The Shaken Realist:
Bernard Williams, the War, and Philosophy
as Cultural Critique

Nikhil Krishnan and Matthieu Queloz

Bernard Williams thought that philosophy should address real human concerns felt beyond academic philosophy. But what wider concerns are addressed by *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, a book he introduces as being 'principally about how things are in moral philosophy'? In this article, we argue that Williams responded to the concerns of his day indirectly, refraining from explicitly claiming wider cultural relevance, but hinting at it in the pair of epigraphs that open the main text. This was Williams's solution to what he perceived as the stylistic problem of how to pursue philosophy as cultural critique. Taking the epigraphs as interpretative keys to the wider resonances of the book, we show how they reveal Williams's philosophical concerns—with the primacy of character over method, the obligation to follow orders, and the possibility of combining truth, truthfulness, and a meaningful life in a disillusioned world—to be recognisably rooted in the cultural concerns of post-war Britain. In the light of its epigraphs, the book emerges as the critique of a philosophical tradition's inadequacies to the special difficulties of its cultural moment.

1. Introduction

Bernard Williams defended inaccessibly technical philosophy on the ground that the path to something helpful was often hard and technical. But he also felt that, at the end of the line, philosophy should 'speak truthfully to a real human concern, to something that could disturb or interest a grown-up person quite apart from any involvement in professional philosophy'.[1]

---

[1] Williams (2006c, p. 120); for his defense of inevitable technicality, see Williams (2014d, pp. 365–70). In his commentary on *ELP*, A. W. Moore notes that 'Williams was keen to re-establish contact with the real concerns that animate our ordinary ethical experience' (2006, p. 203). See also Williams (2007, pp. 138–39).

For a book regarded as Williams's main contribution to philosophy, however, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (*ELP*) does surprisingly little to motivate its central claims from urgent problems in the wider culture. Most of its ten chapters appear to be interventions in theoretical disputes with little currency outside the world of Anglophone moral philosophy. The book does not advertise itself as a piece of 'cultural critique' in the way that—to name a book published in the same decade—Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) did.[2] Williams introduces *ELP* as being 'principally about how things are in moral philosophy'.[3] There have been readers who felt that Williams *aspired* to do more, in particular 'to align himself with Nietzsche as a critic of morality as a genuine cultural phenomenon';[4] but since, unlike Nietzsche, Williams ostensibly focused on ethical theories and their systematic reworkings of ideas at work in the wider culture, it seemed doubtful even to those readers that what Williams in fact criticised was 'anything other than a philosopher's "invention"'.[5] For the most part, readers have been minded to take the book at face value, as a critique of certain academic tendencies, with little to say about the wider culture.

By contrast, we argue that there are significant respects in which *ELP* is a piece of cultural critique, and that hearing its cultural resonances yields a much richer picture of what the book is about. Williams is inviting us to read his critique of ethical theory as having a wider cultural import. In his 1990 preface to the French translation of *ELP*, he explicitly did so, noting that 'the

---

[2]   MacIntyre (2007, p. 22 and *passim*). If the choice we moderns face is, as MacIntyre claims, between Aristotle and Nietzsche, then *ELP* is the Nietzschean counterpart to *After Virtue*. Williams ended his review of MacIntyre's book by noting: 'If, at our present juncture, we do have to choose between Aristotle and Nietzsche, it may rather be Nietzsche who is right' (2014a, p. 186). Yet Williams also remarked that it was an exaggeration to present this as our only choice—a remark we elucidate in this paper by showing how Williams proposed to draw constructively on both Aristotelian and Nietzschean ideas.

[3]   Williams (2006a, p. vii).

[4]   Leiter (1997, p. 256).

[5]   Leiter (1997, p. 256); see also Darwall (1987, pp. 78, 82–83), Barnes (1993), and Leiter (2022, pp. 22–24).

critique of ethical theory does not speak only to ethical theory', since ethical theory 'is not itself the basic condition with which we should be concerned, but a symptom, the expression of that condition in the tissue of a certain type of philosophy'.[6]

While that 'basic condition' of which ethical theory is but a 'symptom' can be broadly circumscribed as the condition of modernity,[7] we contend that the cultural resonances of *ELP* are clearest and most pertinent when the book is situated more specifically in the aftermath of the second world war. Expounding these connections to post-war concerns brings out the respects in which *ELP* is a cultural as well as academic critique. The book speaks to moral issues which, though not exclusive to the post-war context, acquired particular urgency and poignancy in the wake of the war: what to say to—or about—the fanatic; whether general rules can be much of a safeguard against atrocity in the absence of a strong moral character; what grounds the authority of an impersonal system of commands over the individual; or how to face up, without falling back on comforting superstitions and delusions, to the horrors of the war and the hideous human costs of the liberal order it made possible.

Yet Williams's way into these grand themes was characteristically oblique, to the point that readers can easily miss their presence in the book's pages: on the reading we propose, it is in the pair of epigraphs that open the main text that one finds the interpretative keys to the wider cultural resonances of the book's philosophical arguments. These epigraphs—an extract from Wallace Stevens's poem 'Esthétique du Mal' and an untranslated French sentence from Albert Camus's novel *La Chute*—have so far been virtually ignored by

---

[6] Williams (1990, p. xi). Our English translation follows the original typescript, now published as Williams (2021). For a more detailed discussion of Williams's explanation of the wider cultural resonances of the book in his preface to the French translation of *ELP*, see Babbiotti, Krishnan, and Marquier (2021).

[7] For Williams's notion of modernity, see (2006a, p. 197) and especially Williams (2005d).

commentators.[8] This is unsurprising, as the text does not refer directly to these epigraphs, and their point is never explained in so many words. But this reticence is in keeping with Williams's general style.[9] Once properly contextualised, however, these epigraphs indicate the respects in which *ELP* constitutes a form of philosophy as cultural critique.

We proceed as follows: in §2, we motivate our focus on the epigraphs, suggesting that Williams's use of them to flag *ELP*'s wider cultural import was his solution to the problem of finding a style for moral philosophy in the wake of the war. In §3, we show how the epigraphs index the book to modernity and to the second world war in particular. In §4, we discuss how the Camus epigraph brings out the wider significance of Williams's reflections on the primacy of character over method and the agent's relation to impartial systems of commands. In §5, we spell out how the Stevens epigraph underscores the wider relevance of another central theme in Williams, of how to make sense of a disenchanted world in truthful terms without choking on its horrors and the human costs of what is of value in it. In §6, finally, we draw out some further implications of this reading for our understanding of Williams's philosophical outlook and of *ELP* in particular.

2. Kitsch and Truthfulness

The tactic of using the epigraphs to flag *ELP*'s wider cultural import may strike one as so oblique as to arouse the suspicion of being really a kind of fudge: an attempt to hint at greater ambitions while in fact doing something far more modest, attacking philosophers' fantasies while leaving the real cultural issues

---

[8] Two notable exceptions: Moore (2019, p. 181) discusses the Stevens epigraph, while Seabright (1985, p. 18) notes in passing that the 'quotation from Camus provides a much more direct clue to the book's theme than is found in most epigraphs'.

[9] See Moore (2006, p. 204) and Nussbaum (2003). On compression as a stylistic method in Williams's work, see Babbiotti (2020).

unaddressed.[10] Sometimes, as Williams himself noted, to adopt a style 'is not simply to adopt a style, but to duck a problem'.[11]

Distinguishing between indirection and evasion here requires a delicate interpretative balancing act. The plausibility of the thesis that the book indicates its ulterior themes through its epigraphy must be judged by the light it throws on Williams's project; to get that far, one has to give Williams the benefit of the doubt, in particular by tentatively assuming that the epigraphs are not just ornamental trinkets. But if such hermeneutic charity is not to degenerate into hagiography, it had better not foreclose the more searchingly critical question of why Williams so much as *appears* to be fudging. Why was he not more explicit about the wider cultural resonances of the book? What was he trying to avoid?

