

# INTRODUCTION

*Daniel Callcut*

So we come to a point where most of my efforts have been concentrated: to make *some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can't have the idealized version of it.<sup>1</sup>

The only serious enterprise is living.<sup>2</sup>

Bernard Williams' writings arguably constitute the most important and most cited body of work in contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy: it would be hard to pick up a survey or anthology of contemporary ethical theory without seeing a very large number of references to his work. He has published groundbreaking work in many areas of philosophy: on moral luck (a term he coined), on internal and external reasons (terms also coined by Williams), on moral objectivity, on integrity and authenticity, on personal identity, on theory and anti-theory, on ethical reflection, on shame, on truth and truthfulness, on genealogy, and in other areas too. Some of the terms coined by Williams now constitute the names of research topics and certain phrases (such as "one thought too many"<sup>3</sup>) look well on their way to achieving a kind of philosophical immortality. Contemporary philosophy would look very different without Williams' contributions. Contemporary moral philosophy has been so profoundly altered by Williams that if one subtracted his influence, it is hard to imagine the shape of what would be left.

The extent of Williams' impact can easily be underestimated since it is spread across many of the distinct subfields that now constitute professional philosophy. Yet it is also the case that, in spite of his influence, Williams remained throughout his life something of a renegade within English-language philosophy: his ideas generated many a research program but there has not been a large amount of philosophy conducted in what one might call a Williamsian spirit. One of the things that distinguishes Williams' work from that of many of his contemporaries is the way that he brings together aspects of moral philosophy that tend to get separated by

the distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. His work explores the implications for ethics of truths *about* the ethical (historical, cultural, political, psychological, biological, and so on). His work is thus able to reveal and wrestle with what would otherwise remain merely latent tensions between influential positions in metaethics and normative ethics. His doubts about moral theory and everyday moral thought led him “to try to find out – often by the crude method of prodding it – which parts of moral thought seemed ... to be actually alive.”<sup>4</sup> His work is, as a result, marked by a rich and ambivalent relationship with moral skepticism.

Williams’ work, not surprisingly, thus offers a deep engagement with themes and ideas that have become emblematic of modernism. He interrogates and recasts, as Elijah Millgram observes in Chapter 7 of this volume, ideas that have become philosophical clichés. Moreover, Williams was brilliant at spotting when the intellectual, cultural, and emotional implications of an idea had only been half-absorbed. He worked, for example, to clarify some of the intuitions underlying a conception of value that was not only central to much twentieth-century philosophy but one which also arguably has become a central tenet of much contemporary life: namely, the view that there is no objective moral reality, and that ethical norms are projections on to an in itself valueless world. Williams emphasized the point that if evaluative thought is to be understood as a projection, then some sense needs to be made of what is “there anyway.”<sup>5</sup> Projection, to adapt a phrase of his, requires a screen. Thus, Williams’ interest in making sense of an “absolute conception” of reality (i.e. a conception of what is there anyway) was, as Simon Blackburn makes clear in Chapter 1, fueled in part by his interest in making room for the significance of the claim that ethical norms are *not* there anyway. Blackburn argues that pragmatists who reject Williams’ metaphysics will nonetheless need to find ways to retain and rearticulate his basic insights and distinctions. Millgram, by contrast, presents a sustained argument for the view that Williams’ focus was, from a practical point of view, on the wrong distinctions, and that (ironically) Williams’ brilliant explorations of the fact/value and science/ethics distinctions should ultimately help liberate philosophers from the kind of worldview within which such distinctions are important.

Williams did not think that rejection of the idea of moral reality (in the “there anyway” sense) meant an end to (at least not entirely) the notions of ethical knowledge or ethical truth. More specifically, he argued that we should think of ethical concepts as vehicles with which we construct ethical reality, a reality of which we can then (sometimes rightly) claim to have knowledge. But Williams doubted whether current forms of ethical self-understanding could easily accommodate this constructivist model of ethical knowledge. He was thus far more interested than many of his contemporaries in the revisionary implications of a ‘projectivist’ or ‘dispositionalist’ conception of value: how should we personally, socially,

and politically accommodate the fact that any ethical way of life (in Williams' words) "is only one of many that are equally compatible with human nature"?<sup>6</sup> Williams took the serious versions of ethical relativism seriously. How could he not, given his view that values and obligations are, as Charles Guignon puts it in Chapter 8, "projections of our culturally conditioned commitments"? Carol Rovane, in Chapter 3, explains both Williams' "distinctive and influential contribution to the topic of relativism" and her own account of the truth in relativism.

