioning that way. They might be like, whatever, they will get over it, my whole life depends on it anyway. But for you, this is something you can't do, and won't do. So for you, this is functioning categorically. It is a piece of practical necessity.

The Ancient Greek world was full of practical necessity, you know. Ajax comes back from the war, and is humiliated because he has delusions of fighting men when in reality he's just killing all the sheep and becomes a laughingstock, and he kills himself out of practical necessity! Not a happy story. But the idea is that practical necessity was alive and well in the Ancient world and they did not have the notion of categorical reasons that Kant had. We can have the idea of practical necessity, and of the conscience forbidding you to do something, and it functions categorically *for you*. You will not betray this friend. But what we should realize, Williams thinks, is that it's essentially personal. It's essentially *first-personal*, if one can put it this way. It's your reason. So he cheekily used that word, "categorical," about desires, as part of that picture, i.e., that we should not let the morality system mindset distorts where practical necessity comes from for a human being—it really comes from something personal, such as a personal conscience, and from who you are. It's almost existential.

So categorical desires can function in the same way. These projects—these ground projects, as Williams sometimes calls it in his critique of utilitarianism, are what make my life *mine*. They function for me as categorical in the sense that I can't and won't get rid of them; they command my will, because of who I am. So that's a little detour on what he's up to, in using the word "categorical" desires, which is a bit of a nod and a wink, you know.

Gabriel Thomas. Thank you! That was extremely helpful.

Johnna Blystone. I'm not technically part of *Sapere Aude*, but I am interested in you and your career; specifically I would like to know: what would you say are the overarching themes of your particular interests in philosophy? And can you say a little bit about how you came into these specific central interests that you find yourself in?

Miranda Fricker. Sure! So I had a little bit of an odd way back into philosophy, because I certainly never planned to be a philosopher or any kind of an academic . . . I did an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and French—so French literature and language— and I always loved writing about novels and plays and poems, mainly. But then again, what I really liked was the *combination* of both arguing and writing about texts. So when I took this one course module that was technically in French literature, and it was on Montaigne and Pascal—both of whom were also philosophers, to me, that was a complete turning point.

Up till then, the philosophy I was doing was just talking about the arguments, about the content, whereas the literature I was doing was talking about the content but with a focus on the form. But being asked to write about Montaigne and Pascal in the context of a French literature course, about philosophical content *and* form and how the two interplayed, with someone who was a wonderful expert on them, I couldn't believe my luck! At that time I was like, "this is something I know how to do, and this is something I really enjoy." In some ways, there is not a lot of room for that in traditional philosophy. And although the experience did not make me immediately think, "ah, *therefore* I want to be an academic philosopher!" it did make me fall in love with academic work.

At the same time, I was getting into feminism, and how gender shapes our lives and frustrations. Philosophy, by the way, is still a very male-dominated subject, and it was even more so back then. So I did a master's degree in Women's Studies at the

University of Kent; I wanted to read a lot of feminist stuff and get my head around it. It was reading feminist philosophy in the course of that which made me think, "this is cool! All these people are asking questions about power, prejudice, gender, race, and relating them to issues of knowledge . . ." And that was when I realized there was a dissertation I really wanted to write.

So finally I wrote a DPhil dissertation at Oxford about postmodernist theories of knowledge and why they were false grounds for feminist politics, because feminist politics, or any politics, needs to have a robust everyday sense of what is real or not real, true or not true, what is knowledge and what is not knowledge—pure ideology, for instance, in order to get this politics going. And those ideas are what eventually morphed into this work I did, *Epistemic Injustice*, that came out in 2007, which was an evolved version of that project in some ways. Now we just call that project social epistemology, feminist epistemology, etc., but in those days, the word "social epistemology" hardly existed; it was fighting for its own existence, and epistemology was still super abstracted and really just focused on trying to define the concept of knowledge, trying to think about different forms of justification, to combat skepticism, etc., and it seemed like issues of power and people not being believed because of prejudices and so on were someone else's business, whoever that is, and not that of epistemology—because it's out there in the world. And I was trying to show that it actually *is* the business of epistemology. In various ways, there are conceptions of what we're doing when we're trying to define the concept of knowledge which would require that we should combat prejudice *already.* If you're already talking about prejudice, you're already talking about the world. Somehow, it was very helpful to me that feminist epistemology, virtue epistemology, and other kinds of social epistemology was pushing to be heard—they were always socializing our conception of knowers and inquirers. I came to feel that my project was part of those conversations, whereas before that it just felt like, honestly, I did not know what conversations this was meant to be part of. These category shifts

help a lot when you're trying to form a project, so that you know what you're doing and can explain it to people without difficulty.

And then I kind of have moved much more into working in ethics for the past ten years. I've always done both, and taught both, but I've found myself getting really interested, through Williams's work, in interpersonal responses to wrongdoing: blame, apology, forgiveness. I've been working on that recently and also, as I was saying last night, I am gradually working my way round to feeling that I know how to write about Williams's work—how I *want* to write about Williams's work. And that connects with the literary background.