A sense of what Williams was trying to avoid can be gleaned from his later reflections on the stylistic difficulties involved in writing philosophy that addresses the horrors of the 20th century directly. It is not just that he felt that a more obvious treatment of them would have been inauthentic. He also felt that a less oblique approach would have been inappropriate to the subject matter and the style it demanded:

> There is much cultural criticism and supposed philosophy which sounds, superficially, very urgent, only too heart-breakingly involved in the end of humankind or the horrors of the 20th century. It offers an easily accessible and instantly impressive eschatology, and it is this that some critics hold up as a model of seriousness. But these writings, just because of their message that what is really important is instantly awesome, are on the wrong side from philosophy—on the wrong side ... between kitsch, on the one hand, and truthfulness, on the other. In philosophy, at least, a truthful style is not likely to make it immediately obvious what the work has to do with our most urgent concerns, because its interest is in the less obvious roots and consequences of our concerns.[12]

---

[10] See, e.g., Leiter (2022, p. 22).
[11] Williams (1995d, p. 66).
[12] Williams (1996). Reprinted in Williams (2014d).

Williams's remarks here are not a blanket condemnation of philosophy that is upfront about its relations to the wider culture. His final book openly professed to address important 'tensions in our culture between truth and truthfulness'.[13] His remarks are, rather, a reminder not to assume that philosophy about urgent, serious subjects must be urgent, serious philosophy. To do so would be to commit the 'fat oxen' fallacy: the 'strangely tempting' fallacy of thinking that a man 'who drives fat oxen must himself be fat'.[14] One may aspire to write about serious and urgent subjects and end up writing a piece of kitsch, turning world-historical horrors and suffering into something with the seriousness and urgency of a soap opera. As the reviewer of one moral philosopher's historical survey of 20th-century massacres observed, there is a way of harping on about atrocity that is the opposite of truthfulness, because it turns hard truths into something comforting—the comfort of 'being neither victim, nor perpetrator, nor bystander'.[15]

At the same time, Williams opposed the view, which he associated with post-modernist cultural studies, that drawing on history is itself inherently kitsch.[16] History *could* be kitsch, especially when catering to the appetite for 'heritage humanities'.[17] But this merely meant that the serious study of history had to guard against an exploitative commercial demand for kitsch, not that history was itself kitsch. The difficulty, for Williams, was that if philosophy was going to be truthful, it had to participate in what he called 'the humane study of humanity',[18] and the adoption of this self-conception meant that philosophy had to draw, notably, on history; but just because it had to draw on history,

---

[13] Williams (2002, p. 4).

[14] Williams (2001, p. 29). The context was a discussion of the value of the sciences as compared to the humanities: 'Justifications for doing objective subjects [e.g. physics] are not objective justifications for doing those subjects.'

[15] Newey (1999).

[16] Williams (1995c, p. 87). He elaborated on the idea that philosophy needs history in Williams (2006e, 2014e). See Moran (2016) for a helpful discussion.

[17] Williams (2002, p. 10).

[18] Williams (1995c, p. 87).

there was a special challenge involved in writing moral philosophy after the atrocities of the war in ways that neither evaded history nor degraded it into kitsch. Any moral philosophy written in the shadow of Auschwitz, so far as it sought truthfully to confront the event that cast it, faced the challenge of doing so without lapsing into the exploitatively lurid and sentimental, 'only too heart-breakingly involved … in the horrors of the 20th century'.

It took Williams a long time to find a response to the stylistic demands on writing moral philosophy after Auschwitz. As late as the winter of 1970–71, with as yet no book to his name, Williams admitted in an interview with Bryan Magee: 'there is a certain sense in which I personally don't know how to do the subject … there's a problem about finding a style, and that's not a shallow question. The problem of how to find a style in moral philosophy is actually one of the deepest questions about it'.[19]

The style that he eventually did find in *ELP*, we suggest, was his provisional response to this problem. Williams's struggle with the problem of finding a style for moral philosophy, his aversion to kitsch, and the special difficulties he saw in addressing the moral issues raised by the history of the 20th century help explain why he would have chosen to do so through indirection and allusiveness, and thereby warrant taking the epigraphs seriously.

3. The Moral Concerns of the War and its Aftermath

To bring out the aspects of the wider historical and cultural context to which the epigraphs allude, we need to fill in something of the textual and genetic context of the epigraphs themselves.

The first epigraph is an extract from a poem by the American modernist Wallace Stevens, 'Esthétique du Mal'. This long, experimental poem of his late period was written not just during the war, but in response to it, provoked by a letter from a soldier in the spring 1944 *Kenyon Review* complaining that the

---

[19] Magee and Williams (1971, p. 164).

contemporary aesthetic of poetry was out of touch with soldiers' pain. Stevens was no 'war poet' in the vein of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon; he was too old to be drafted in the first world war and was sixty when the second one started. Like H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) or W. H. Auden, he brooded over the war and its cultural ramifications from a distance.[20]

The second epigraph is an untranslated French sentence from a novel by the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, who joined the *résistance* against the Nazis during the Occupation and of whom Williams was a life-long admirer. The sentence hails from one of Camus's lesser-known novels, *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1956): 'Quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode'. It is uttered by Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a world-weary lawyer holding forth in a seedy bar in Amsterdam, in a mordant aside about the methodical diligence that made the Holocaust possible:

> I live in the Jewish quarter or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren made room. What a cleanup! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assas-sinated; that's real vacuum-cleaning. I admire that diligence, that methodical patience! When one has no character, one has to give oneself a method. Here it did wonders incontrovertibly, and I am living on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history.[21]

Both epigraphs thus turn out to be veiled allusions to the war, marking out *ELP* as a work that grew out of the post-war world.

How much should we make of this fact? In considering this question, it is worth recalling just to what extent the war was the defining experience of many philosophers of the generation that gave British philosophy its shape in the post-war years. Gilbert Ryle (1900–76), 39 years old when the war started, volunteered almost immediately and was commissioned in the Welsh Guards, rising to the rank of Major by the end of the war.[22] Isaiah Berlin (1909–97)

---

[20] On the poem's genetic context, see Berger (1985, pp. 3–33), Filreis (1991, pp. 130–47), Jaeckle (2005) and Mariani (2016, ch. 15). On the evolution of Stevens' characteristic mode of war poetry, see Berger (2016).

[21] Camus (1956, pp. 10–11; translation adapted to be closer to the French original).

[22] See the biographical section of Tanney (2021).

worked for the British Diplomatic Service, sending regular cables from the USA on the American political situation.[23] A. J. Ayer (1910–89) joined the Welsh Guards, worked in Cambridge interrogating prisoners and was sent to the USA on a secret service mission, then returned to London where he helped with the organization of French resistance movements to the Nazi occupation of France.[24] J. L. Austin (1911–60) served in the British Intelligence Corps, did crucial work on D-Day intelligence and left the army in 1945 a lieutenant colonel. Stuart Hampshire (1914–2004) enlisted in 1940 and worked in army intelligence, interrogating Nazi officers at the end of the war.[25] Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in London, Brussels, Innsbruck and Graz, where she worked at refugee camps.[26] In London, she had shared a flat with Philippa Foot (1920–2010), then working for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Elizabeth Anscombe (1919–2001) had publicly opposed Britain's entering the war and later campaigned unsuccessfully for Harry Truman to be denied an honorary degree from Oxford.[27] R. M. Hare (1919–2002) credited his interest in moral philosophy to an early flirtation with pacifism; he ended up serving in the Royal Artillery, training soldiers in the Punjab, then taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1942, first tasked to work on the infamous Siam-Burma railway, then imprisoned in Singapore until the end of the war.[28] Richard Wollheim (1923–2003) enlisted aged nineteen, serving as an infantry officer in France, and was briefly a prisoner-of-war in Germany but escaped to rejoin

---

[23] A detailed and sympathetic account of Berlin's war work can be found in Ignatieff (1998, pp. 97–134).