Williams, then, was interested in the question of "what needs to be, and what can be, restructured in the light of a reflective and nonmythical understanding of our ethical practices."<sup>7</sup> He argued that what must be achieved by an adequate conception of ethics is a robust enough sense of the importance of ethical concerns. Williams explored ways to understand the kind of importance typically accorded to ethical concerns even if the various traditional justifications for morality failed. He stressed the importance of getting over the recoil idea, associated most prominently with existentialism, that if ethical norms have no importance from a cosmic or God's eye point of view, then they lose their importance. This response, Williams argues powerfully in "The Human Prejudice," is itself part of a worldview "not yet thoroughly disenchanting."<sup>8</sup> He was constantly engaged with the question of what it means to come deeply to inhabit (or reinhabit, after disenchantment) a meaningful and ethical life lived within not just a human but an historically and culturally situated point of view. Nonetheless, one can certainly see moments of what John Cottingham in Chapter 2 calls a "lingering dismay" at the human cosmological condition. Cottingham explores to what extent Williams' difficulties are generated by the fact that, for Williams, human dispositions are the sole and ultimate support of human value and meaning.

Thick concepts, as Peter Goldie explains in Chapter 5, play a central role for Williams in providing the texture of ethical, cultural, and emotional life. Williams thinks of thick ethical concepts as the prime vehicles of ethical knowledge: they embody agreement on an historically contingent but shared form of ethical life. The conditions of modernity, however, mean that ways of life that would have once been simply inherited are increasingly transferred into the realm of conscious choice. Williams defended (in characteristically nuanced fashion) the idea that this can be a liberation. But it can also mean that personal and cultural confidence, in the form expressed by practical know-how within a way of life, is challenged or undermined by the sheer variety of different modes of life on offer. Thus the question of which thick concepts to "live" (in the sense explained by Goldie) can be plagued with cultural and personal uncertainty and worries about arbitrariness (in the sense explained by Cottingham). Williams' later work increasingly dwelt on the philosophical and ethical significance of the cultural history that has brought such questions of contingency and identity to the fore.

Williams was keenly aware that one way to be skeptical about morality is simply to consider it not very important. Hedonists need not deny that they have moral obligations: they just do not let them get in the way of their pleasure. This is part of what Williams was getting at when he writes that “an ethical skeptic is not necessarily the same as someone who doubts whether there is any ethical knowledge” and that “to be skeptical about ethics is to be skeptical about the force of ethical considerations.”<sup>9</sup> Williams, for the most part, seems to defend such skepticism as (at the very least) perfectly coherent and intelligible. This is not an argument that ethical life is necessarily irrational: see Joshua Gert’s exploration of the complex questions involved in interpreting Williams’ views on reasons and rationality in Chapter 4. Nor is Williams denying that for many people the happy life will be (will need to be, in light of who they are) an ethical one. Indeed, his forceful criticism of what he called the “morality system” stems precisely from a concern to overcome a conception of ethics that encourages the idea that the ethical life and the happy life are in opposition. The problem with morality, in Williams’ pejorative sense, is that (as Daniel Markovits explains in Chapter 6) it constructs ethical life as a “form of subjugation” and that it leaves the individual (as Frances Ferguson puts it in Chapter 9) owing “her soul or his to a company store so large as to include the world.” Williams argued powerfully that if ethical norms are to have authority, then they must integrate into a life worth living.