One of the things with Williams is that he's difficult to pin down for a reason. He thought trying to pin things down and put things into neat boxes was a bad idea; he mistrusted it and thought it led to bad philosophy, bad mistakes, because you become instantly partisan in how you're viewing things. He talked about social construction a lot—he said explicitly that the value of truthfulness is socially constructed as intrinsic—but he would never say, "therefore I am a social constructionist about intrinsic values." So I hope that writing about his philosophy in a way that pays attention to the type of text you produce is just that kind of philosophical conversation. Reading him is just like talking to him; it's completely his voice, it's how he talked. And it's really nice that you read him and you hear his voice. To conserve that is a bit like conserving a character in a novel— there's a kind of personality to this philosophy, a kind of . . . jovial irreverence. He would make fun of things; and you want to conserve that character—that seems like part of the literary project. To write about someone's work and keep their personality in it is a kind of literary project. So I'm looking forward to getting stuck into that.

Johnna appreciated the answer. She had explored similar lines of thought while researching for a research project on feminist identity philosophy, through which she read about the notion of practical identity by Christine Korsgaard. Johnna

said that this sounded to her also like the kind of skepticism about universal moral reasons which has hitherto pervaded our conversation.

Miranda Fricker. I can totally see that you will get a lot out of Korsgaard, Johnna. Some people say that Korsgaard's Kant isn't really Kant—it's Korsgaard's Kant; and part of what Korsgaard was reacting to was Williams. His idea is that a lot of our ethical reasons are irreducibly personal; and while he wanted to talk about fundamental personal motivations, etc., as we have discussed, she does not want to say that, of course. She wants to conserve the Kantian apparatus of what deliberation looks like and how our reasons command us. But she was trying to show— and I think she did a brilliant job of showing—how you can convert or adapt a Kantian conception of deliberation capable of admitting first-person ethical reasons built into it by the idea of personal identity. "As a mother, I must do this." Lots of our reasons have authority over us, not *merely* because we are rational beings, but also because we are rational beings who have a certain kind of personal identity.

So that's all part of the same conversation. Williams had the utmost respect for Korsgaard. There was a time when there was a buzz in the air, I suppose, when I was a graduate student, and when moral philosophers thought about reasons, the issue of the day was exactly this: Are all moral reasons *impersonal* reasons in the way that the Kantian system requires? Or are some of them, or all of them, radically first-personal in the way that Williams argues for? Or are there any bridges or hybrid positions that can be adapted? And so one might think of Korsgaard as having developed a sort of hybrid position in this direction.

Gabriel Thomas. Earlier you mentioned forgiveness, and I know you've done a lot of work on forgiveness . . . I am really interested in this concept in a philosophical way. It seems to me that how we approach forgiveness presupposes a deontological understanding of morality, so that, if I stepped on someone's toe,

I would say "sorry, I did not mean to." And that seems to suggest an intention, in the way that Kant talks about.

Miranda Fricker. I see. Let me say something about the idea that there is something deontological about forgiveness, and the idea that people's intention seems an important part of what our reasons might be for, e.g., forgiving them. Particularly their will, let's say—they're very sorry, they feel remorse, they promise not to do it again, etc. That looks like it's all about the moral emotions they're feeling and the intentions they've got, and that's broadly what deontology is all about.

But I will say this: except *perhaps* consequentialists, everyone knows that intentions are important, whatever ethical theory you've got. For instance, from a virtue perspective, obviously whether someone has a good intention or a bad intention is an incredibly important feature of their character and, therefore, of a situation where forgiving them would be *apt* or not. So I would disagree with the idea that there is something intrinsic about forgiveness that encourages a deontological perspective.

However, I do actually think that it is possible to be in a situation where you have a duty to forgive someone. Think of an ordinary instance of wrongdoing. If, for instance, your friend has let you down in some way which is not *too* horrible, but which is nonetheless in the domain of blame and forgiveness and not of "get out of here, it's fine," then it looks like they actually need to apologize for that. And so they do apologize to you, and you see that they're really sorry, and it's good enough for you, etc. Then, if you *don't* at least try to forgive in a circumstance like that, it seems to me like you're being unforgiving—and that's a fault, a vice, holding out on them.

One of the reasons for its being difficult to talk about the duty to forgive is this: we might not be in control of whether we forgive. I can try to forgive, and find that I just can't! In more serious cases of wrongdoing, forgiveness can take a long time. Or you forgive for a while, and then the feelings come back again

. . . So it can be an ongoing process, and it can be hard. People sometimes say, well, you can't have a duty to do something that is not in your control. But I think that we *do* have lots of duties that are not in our control: parents have a duty to be loving towards their children. At least they should try; and when they fail, they have failed at a duty to their children. But the thing to say is that they tried, but they couldn't. And sometimes it's just really sad that they don't love their children as they should. There is an excusing condition there, i.e., that they really tried, but they just did not summon up the resources to be that kind of parent anymore. So I think that we often have duties to do things that are not in our control. If we don't try, then we have failed at our duty; but if we try and we fail, then it's very sad that we have failed, and it is quite a powerful excusing condition. I think that's the case with certain situations of forgiveness.