[24] References to his wartime doings pepper his two volumes of memoirs, Ayer (1977) and Ayer (1984).

[25] See O'Grady (2004).

[26] Conradi (2002, pp. 109–199) offers a detailed account of Murdoch's activities during the war.

[27] See O'Grady (2001) and Wiseman (2016).

[28] See Hare (2002). See also the account of Hare in Mehta (1963).

his unit.[29] Wollheim returned after the war to complete his interrupted degree at Balliol College, Oxford, where R. M. Hare was one of his tutors and a fellow undergraduate was an eighteen-year-old Bernard Williams (1929–2003).

Williams had been too young to have fought in the war—he was ten when it started—though he served with distinction in the RAF in the early 1950s, when he did his National Service. But the war had dominated his childhood, and continued to dominate the collective imaginary for decades after it had ended. Moreover, what would have been his philosophically most formative period coincided with the years in which the sheer scale and methodical execution of the Holocaust became widely known and some of its perpetrators were tried, notably in the Nuremberg trials of 1945–46 and the Eichmann trial of 1961. It is therefore not surprising that although post-war analytic philosophy tended to aspire to an absolute deracination from any non-philosophical context, allusions to the war and its moral concerns were ubiquitous.

This is perhaps most evident in the case of Williams's tutor at Oxford, R. M. Hare. Invited to address a German audience in 1955, Hare tellingly chose a subject with immediate relevance to his listeners. The talk was delivered again for the BBC Third Programme and published in *The Listener* under the title 'Can I Be Blamed for Obeying Orders?' The question, Hare said, was one that 'arises frequently in wartime and in connexion with war-crimes trials. … Can the study of moral language shed any light on this problem? I want to maintain that it can'.[30] The talk ended with some stern words:

> We must never lose sight of the distinction between what we are told to do and what we ought to do. There is a point beyond which we cannot get rid of our own moral responsibilities by laying them on the shoulders of a superior, whether he be general, priest or politician, human or divine. Anyone who thinks otherwise has not understood what a moral decision is.[31]

---

[29] He tells some of that story in Wollheim (1994).
[30] Hare (1972, p. 2).
[31] Hare (1972, p. 8).

The moral concerns of wartime also appeared in another form in Hare's work. His system of ethics—'universal prescriptivism'—took a formal feature of (some) moral language and attempted to derive substantive limitations on what could be a plausible moral position. But his position was, from the start, haunted by what he called the problem of the 'fanatic', frequently incarnated as a fiercely consistent Nazi, someone firm enough in his anti-Semitism to accept the prescription 'let me be killed if I were a Jew'. The prescription, eminently universalizable as stated, seemed to admit as a viable moral position what should be beyond the pale of morality. The mere logical possibility of such a person seemed to tell against Hare's aspiration to derive a substantive moral theory (in his later work, a kind of utilitarianism) from the logic of moral language.

4. Character and Method

Thirty years after Hare first delivered his talk on obeying orders, Williams, in the middle of *ELP*, put his finger on what he thought the least credible of Hare's claims about the fanatical Nazi: that what stood between him and a proper appreciation of the moral claims of all humanity was merely the refusal to engage in 'the ideal process of thinking', by which he would, if only he were sufficiently responsive to rational argument, 'acquire an actual preference against antisemitism'.[32] It is striking, Williams wrote, 'how strong the claims are that Hare makes for the powers of rational argument in ethics'.[33] Williams himself certainly did not have any such faith in the powers of rational argument. As he had memorably put it earlier in *ELP*: 'What will the professor's justification do, when they break down the door, smash his spectacles, take him away?'[34] The Nazis are not named here, but they are among the likely

---

[32] Williams (2006a, p. 84).
[33] Williams (2006a, p. 84). See also Williams (1988).
[34] Williams (2006a, p. 23).

candidates for the 'they' in this sentence, along with the many totalitarian regimes that were, in the mid-1980s, still in power across eastern Europe and, significantly, in Argentina, where Williams had spent the spring of 1985 observing the trials of the leaders of the ousted *junta*.[35]

Another passing reflection—about whether moral wickedness could be assumed to correlate with a lack of psychological health, as Plato for one had thought—brought up the Nazis again in connection with the question whether there could be a 'figure ... who is horrible enough and not miserable at all but, by any ethological standard of the bright eye and the gleaming coat, dangerously flourishing'.[36] Perhaps, Williams mused in response, 'it is an achievement of the modern world to have made it impossible to rear that type, because it has made evil, like other things, a collective enterprise, a process that makes it more powerful but less interesting'. His footnote to this sentence commends Hannah Arendt's classic *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Williams would, then, have been familiar with the chilling moment when Eichmann reveals another, philosophical, side to his otherwise dull ('banal') personality:

> … Eichmann's vague notion that there was more involved in this whole business than the question of the soldier's carrying out orders … appeared during the police examination, when he suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty.[37]

This claim is picked up on immediately by everyone at the trial as an absurdity; as Hare had pointed out so clearly, Kant's ethics constitute an emphatic rejection of 'following orders' as a way to evade responsibility. But Eichmann's subsequent utterances, confused though they were, made it clearer what in his conduct he regarded as Kantian. It was the consistent but unimaginative cleav-

---

[35] Williams recounts the experience in Williams (1985). See also Williams (2005b, p. 69) and the reference, in Williams (2005a, p. 118n5), to the *junta*'s General Galtieri, who seemed to Williams to epitomise the rule of men rather than of law.

[36] Williams (2006a, p. 46).

[37] Arendt (2006, pp. 135–6).

ing to the dictates of duty even when they conflicted with his interests and those of others he cared for. This was part of what Arendt famously thought 'banal' in him. To Eichmann's mind, it was this consistency that justified his actions: he had not acted as he had out of 'inclination'. Arendt suggested that Eichmann had in fact been acting on Hitler's lawyer, Hans Frank's

> formulation of 'the categorical imperative in the Third Reich', which Eich-mann might have known: 'Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it' . . . . Kant, to be sure, had never intended to say any-thing of the sort . . . . But it is true that Eichmann's unconscious distortion agrees with what he himself called the version of Kant 'for the household use of the little man'. In this household use, all that is left of Kant's spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law—the source from which the law sprang. … Much of the horribly painstaking thoroughness in the execution of the Final Solution—a thor-oughness that usually strikes the observer as typically German, or else as characteristic of the perfect bureaucrat—can be traced to the odd notion, indeed very common in Germany, that to be law-abiding means not merely to obey the laws but to act as though one were the legislator of the laws that one obeys.[38]

It is hard to pick apart what in Arendt is ironic, what cliché and what real insight, but her last sentence echoes Camus's remark about the 'diligence, that methodical patience' with which the Holocaust was executed. 'When one has no character, one has to give oneself a method'.

Camus casts character and method in opposition as two alternative sources of action. 'Character', that almost quaint notion with echoes of classical heroes and sanctimonious schoolmasters, emerges in Camus's remark as distinctly superior to 'method', with its echoes of bureaucratic punctiliousness, scientific protocols, and algorithmic decision procedures.

In Williams's development of Camus's contrast, character comes to stand for a strain in classical Greek ethical thought he opposes to its counter-strain in modernity. In this picture of ethics, the question is *how one should live*, and the

---

[38] Arendt (2006, pp. 136–7).

path to the good life leads through the cultivation of virtuous dispositions of character. This picture stands in contrast to modern ethical theory, for which the question is *what ought I to do*, and the answer is to be determined through the rigorous application of a method, 'a rationalistic decision procedure, a method for resolving conflicts that can itself be discursively laid out',[39] such as the systematic appraisal of possible courses of action by the lights of Kant's Categorical Imperative or Mill's Greatest Happiness principle.