One can then see why Williams thought that in many ways novelists and playwrights offered more useful moral insight than moral theorists. The traditional moral theories seemed made for a world that had the kind of metaphysical and moral order that he believed it lacked. Williams saw the absence of such order as casting doubt on the rationale for normative moral theory, which he tended to identify with metaphysically ambitious attempts to ground a universalistic, systematic morality. He thought of much moral theory, as Ferguson points out, “as a kind of pseudo-science.” To model ethical theory on (a certain understanding of) scientific theory only made sense if one could make good on the claim that moral beliefs track a structured ethical reality in the same way that scientific beliefs track the structure of empirical reality. Williams thought that too much moral philosophy was built on this illusion. Moral philosophy needed to find styles and methodologies that managed better to accommodate the fact that ethical norms live in human dispositions. Williams explored the ways in which moral philosophy might do this without falling prey to an “inert mixture of relativism and conservatism.”<sup>10</sup> Too much ethical theory was too ahistorical, too utopian, and too abstracted from concrete human life to provide intelligent guidance. Moral philosophy needed to involve itself more in (in a phrase that Sharon Krause develops into a term of art in Chapter 12) “the actual.”

Many of Williams' most influential discussions – including his critique of utilitarianism and his acclaimed discussion of moral luck – grow out of an extraordinary ability to articulate the emotional reality of ethical life. In Chapter 6, Markovits highlights Williams' keen sense of the untenable psychological implications of consequentialist or Kantian accounts of morality: their demand for impersonality is, as Markovits puts it, “inconsistent with ... the conditions for the development of an (integrated) moral character.” Williams had a novelist's sense of the human weight of things and used this sense to test moral theories against what he thought of as both more realistic and more appealing conceptions of ethical life. (In Chapter 8, Guignon explains the affinities between this approach and methodologies employed within the phenomenological tradition.) Williams was particularly adept at registering the way that the human significance of actions exceeds their intentions. There is “in the story of one's life,” as he puts the point in his discussion of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, “an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that the meaning of an action can be determined by what happens, in a way that goes beyond intention and control, is just one instance of the way that human life is hostage to luck. Christopher Kutz, in Chapter 11, extends Williams' insights with regard to the role of luck in political life while warning of the “normative gamble” that this recognition can encourage.

Williams suggested that much moral philosophy offered a naïve ‘good news’ view of the world, devoid of an appreciation of conflict, tragedy, and loss. Williams was fond of pointing out (in Nietzschean fashion) what one might call ‘the bad in the good’: the discomfort that much actual moral (and aesthetic) achievement should produce given the historical conditions of creation. Martha Nussbaum suggests, in Chapter 10, that Williams offers a corrective to the kind of philosophy that offers a “flight from reality.” But she also argues that Williams' corrective itself stands in need of correction: the recognition of inevitable tragedy and loss needs to be integrated into a fuller picture that recognizes both the good in life (despite the existence of tragedy) and the often unappreciated extent to which much of the tragic can be avoided or at least diminished by human effort. Krause concurs with this while endorsing (as Nussbaum does) Williams' recognition of the fact that “internal dividedness on moral questions and the feeling of regret are common.”

Williams argued, in words that were prescient as well as still pertinent, that it is a mistake “to detach the spirit of liberal critique from the concept of truth.”<sup>12</sup> His work became increasingly occupied with the question of which existing ethical concepts could (in some form) emerge from genealogical and social critique, and his late work pointed towards a style of ethical philosophy that encouraged conceptual creativity in ethical theory and practice. Thus his interest in preserving a sense of the importance of ethical

concerns should not be equated with the concern to defend ‘traditional’ morality. Indeed, one of the most important casualties of a nonmythical conception of ethics is the idea that ethical norms all stand or fall together. His writing on these issues is enriched by the fact that there are wider cultural concerns about the ‘status’ of values and, particularly in a secular context, wider concerns about how to understand and sustain the deliberative priority traditionally accorded to ethical concerns. Moreover, Williams’ historicist conception of ethics means that the philosophical and ethical questions cannot be neatly separated from the cultural questions. Williams is quite self-aware about all this, and the self-awareness adds a further layer of richness to his work. I think that his work is best read as working towards a response to outright ethical skepticism: what he shows is that ethical skepticism can be rejected by rejecting the implicit conception of ethics on which it depends. But don’t listen to me: read Bernard Williams!

### Notes

- 1 Interview with Bernard Williams, *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Vol. XII (Spring 2004), p. 86.
- 2 Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 117.
- 3 Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 18.
- 4 Preface to *Moral Luck*, p. x.
- 5 See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter 8.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- 8 Bernard Williams, “The Human Prejudice,” in A. W. Moore (ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 137.
- 9 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 25.
- 10 Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 220. See also “Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism,” in *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 11 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 69.
- 12 Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 4.