

Schueler vs. Williams on the Relation Between Justifying Reasons and Explanatory Reasons

In class we ended on p. 69, with Schueler's delayed exegesis of Williams' argument. As noted, Williams does not after all reject the conceptual ("ordinary-language") distinction between explanatory reasons and justifying reasons; he merely argues that we must not neglect the close tie between the two, lest we become unable to "make sense of how an agent can act for a reason that is [itself] also a justification for his action." Schueler says, fine, but why should that impugn the distinction itself? Quite so; let's regard that as settled.

But there's more

Schueler now offers a model to demonstrate the mutual compatibility of the distinction and the close tie. It is the example of going to campus to teach a class. In it, Schueler says, my justifying reason is (the fact) that the class meets today. And once I do go to campus, what explains my going is (the very same fact) that the class meets today. "So where is the problem?"

At that point he has Williams challenge the model. (He puts the challenge in terms of *equivocation*, as between the normative and the explanatory sense of "reason," but I don't follow that; straighten it out if you can.) What Williams may say is: That my class meets today is my justifying reason for going to campus. But, strictly speaking, the same fact does not explain my having gone; rather, it is my *awareness* or knowledge or anyway belief that my class meets today that contributes to the explanation. (Right; given the belief, I would have gone even if the belief were false and my class didn't meet today, and if I had not had the belief, I would not have gone, despite the fact.)

So, you would expect Williams to continue, Schueler's example is not a model, because in it the justifying reason \neq the explanatory reason. I assume that is what Schueler means, but he doesn't say it until p. 71. Rather, oddly, he turns Williams to a different topic, adding that, since my awareness that the class meets today is in itself far from sufficient to make me go to campus, we need an additional condition of some kind to get my action explained. That's an argument for Williams' internalism, but I don't know what it's doing in this paragraph.

The internalism itself is relevant, though, because (on Schueler's interpretation) it is what Williams uses to "bridge the gap" between justifying and explanatory reasons. But Schueler now proceeds to argue, first, that Williams does not succeed in bridging the alleged gap, and second, that actually there is no gap to bridge, anyway.

On Williams and the gap

It is the internalist's "connection with the agent's motive that is supposed to insure that the same fact that provides a reason for him to perform the action provides an

explanation of it when the action is actually performed” (p. 71). Schueler’s objection is that “even if we accept the idea that justifying reasons, in order to *be* justifying reasons, must be capable of moving us, the internal-reasons view doesn’t show how this happens, because it puts motives ‘in’ reasons in the wrong place” (p. 72).

According to the internalist, if I have a (justifying) reason to go to campus, it must include a conation or motivation that I already have. Schueler says this commits Williams to claiming that “the *content* of the justifying reason” must always essentially refer to such a conation. “[W]hat gives me a reason to go to campus will have to be not just the fact that a class I am teaching meets today but this fact *plus* the fact that I have...a motivation of some sort toward meeting this class” (p. 73). Right, what *gives me* a reason must include the motivation, but how is anything supposed to follow about the reason’s own content? And what notion of “content” is in play at all? Schueler himself thinks of justifying reasons as facts, which of course don’t have “content,” but he seems to suppose that since Williams requires there to be a motivation a paradigm case of which would be a desire, that conation will be a psychological state having content. Later (p. 74) he says “the desire that *moves* me will have to be one that has as its content the *same* content as my reason judgment....”

With those assumptions about Williams’ commitments in place, Schueler proceeds to generate his potential regress. The justifying reason’s content must be, not just the fact that the class meets today, but that fact “*plus* the fact that I have...a motivation of some sort [= ‘desire’ as S. will now broadly use the term] toward meeting this class” (p. 73). Yet those two facts even together will not explain my action (because as before, facts alone can’t explain any action); I have to have the corresponding belief, that my class meets today and I desire to meet the class. But then since mere belief cannot move me, I must have the further desire “to meet classes that I believe I have this first sort of desire to meet.” (The sentence that follows that one is ungrammatical; I suppose an “if” has been omitted between “that” and “I.”) “Hence the desire needed to explain my going to campus *can’t* be the one referred to *in* this judgment [i.e., the judgment that I have the first sort of desire]” (p. 74). So we’d need a still further desire, etc. The gap abides.

Quite right, *if* Schueler’s assumptions about Williams’ commitments are correct. But as before, I don’t see why Williams should grant that the motivating desire’s *content* should match the justifying fact. The justifying fact/reason is that my class meets today. Obviously the motivating desire is not that my class (be scheduled to) meet today, so that can’t be the match Schueler/Williams has in mind. The motivating desire would be *to give or conduct or anyway show up at* the class. Presumably when Williams says the justifying reason must also explain, he is thinking of a Davidsonian belief-desire (or anyway belief-motivation) pair. But here I must defer to Williams experts.

Vs. the gap itself

Schueler says (p. 75) that the appearance of gap arises from the “[t]hree ideas” he lists. The first idea is Williams’ anti-gap premise itself. The second is the preceding point that it is not a fact alone but one’s awareness or knowledge of the fact that contributes to action explanation. The third is that “since supposedly beliefs or judgments alone cannot move us to act, a desire of some sort is also required.”

Schueler says that “the first two points by themselves are innocuous.” Obviously the first “point” is innocuous, as regards exhibiting a gap, since it’s only the assertion that there should be no gap. But the second was the key premise in Williams’ original challenge to Schueler’s model, showing that in the example, the justifying reason(-fact) is not the explaining reason; so it’s not *innocuous* even if it’s answerable; and the appearance of gap certainly does arise from it. (As above, of course it does not cast doubt on the conceptual distinction.)

Against the conativist third idea, Schueler ostensibly resists the second idea. “It would just be a mistake to move from the idea that an agent must be aware of some fact, or believe that it is a fact, in order to be moved to action by it, to the conclusion that somehow this fact cannot give him reason to act” (p. 76).

And so it would. But Schueler has shifted the issue. What Williams (as portrayed) wanted was for the very same reason to justify me in going to campus and to explain my going to campus. That’s not quite what Schueler has delivered. His view is that the fact that my class meets today is what justifies my going, = my reason in the normative sense, and that the same fact “*gives me*” a(n explanatory) reason to go and then I do go “for that reason,” i.e., because I had the corresponding belief (p. 76). The explanatory reason (the belief) is still not the original fact, which was the justifying reason. The gap abides. And *not* even *prima facie* because of the third idea, Williams’ contention that my reason must incorporate a further desire or motivating state.

But why go even a step with Williams in the first place?

Yet perhaps Schueler’s heart is in the right place. Let’s now try interpreting him a bit differently, as holding that the relation he has posited between the original fact and my action is a close *enough* tie. He says the justifying fact that my class meets today gives me a reason to go, and then I do go “for that reason,” i.e., because I had the corresponding belief. Isn’t that tie enough? Why should we try to meet Williams’ (attributed) demand that numerically one and the same reason both justify and explain?

Perhaps Williams would dispute Schueler’s assumption that the original fact *is* the justifying reason. I daresay he would insist that the fact only gives me a justifying reason in light of my desire/motivation to meet my class. Then as before, he might maintain that it’s the Davidsonian belief-desire pair that *is* both the justifying and the explaining reason. (Williams experts? Let’s hear from you.)

He’s free to talk. But as yet, so is Schueler; we have not seen a compelling argument for Williams’ internalism. And, returning to the matter of the close tie and the gap, we have also seen no argument against Schueler’s position as interpreted two paragraphs back. We already know that the word “reason” is paronymous. The justifier and the explainer may be “reasons” in not quite the same sense, and may be only closely related in the way Schueler suggests.