From various angles but throughout the book, Williams chipped away at this picture, on which what we—all of us, not just philosophers—need in ethics is the rigorous application of a method or an ethical theory. Many of the critical considerations he raised had to do with the difficulty of giving an adequate answer to the question of how any putative ethical method or theory could be *lived out*, apart from its being simply affirmed as true. Some methods cannot, and by their own lights *should* not, be put into practice self-consciously, because that would be self-defeating (as Mill noted, it is usually a bad idea to go about *trying* to maximise happiness). But the fundamental problem with the enterprise was that it was passing the baton of living on to something poorly placed to determine how to do it: philosophy.

This was a critique of philosophical theories adhering to an inflated conception of how much guidance they could provide to the wider culture; but it was, equally, a critique of a wider culture that looked to a system or theory for guidance. Indeed, it is the latter point that is suggested by the Camus epigraph: the felt need for a method can itself be the expression of a lack of character. The Eichmann who emerges from Arendt's account seems to have lacked guidance from anywhere except his party, and his abstract commitments to a half-understood Kant only aggravated that character flaw. Could more philosophy have helped him? Perhaps a primer on what Kant's Categorical Imperative really required? That seems to depend on a quite incredible

---

[39] Williams (2006a, pp. 100–1).

optimism about what rational argument can, just by itself, achieve. Eichmann's actions might be explained by many things: cruelty, callousness, insensitivity, fear, open anti-Semitism or mere conformism—but these are deformations of character. Arendt's account thus stands a cautionary story about the consequences of living by a method while having the wrong dispositions. Far from being a safeguard against evil, method only amplifies a lack of character, while a lack of character only amplifies the felt need for a method.

What philosophy *could* do, as one commentator helpfully summed up Williams's view, was to 'assist the self-understanding of those whose ethical reasoning already has guidance from elsewhere',[40] such as from their character and ethical dispositions, but *without* claiming any special authority over ethical thinking. For why should one—why should *I*—grant some impersonal philosophical system the authority to tell me how to live? As Williams noted in his 1990 preface to the French translation, 'the book tries to make at least one point that can certainly be learned from Nietzsche: that in its relation to society, history, [and] ethics, there is a serious question about the *authority* of philosophy'.[41] If philosophy was going to be authoritative, it had to take the agent *with* his or her character and draw its authority *from* that character, not try to transcend character altogether.

Williams's critique of philosophy's aspiration to transcend character was one of the main threads connecting different parts of the book, and it can be thought of as having three strands.[42] First, Williams rejected any picture of philosophical reflection in ethics on which the agent could realistically hope, through sufficiently systematic and methodical reflection, to achieve complete independence from the character and dispositions she reflects from. Aristotle, he claimed, had been right to put 'the substantive ethical dispositions into the content of the self'. As Williams explained the point:

---

[40] Moore (2006, p. 216); see also Williams (2006a, p. 74).
[41] Williams (1990, p. xix).
[42] Williams (2006a, pp. 110, 194).

> I am, at the time of mature reflection, what I have become, and my reflection, even if it is about my dispositions, must at the same time be expressive of them. I think about ethical and other goods *from* an ethical point of view that I have already acquired and that is part of what I am.[43]

This was more than just the empirical claim that, as a matter of human psychology, one's deepest dispositions of character would still betray themselves in the way one applied a method. It was the claim that the deepest dispositions constitutive of one's character were *at the same time* and *necessarily* constitutive of one's ethical point of view. So even if, *per impossibile*, one managed to stand back entirely from one's dispositions, one would thereby shed the evaluative attitudes and resources required to *have* an ethical point of view at all:

> The outside point of view of his dispositions is available to the agent himself. But if he tries in his reflection to abstract himself totally from those dispositions, and to think about himself and the world as though he did not have them, then he should not be surprised if he cannot get an adequate picture of the value of anything, including his own dispositions.[44]

Without some mooring in character, methodical reflection would lose all sense of quality. Hence, the complete dissociation of method from character, of impartial ethical theory from the dispositions of the agent, had to be 'illusory'.[45]

Secondly, a method of impartial ethical reflection that completely dissociated agents from their characters would alienate them from the very thing that made them *someone in particular* rather than merely the 'janitors' of some system of values.[46] 'How can an *I* that has taken on the perspective of impartiality', Williams asked, 'be left with enough identity to live a life that respects its own interests?'[47] A method that rides roughshod over character leaves

---

[43] Williams (2006a, p. 51).
[44] Williams (2006a, p. 51).
[45] Williams (2006a, p. 110). This strand in Williams's thought is developed in Harcourt (2013).
[46] Williams (1973, p. 118; 1981b, p. 14).
[47] Williams (2006a, pp. 69–70).

no-one in particular for agents to be, thereby depriving them of just the kind of close identification with particular projects and desires that sustains the possibility of a meaningful life in the first place.

And thirdly, Williams denounced as illusory the ambition of a certain variety of ethical thought, which he called 'morality' or 'the morality system', to cut through the contingency of character and allocate praise and blame on an ultimately fair basis. The characteristics of 'morality' in Williams's pejorative sense are that it draws a stark contrast between the 'moral' and the 'nonmoral', insists on the overriding importance of the 'moral', and interprets the conclusions of practical reasoning as 'obligations' of a particularly inescapable and stringent sort: what one has most moral reason to do is what one really *must* do, as a matter of practical necessity; its characteristic reactive attitudes are blame and guilt, which it focuses entirely on the voluntary breaking of obligations.[48] But because morality is informed by 'the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just',[49] it seeks to allocate praise and blame on an ultimately fair basis, namely exclusively on the basis of *utterly voluntary* actions—pure expressions of the agent's will that in no way reflect contingent influences that might be unfairly distributed:

> There is a pressure within [morality] to require a voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent's own contribution, no more and no less. It is an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met (as opposed to the less ambitious requirements of voluntariness that take character largely as given).[50]

Williams did not question the basic assumption that a concern for fairness provided a rationale for treating attributions of blame and responsibility as

---

[48] See Williams (1995e, pp. 202–5; 2006a, pp. 7, 38, 54–5, 174–7). Queloz (2022) argues that if we regard an important point of the morality system as being to offer a shelter from luck, the disparate elements Williams groups together under that heading can be seen to form a genuine 'system' in the sense of a functional unity.

[49] Williams (2006a, p. 195).

[50] Williams (2006a, p. 194).

conditional on *some* form of voluntariness, since our capacity to do the right thing is to a significant extent hostage to forces outside our control, and holding people responsible for everything they did would be patently unfair.[51] But there is a *less* ambitious notion of voluntariness, satisfied already if what was done was an intentional aspect of an action performed in a normal state of mind; and there is a *more* ambitious notion of voluntariness, satisfied only if what was done in no way reflects the influence of any contingent forces. While the less ambitious notion 'takes the agent together with his character, and does not raise questions about his freedom to have chosen some other character',[52] morality's ambition to allocate blame and responsibility exclusively on the basis of 'utter voluntariness'[53] requires the real agent to be located beyond character, in a pure rational self that is unfettered by contingent dispositions of character.[54]

In reality, of course, there is no doing away with character and contingency, and even the most voluntary action will be found, upon reflection, to carry an element of contingency or luck. The effect of morality then is to generate scepticism towards the idea that any action is ever really voluntary and truly merits praise or blame. But that scepticism is not the preserve of philosophers. It is 'everyday' scepticism, 'generated by an honest acquaintance with human affairs'.[55] And what makes this scepticism everyday is morality's pervasiveness in the wider culture. Morality is 'not an invention of philosophers', but 'the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us'.[56] This 'peculiar and familiar'[57] variety of ethical thought, Williams suggested, owes its cultural

---

[51] Williams (1995g).