Another way in which people find it problematic to talk about there being a duty to forgive is if they say the following: that forgiveness is *essentially* a gift, it's essentially elective and voluntary. I have a lot of sympathy for this thought, but I think those two things are compatible [i.e., forgiveness being a duty, and forgiveness being a gift]. Now, I also think forgiveness is essentially a gift; in fact, *unconditional* forgiveness is most certainly a gift, where you just forgive out of the goodness of your heart even though they haven't apologized—there, you don't have a duty to forgive at all. It's totally elective, because nobody's generated a reason which you recognize as sufficient for you to try to forgive. That's obviously just a gift. *However*, even in forgiving someone when you recognize that it is your duty to forgive them—as when your friend apologizes to you and you recognize this—I think that's still a gift. It's all part of the normativity of gift giving that we often have duties to gift things.

Think about birthday presents: If you grow up in a family where you all give each other birthday presents every year, and then one year, none of them gives you a birthday present, then it's like, "you . . . kind of owe me that gift!" But it can be very

uncomfortable to say it, and pointless to demand it in the mode of "where's my gift? I have a right to this gift." There is a curious feature of the normativity of gift giving—I have argued—that you can get quite demanding about what they should be giving you, and yet the demand can be pragmatically self-defeating, when you assert your rights in the mode of entitlement: as soon as you say, "I have a right to this birthday present," you've kind of undone the proper normativity, and it won't be possible for them to give it in the right spirit anymore. It's the same with forgiveness. If you really ought to be forgiving your friend, and they suddenly shift stance and demand, "where is my forgiveness? I've a right to be forgiven," then they're no longer in the kind of humility that an apology requires. They're destroying the grounds on which your duty to forgive them is even based. So it has this self-defeating aspect.

I've tried to argue that this is the reason why we have a very strong intuition that there is something weird or inappropriate about *demanding gifts*, and I've tried to argue that, actually, the weirdness, the inappropriateness, only comes in when the demand takes the form of an entitlement stance, which is more like asserting a right to something and carries the idea that, in principle, I can just take it. So I can just demand that you should say these words owed to me, "I forgive you," and what have I got? Clearly not the real thing. Does that make sense?

Gabriel Thomas. That makes perfect sense.

Miranda Fricker. So that's sort of the idea. We can have the obligation to forgive, but not the rights to be forgiven. And some people who hold deontological conceptions find that really odd. But there's a long history of broadly Kantians who find that a rather natural thing to say. Onora O'Neill, for instance, in her political philosophy and her interpretation of Kant, thinks that we have special obligations, e.g., an obligation to your own children is special because they are *your* children. Those obligations do not carry rights—your children do not need to

have a right to ask you that you should love them, yet you *do* have an obligation to love them, and it's an obligation that sadly not everyone is able to meet.

Dr. Fricker then asked me what I was doing for my senior thesis. I told her that, at the time, I was a junior, and had not thought about what I wanted to do for such a project. I then mentioned a personal opinion that studying ethics was, for me, more difficult than any other field of philosophy, since the thoughts involved appeared so practical, uncertain, and concrete.

Miranda Fricker. Absolutely, I'm so glad you said that, Son. I think doing moral philosophy is *really* hard for those exact reasons, because what you're trying to do is so . . . multiple. It's not neat. The subject matter is, as it were, in tension with our philosophical methods, to some extent. Our methods are, viz., make it neat; make it all explicit, put it in a system. By contrast, the values, concepts, and habits we have really are a melting-pot residue of many different moral cultures. No wonder they don't add up! We do all think a bit in terms of virtues, everyone has different religious inputs, etc. But then again, why would they add up? Maybe it's kind of glorious that they don't. Maybe we have so many different resources for our thinking that we just have to learn to draw on what is useful . . . sometimes I think we are just pragmatists about whether to think in a virtue way, or a utilitarian way, etc.

Now perhaps consequentialism is wrong for most of these thinking, but a lot of one's decision making undoubtedly has that structure. A lot of ethical decision making is sort of about distribution of resources. So of course one thinks about these things, and does trade-offs—this is a deeply familiar, useful mode of thought. But it can't be made to embrace the whole, nor—I believe—can deontology. And if virtue theory can, that's because it says less—it's noncommittal. So sometimes it appears to one that ethics is all a bit indeterminate, that there isn't one right answer; other times, there is clearly a right answer and a right way of thinking. So you're right—it's difficult! I personally think we

should embrace that and just see it for what it is. Every attempt to systematize is bound to draw on some aspects of our moral life and leaving others out; there are always going to be abstractions and models, and we shouldn't try to do it all. That's what I think.

I nodded in agreement. As we were finishing up our meals, an amused waitress came up and informed us that a mysterious lady in black had just arrived and offered to pay for our entire bill. Curious, we turned our eyes towards the table gestured at by the waitress, and saw that it was actually Dr. Elizabeth Schiltz, the Department Chair, who had come to offer us a lift back to the College.

Even as we were exiting The Leaf, none of us was able to fully comprehend and appreciate—till has vanished the present moment—what a tremendous honor it was to have breakfast with one of the most celebrated philosophers of our time.