[52] Williams (2006a, p. 194).

[53] Williams (2006a, p. 196).

[54] Queloz (2021a) develops this contrast between a more and a less ambitious notion of voluntariness and defends the superiority of the less ambitious notion.

[55] Williams (1993, p. 94).

[56] Williams (2006a, p. 174).

[57] Williams (1995e, p. 204).

presence not primarily to the influence of academics, but to the deep and enduring influence of Christianity.[58]

In embracing the primacy of character over method, the pagan ethics of Aristotle had thus got something right that Kant and his successors, seeking a method that could be applied entirely independently of the character of the reflective agent, had got wrong. What was needed to live well was a virtuous character, not a theory about it, and the dispositions making up the virtuous character would not primarily manifest themselves through methodical reflections about virtue at all.[59]

While this Aristotelian picture helped highlight and came closer to overcoming the problems that Williams raised for ethical theories, he also felt that this picture could not be expected to answer the demands of modernity.[60] He worried that it failed to offer a plausible answer to a question that comes naturally to us now: whether, when the agent stands back from his dispositions, 'there is anything in the view of things he takes from the outside that conflicts with the view of things he takes from the inside'.[61] For Aristotle, the virtuous agent, finding upon reflection that his ethical outlook was ultimately grounded in his ethical dispositions, could fall back on the reassuring thought that these dispositions constituted nothing less than the correct and full realisation of human nature. For us who no longer share Aristotle's teleological assumptions, however, it is much less clear that reflecting on our ethical convictions as if from the outside will leave our confidence in them intact: 'We understand—and, most important, the agent can come to understand—that the agent's perspective is only one of many that are equally compatible with hu-

---

[58] See Williams (1993, p. 12; 2005c, p. 54; 2006a, p. 198; 2009, p. 203). We return to Christianity's influence on morality in the next section.

[59] Williams (2006a, pp. 9–11); see also Williams (1995a, p. 551).

[60] Williams's reservations about an unreconstructed Aristotle were numerous. Two representative discussions are Williams (1995e, pp. 194–202; 2001, pp. 55–62).

[61] Williams (2006a, p. 52).

man nature'.[62] Reflecting on the fact that our contingently formed dispositions are the ultimate support of the meaning and value we see in life threatens to undermine our confidence in the grounds on which we find life worth living.

It is this problem of confidence that the other epigraph about the 'cold vacancy' facing the 'shaken realist' speaks to. But here too, taking seriously the epigraph's connections to the war adds depth to it and reveals the problem at issue to be not just a modern problem, but a problem that takes a distinctive and acute form in the wake of the war.

5. The Cold Vacancy and the Pessimism of Strength

Canto VIII of 'Esthétique du Mal', from which Williams's epigraph hails, engages with the war notably through the way it dramatizes the difficulty of affirming life despite the pain it involves: the difficulty of choosing the 'yes' over the 'mortal no', of affirming life in the face of meaningless suffering. The poem was Stevens's response to a letter complaining that 'the aesthetic of poetry' was cut off from soldiers' pain, and that what poetry should aim to provide was 'an overwhelming desire to go on'.[63] This prompted Stevens to explore the relation between poetry and pain and attempt an *esthétique du mal*, an 'aesthetic of pain/evil' (the French is ambiguous).

Once the epigraph is embedded in its textual context, however, this wartime concern with pain and life-affirmation can be seen to be embedded in the broader theme of the modern disenchantment of the world. Canto VIII of the poem begins with the resonant declaration: 'The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination'.[64] Stevens is here standardly understood as reflecting

---

[62] Williams (2006a, p. 52). Some of the consequences of this gap are traced in Sagar (2014b) and Smyth (2019).

[63] Cited in Mariani (2016, p. 285).

[64] Stevens (1944, p. 496). We have benefited from a range of critical writings on the poem, in particular Hans (1990, pp. 92–5), Vendler (1969, p. 206 ff.), Berger (1985, pp. 3–33), and Filreis (1991, pp. 130–47).

on the implications of a familiar narrative of modern history: secularism might have killed off Satan—presumably at the same time it was doing away with God—but it has found nothing to fill the region of imaginative space that Satan occupied. 'A capital / Negation destroyed him in his tenement', Stevens continues, 'And, with him, many blue phenomena'. The death of Satan is bathetic: there was 'nothing of the Julian thunder-cloud / The assassin flash and rumble ... He was denied'. What we can now see were but 'phantoms' are gone. The 'blue phenomena' that Satan stood for—vengefulness, resentment, aggression—have not, of course, themselves disappeared from human life; but they now lack an adequate symbol to mark and account for the place they have within it.

'Phantoms', Stevens goes on to ask, 'What have you left? What underground? / What place in which to be is not enough / To be?' Satan stood, among other things, for ambition and vengefulness, for a desire to transcend the merely human, for the sense that simply *to be* was not enough. But where are we now to locate our own dissatisfactions with our humanity, our mortality, our vulnerability, the limits of our powers? And with this, we reach the lines that Williams chose for his epigraph:

> How cold the vacancy
> When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist
> First sees reality.

A vacuum has been left by the twin denials characteristic of modernity: God and Satan, heaven and hell, denials of the things beyond the merely human that human beings in many times and places have been found to yearn for. But when 'the shaken realist / First sees reality', he experiences these absences as a kind of tragedy. So far, so familiar. The epigraph continues:

> The tragedy, however, may have begun,
> Again, in the imagination's new beginning,
> In the yes of the realist spoken because he must
> Say yes, spoken because under every no
> Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.

The compulsion of the realist to say 'yes' is the bare human desire for life-affirmation, an affirmation formerly supported by reassuring narratives about the value of human life in the grand scheme of things. But the realist's achievements are those of Copernicus and Newton and Darwin, to have shaken the faith of humanity in its own cosmic significance—in effect if not by design. How best to respond to this disenchanted reality, to the 'cold vacancy' left by these retreating phantoms?

Stevens's Canto IX spells out one natural, but ultimately misguided, reaction: 'Panic in the face of the moon'. Once realism—in this broad sense, the modern growth of scientific understanding—wrenches off the poetic fancies with which we had clad the moon, on the grounds that they have nothing at all to do with the moon's 'real' nature, a natural reaction is 'panic', because 'nothing is left but comic ugliness / Or a lustred nothingness'.[65] The physical world, understood in (as philosophers would now put it) naturalistic terms, seems to lack the meaningfulness the realist continues to want, but can no longer believe in.

Stevens's Canto VIII bears the obvious impress of his deep interest in Nietzsche. Nietzsche had likewise sought to confront the challenge posed by 'pessimism', in the nineteenth-century sense of acute awareness of the pervasiveness of pain or suffering—perhaps the principal theme of Stevens's 'Esthétique du Mal'. The themes and imagery of Canto VIII–IX have been thought to have antecedents in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (which happens to be the one book by Nietzsche that Williams edited in its 2001 English translation).[66] Stevens's 'The tragedy ... may have begun, / Again' evokes Section 342 of *The Gay Science*, titled 'Incipit tragoedia' ('The tragedy begins'). In Section 357, Nietzsche writes: 'Looking at nature as if it were proof of the goodness and care of a god; interpreting history in honour of some divine

---

[65] Stevens (1944, p. 497).
[66] Bloom (1976, pp. 228–9).

reason, as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes; … that is *over* now; that has conscience *against* it'.[67]

And Section 377 is another likely antecedent:

> ... we have ... outgrown Christianity and are averse to it—precisely because we have grown *out* of it, because our ancestors were Christians who in their Christianity were mercilessly upright: for their faith they willingly sacrificed possessions, blood, position, and fatherland. We—do the same. But for what? For our unbelief? For every kind of unbelief? No, you know better than that, my friends! The hidden Yes in you is stronger than all Nos and Maybes that afflict you and your age like a disease; and you must sail the seas, you emigrants, you too are compelled to this by—a *faith*![68]

Confronted with the prospect of being crushed by a truthful consciousness of what the world is like, the central issue, as Nietzsche put it in *The Gay* Science's famous thought experiment inviting us to imagine the 'Eternal Recurrence' of all the horrors that were involved in bringing us to where we are, is whether one can say 'yes' to life in such a world.[69] If one cannot, despondency beckons, a nihilism on which nothing has value. But if one can affirm life on such terms, the question is whether one can do so while holding on to a realistic consciousness of what the world is like, or whether one can affirm life only the way Stevens envisages, by installing new idols in place of evicted ones.

These Nietzschean themes in Stevens's 'Esthétique du Mal' would not have been lost on Williams, who shared Stevens's deep interest in Nietzsche. By 1981, if not before, Williams had come over to the view that

> Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century. This was, above all, because he saw how totally problematical morality, as understood over many centuries, has become, and how complex a reaction that fact, when fully understood, requires.[70]

---

[67] Nietzsche (2001, §357).
[68] Nietzsche (2001, §377).
[69] Nietzsche (2001, §341).
[70] Williams (1981a). Some of Williams's debts to Nietzsche are explored in Clark (2015) and Queloz (2021b, pp. 187–92).

In his preface to the French translation of *ELP*, Williams invokes Nietzsche no fewer than nine times.[71] But *ELP* itself makes few explicit references to Nietzsche. Nevertheless, the epigraph from Stevens casts a Nietzschean pall over proceedings without his name needing to be pronounced at all.

There are three Nietzschean themes in particular that our discussion of the Stevens epigraph has brought out, and whose relation to *ELP* we can now examine: the modern challenge of finding meaning in a world from which the phantoms have gone (disenchantment); the temptation to install new idols in place of evicted ones (re-enchantment); and the difficulty of affirming life in full awareness of its horrors (pessimism).

All three themes run through *ELP*. The first, the modern disenchantment of the world, implicitly frames much of the book, but it also finds explicit articulation in it: 'the world has become entzaubert', Williams notes in Weber's phrase, 'the magic has gone from it'.[72] In a glancing reference to the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, he adds that 'current attempts by Islamic forces in particular to reverse that process—if that is what those attempts really are—do not show that the process is local or reversible, only that it can generate despair'.[73] And in another one of the book's few explicit references to Nietzsche, he alludes to the disenchantment of the world in terms of Nietzsche's phrase that 'God is dead': 'Nietzsche's saying, God is dead, can be taken to mean that we should now treat God as a dead person: we should allocate his legacies and try to write an honest biography of him'.[74]

What would an honest biography of God look like? To treat God as a dead person, Williams suggests, means to stop treating the arguments about him as 'arguments about the cosmos and of cosmic importance', and recognise that 'the important questions must be about human beings, and why, for instance,

---

[71] See Williams (1990).
[72] Williams (2006a, p. 165).
[73] Williams (2006a, p. 165).
[74] Williams (2006a, p. 33).

they ever believed that God existed'.[75] To write an *honest* biography of God would then be to acknowledge what the belief in God tells us about *ourselves*, and about the human needs and impulses that expressed themselves in that belief. It would be to try to understand the development of the belief in God in secular terms and face up, not just to the fact that this belief has grown out of human needs and impulses, but to its implications: notably, that the needs and impulses may endure even after the belief they helped produce has been abandoned.

This is connected to the 'allocation of God's legacies' and to the second Nietzschean theme evoked in the epigraph, the temptation to re-enchant the world by creating new idols. A considerable part of *ELP* can be read as undertaking to 'allocate God's legacies', as becomes clear in the light of Williams's explication of this metaphor in his introduction to *The Gay Science*:

> Nietzsche believed that the faith in the Christian God, and more generally in a reassuring metaphysical structure of the world, was a projection of fear and resentment. … He shares with … Marx … the idea that religious belief is a consequence, an expression of social and psychological forces. If those forces remain, and the Christian expression of them collapses, then surely other expressions will take its place. If need secretes thought, and the need remains, then it will secrete new thoughts. … [L]iberalism, socialism, Utilitarianism and so on are just secularized expressions of those same forces. But … they are too manifestly close to the original, and … our growing understanding that the world has no metaphysical structure whatsoever must discredit them as well.[76]

If we should now not merely *say* that God is dead, but *treat* God as a dead person, this is presumably in contrast to people who pay lip service to the 'Death of God', but continue to treat God as a *living* person, notably in the way they think about ethical reasoning and rationality. The early chapters of *ELP* are devoted to identifying such legacies of God. In particular, Williams examines the idea, rooted in what Nietzsche calls the 'metaphysical faith' of

---

[75] Williams (2006a, p. 33).
[76] Williams (2006b, p. 316).

Plato and much Christian thought, that ethics might be given foundations in something 'outside' ethics: in some conception of well-being (a project that unites Aristotle with Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick and their successors), or in practical reason (a Kantian project). It is a familiar accusation against the more sophisticated contemporary elaborations of these theories that they merely replicate the religious outlooks to which they aspire to provide a secular alternative. But Williams's point about allocating God's legacies in the light of an honest biography of him suggests something more: that those secular theories are not just the product of intellectual error, a mere failure to fully appreciate the ramifications of the Death of God, but expressions of real and enduring needs. For if the belief in God answered to needs, and the needs remain, they will call for new beliefs answering to them. In Stevens's terms, God's legacies in ethical theory are an expression not merely of intellectual inertia, but of an 'unbroken passion for yes'.[77]

But the bind we are in, according to Williams, is that while those theories might answer to genuine needs, the ideas of human nature, agency, and rationality embodied in those theories do not fully make sense to us now.[78] They are too caught up in metaphysical assumptions that are no longer stable under reflection and thus cannot meet the demands of the modern world on ethical thought.

If the ideas of Christianity and its less obvious legacies no longer make sense to us now, however, 'some extension of ancient thought, greatly modified, might be able to do so',[79] Williams thought. A Europe after Christianity might find new meaning in a Europe before Christianity. He returns to this idea in the Postscript, contending that a historical story could be told to show why, in a Europe in which the pale Galilean has come and gone, 'very old philosophies may have more to offer than moderately new ones'; this histor-

---

[77] We are indebted to A. W. Moore's comments on an earlier draft on this point.
[78] See Williams (2006a, p. vii; 2006d, p. 46; 2009, p. 199).
[79] Williams (2006a, p. vii).

ical story, he says, 'would involve the coming and departure of Christianity (which helps to explain why the ancient world is nearer than it may seem) and the failures of the Enlightenment (which make its characteristic philosophies so unhelpful)'.[80] For Williams, one of these failures of the Enlightenment was, as we saw, the Kantian idea of the rational agent as a characterless and autonomous self that can be fully extricated from the influence of contingent forces.[81] But unlike Nietzsche in some of his moods, or, more recently, Adorno or MacIntyre, Williams did not think that these failures must ultimately prove 'destructive of the values of the Enlightenment'.[82] The challenge was to reconcile disenchanted realism with what was most alive in the Enlightenment's legacy, in particular the values of critical reflection and truthfulness, and this meant that the temptation to place new idols in place of evicted ones should be resisted.[83]

This challenge ties in with the third Nietzschean theme of the Stevens epigraph, the difficulty of affirming life in full pessimistic awareness of its true character without falling back on the facile solace of fantasy. In the Postscript to *ELP*, Williams wrote that the hopes expressed in the book 'can be compressed into a belief in three things: in truth, in truthfulness, and in the meaning of an individual life'.[84] His belief, in other words, is that we can make sense of the idea that there is such a thing as getting it right ('truth'), that we should strive to

---

[80] Williams (2006a, p. 198). Cf the slightly more detailed version of this claim in Williams (1993, p. 12; 1995e, p. 204; 2005c, p. 54; 2009, p. 203). For a discussion of why one might take the Death of God to be destructive of Enlightenment values, see Leiter (2019).

[81] See Williams (2009, p. 199).

[82] Williams (2006a, p. 198). Although he mentions Nietzsche as someone who thought that the failures of the Enlightenment were destructive of its values, he also saw that Nietzsche did not, for all that, give up on the value of truthfulness; see Williams (2002, pp. 12–15).

[83] Another Enlightenment value that Williams retains is freedom. For a reading of Williams's political theory to this effect, see Sagar (2014a). For a reconstruction of Williams's vindicatory genealogy of the political value of liberty, see Queloz (2021b, pp. 238–41). For a reading which sees the Enlightenment idea that human beings set their own ends as the root conviction that unifies Williams's oeuvre, see Fricker (2020).

[84] Williams (2006a, p. 198).

get it right ('truthfulness'), and that our striving to get it right will not preclude our leading a meaningful life ('meaning'). But perhaps more so even than Stevens and Nietzsche, Williams was impressed by the difficulty of combining these three things. There is a constant temptation to sacrifice truthfulness to the need to give meaning to suffering, and the more meaningless suffering the world contains, the harder it becomes to affirm life without resorting to illusions.

Here the fact that Williams was writing in the aftermath of the war, and alluding to it through the Stevens epigraph, becomes particularly significant. The difficulty of life-affirmation—though not, of course, exclusive to the war— would have been greatly exacerbated by the war and the unprecedented atrocities that came to light in its aftermath. The war, one might say, transformed the modern problem of life-affirmation in the face of the *disenchantment of* the world into a different, harder problem, of life-affirmation in the face of *disillusionment with* the world, and particularly with humanity. The 'shaken realist' should not just be understood as a modern figure, a sanguine Enlightenment naturalist seeking to make sense of the world without illusions. It is, at least in the first instance, a disillusioned figure, whose Enlightenment optimism has been shattered by the pessimism-inducing horrors of the war. (Williams is reported to have declared that he found his attitude to life articulated in the last stanza of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', which strikes just such a sombre note).[85]

At the same time, the 'shaken realist' that emerges from *ELP* is not, in the end, a resigned figure. This is the force of Williams's gnomic but clearly central suggestion in the book that confidence in one's values and ethical convictions—and on that basis, the affirmation of life—could rest on a 'pessimism of strength':

---

[85] McMahan (2013, p. 19).

> One question we have to answer is how people, or enough people, can come to possess a practical confidence that, particularly granted both the need for reflection and its pervasive presence in our world, will come from strength and not from the weakness of self-deception and dogmatism. (Confidence is not the same as optimism; it could rest on what Nietzsche called the pessimism of strength.)[86]

What does Williams take the 'pessimism of strength' to involve? In interpreting this passage, we must recall, first, that when Nietzsche introduced the phrase in the nineteenth century, 'pessimism' designated the acute awareness of the pervasiveness of pain and suffering; and second, that Nietzsche developed his ideal of a 'pessimism of strength' in opposition to Schopenhauerian pessimism. The fundamental contrast was that while Schopenhauerian pessimism culminated in suicidal life-denial—what Nietzsche called the 'death-wish' and Stevens the 'mortal no'[87]—Nietzsche's pessimism of strength was meant to culminate in life-affirmation.[88]

Now, there is one way in which a pessimistic awareness of suffering might issue in life-affirmation that Nietzsche and Stevens both explored, namely by *aestheticising* suffering. Is this what Williams had in mind? That impression might be encouraged by Williams's epigraphic reference to Stevens's 'Esthétique du Mal', since one of the things that Stevens clearly does in that poem is to aestheticise suffering through his 'poetics of pain' (in a representative passage, Canto VII begins: 'How red the rose that is the soldier's wound').[89] Moreover, that impression might be reinforced by Williams's endorsement of a 'pessimism of strength', since Nietzsche originally introduced the phrase in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he argued that Greek tragedy provided solace

---

[86] Williams (2006a, p. 171). For discussions of the notion of confidence, see Fricker (2000), Hall (2014), and Blackburn (2019).

[87] Nietzsche (2009, 1885, 2[100]).

[88] On Nietzsche's attitude towards the meaninglessness of suffering and the way it differs both from Schopenhauer's and from the older tradition of theodicy, see Janaway (2017).

[89] On Stevens's 'poetics of pain', see Filreis (1991, p. 134).

by inviting us to regard the suffering on earth as the gods do, as an *aesthetic* spectacle:

> [O]ur highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art—for only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*—although, of course, our awareness of our significance in this respect hardly differs from the awareness which painted soldiers have of the battle depicted on the same canvas.[90]

Whether the Nietzsche of the *Gay Science* still endorsed this aesthetic redemption of suffering is debated; the *Gay Science* ideal of *amor fati*, the embrace of one's fate, might be thought to call precisely for the affirmation of unredeemed suffering.[91] But there is no such ambiguity about Williams's position. He explicitly rejected such attempts to discern an aesthetic justification in suffering, unequivocally dismissing the thesis 'that the "metaphysical solace" of tragedy could be understood only through a fundamentally aesthetic attitude to life' as 'an attitude which we have even greater reason to reject than Nietzsche eventually had'.[92] Again, the unprecedentedly unglamorous and industrialized character of the horrors of the second world war, which only fully came to light after it had ended, is a plausible candidate for the 'greater reason' to resist aestheticism that separates us from Nietzsche, modern and secular though he was.

   Above all, however, what speaks against interpreting Williams's 'pessimism of strength' as an aestheticising attitude is that this would involve securing the strength to maintain a pessimistic awareness of suffering at the expense of truthfulness. It would involve a kind of embellishment of suffering, and to that extent a kind of falsification or forgetting. And that is something Williams emphatically rejects throughout his work. Williams's pessimism of strength remains a form of *pessimism* (in the nineteenth-century sense) in that it in-

---

[90] Nietzsche (1999, §5). See Huddleston (2019, pp. 18–19) for an illuminating commentary.

[91] For the former view, see Ridley (2007, pp. 135–37; 2013, p. 430); for the latter, see May (2011, pp. 88–91) and Janaway (2017, p. 159).

[92] Williams (2006d, p. 46).

volves being open-eyed about the horrors of the world; but it is a pessimism *of strength* in that it aspires to face these appalling truths *truthfully*, without aesthetically idealising or distracting from them, and without rendering them more bearable through redemptive myths and illusions.[93] It is this commitment to truthfulness, rather than his earlier aestheticism, that Williams seems to have admired in Nietzsche. He writes in *Truth and Truthfulness*:

> One of Nietzsche's most striking qualities is the obstinacy with which he held to an ideal of truthfulness that would not allow us to falsify or forget the horrors of the world, the fact that their existence has been necessary to everything that we value, or the further fact summarized in the slogan 'God is dead'—that the traditional metaphysical conceptions which have helped us to make sense of the world, and in particular to bear its horrors, have terminally broken down.[94]

Williams's endorsement of the pessimism of strength signals that he stands with Nietzsche on all three counts. In a similar passage, Williams asserts in his own voice that 'to recognise how we are placed in this respect is, if anything, an affirmation of strength', namely the strength involved in facing hard truths while forswearing comforting philosophical superstitions.[95] It is the strength required to find value and meaning in life while retaining a reflective sense of 'the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value' without rationalising away these costs through the redemptive myths of Christianity and 'its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies'.[96] The historical resonances of these themes in post-war Britain help account for the drastic language Williams resorted to when addressing this issue.[97]

   Williams's pessimism of strength then appears as another instance of the unbroken passion for 'yes'; but it is, crucially, the *shaken* realist's unbroken

---

[93] Nietzsche (2009, 1887, 10[21]). For a comparison of Nietzsche and Williams on pessimism, see Jenkins (2012) and Queloz (2021b, pp. 187–92).

[94] Williams (2002, p. 13).

[95] Williams (1995f, p. 148).

[96] Williams (1993, p. 166).

[97] Though see Williams (1981a).

passion for 'yes', for what the realist is shaken and unbroken *by* is not just modern disenchantment, but post-war disillusionment. This 'yes' is, moreover, not one facilitated by fresh illusions. Like Nietzsche, Williams takes there to be an *ethical* demand not to 'falsify or forget the horrors of the world' and their role in securing what we now value. Correspondingly, the continued indulgence in metaphysical illusions emerges as not merely an epistemic failing, but an *ethical* failing—a kind of weakness.

Williams's shaken realist is thus a figure that combines the truthful recognition of what the world is like with the determination to bear it and affirm life nonetheless. The confidence resting on a pessimism of strength that Williams envisages is the renewed affirmation of life and value of someone who finds the wherewithal to face the world truthfully—to *remain* a shaken realist.

In a final echo of Stevens's poem, the closing pages of Williams's last book expressed the hope 'that the ways in which future people will come to make sense of things will enable them to see the truth and not be broken by it'.[98] 'If one is in a place where things are not too bad', he wrote, 'there are no doubt satisfactions in a rueful resignation about the ways of the world, … or in repeating that after Auschwitz there are no songs. But a more hopeful story is likely to serve most of us better'.[99] Here Williams once again echoes the idea that the disillusionment of the shaken realist can be followed by a renewed but truthful affirmation of life and what is of value in it. Williams's formulation implies that future people's capacity for truthful life-affirmation will not just depend on their strength, but also on 'the ways in which [they] will come to make sense of things'. Affirming things as valuable requires the conceptual and emotional resources to *make sense* of them *as* valuable, and if the resources available hitherto have lost their credibility now that the phantoms are gone, new ways to make sense of things as valuable will be needed that are more stable under truthful reflection. This concern to identify truthful ways of

---

[98] Williams (2002, p. 269).
[99] Williams (2002, p. 266).

making sense of things animates *Shame and Necessity*, where Williams turned to the pre-Socratic Greeks in search of helpful conceptual resources, because their ethical situation, as yet undistorted by Platonic and Christian ideas, was in some ways closer to the situation of the shaken realist than that of any Western people in the interim.[100] And the same concern gives point to the effort, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, to 'see how far the values of truth could be revalued, how they might be understood in a perspective quite different from the Platonic and Christian metaphysics which had provided their principal source in the West up to now'.[101] The attitude of the shaken realist informed Williams's philosophical project to the end.

6. Conclusion: The Shaken Realist after The Fall

What is added to our understanding of Williams's philosophical outlook if he is read as writing specifically about the condition after WWII rather than about the 'modern condition' more broadly? We have argued that it brings out the historical roots and nature of his 'pessimism of strength'. He is not just a 'realist' determined to view the world truthfully rather than through the veil of comforting illusions, but a 'shaken' realist, chastened specifically by the events of the twentieth century.

This helps explain why Williams felt that there was such a gulf between his own outlook and that of someone like Hume, for example, even though he was in many respects a Neo-Humean.[102] Williams thought that Hume 'suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism. Nobody who's got to

---

[100] Williams (1993, p. 166).

[101] Williams (2002, p. 18).

[102] Williams notes that on 'the question of how effectively moral and nonmoral dispositions can be distinguished at all, the admirable appendix IV of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* remains an indispensable text' (1993, p. 198n41). He acknowledges various other parallels in Williams (1986, p. 206; 1995b, p. 20n12; 1995e, p. 205). See also his favourable remarks in McDonald and Williams (1983).

1999 can take it that seriously'.[103] Recent interpreters have criticised Williams for overdrawing the contrast between his own pessimism and Hume's more optimistic tone.[104] They have emphasized that Hume was far from naïve about the pervasiveness of suffering, and had his own good reasons for emphasising the respects in which a naturalistic understanding of the ethical could be vindicatory, since he was concerned to deny, against religious apologists, that a secular explanation of ethics would explain it away.[105] One interpreter even characterizes Williams as responding, like Hume, to 'The Fall' understood as the historical position we 'moderns' find ourselves in as a result of a growth in social and historical self-consciousness and a loss of faith in redemptive narratives.[106]

But this is where it makes a difference that Williams was writing after 'The Fall' understood more specifically as the historical condition after the second world war, which Camus was writing about in *La Chute*. Asked why Hume, in many ways a kindred spirit, did not figure more prominently in *ELP*, Williams replied that the Scotsman's 'favourite categories of *fanaticism* and *barbarism* are simply inadequate to what we now need to understand'.[107] 'Auschwitz' is a plausible metonymic image for what Williams was thinking of here.[108] Writing in its shadow made it harder to carry on externalizing the worst aspects of humanity as the distant aberrations of religious fanatics or barbarians, now rendered obsolete by the progress of science and civilization.[109]

Taking seriously Williams's opening reference to the 'shaken realist' and Camus's *The Fall* adds to our understanding of *ELP* by giving us a concrete

---

[103] Williams (1999, p. 256).

[104] See Greco (2007), Blackburn (2019), and Russell (2015, pp. 242–7; 2019). For a contrary view to the effect that Williams made a profound shift away from Hume, see Sagar (2014b).

[105] See Russell (2008, ch. 17).

[106] Russell (2019, pp. 45–46, 48).

[107] Williams (1986, p. 206).

[108] See Williams (2014b, p. 300).

[109] For a historical overview of this tendency from the late eighteenth-century onwards, see Gaukroger (2020, pp. 19–27).

social world in terms of which to flesh out the abstract ideas of the book. They were embodied by real people and tied in with issues that were salient in the wake of the war. That gives us the means to respond to the charge that *ELP* fell short of its Nietzschean aspirations to cultural critique because of its seeming focus on supposedly inconsequential aberrations in the academic consciousness, such as the Kantian notion of moral obligation.[110] Setting the book against its historical backdrop reveals it to be about much more than that: it is also about how to make sense of fanaticism's relation to rationality; about the primacy of character over method and the way in which generalisable principles alone will not guard against cruelty; about the individual's relation to impersonal systems of commands and the importance of questioning their authority; and about the modern problem, especially pressing after the war, of reconciling truth, truthfulness, and a meaningful life. Further investigation of these resonances of *ELP* might explore, as we have not done here, how Williams's wider cultural concerns are also in the background of his later political writings, especially on liberalism and the predicament of 'people who need a theory of individual rights, but have lost some of the traditional reasons for asserting them'.[111] Here, our aim has been to show that once one takes the epigraphs seriously and relates the philosophical arguments of the book to their post-war context, it becomes hard not to hear them as resonating with the salient ethical issues of its day. In these respects, the book exemplifies a form of philosophy as cultural critique.

It is in Williams's epigraphs, then, that readers can find the clearest indication of the wider cultural resonances that *ELP* did not explicitly claim for itself. If Williams was reticent about these wider implications, we have suggested, it was because of the stylistic challenge he perceived in writing moral philosophy after the war, his determination to steer well clear of kitsch, and his refusal to assume that what is really important is instantly awesome. Williams did

---

[110] See Leiter (1997, pp. 255–6; forthcoming, pp. 6–12) and Darwall (1987).
[111] Williams (2014c, p. 318).

not think it the place of a work of philosophy to insist on its own relevance: a book's relevance to a reader's concerns is a reader's own business.[112,113]

---

[112] A point Williams vividly expressed in his reply to Simon Blackburn: 'As it used to say on packets of cake mix, [the reader] will add his own egg' (1986, p. 203).

[113] We would like to thank Edward Harcourt, A. W. Moore, Amia Srinivasan, Paul Sagar, Vida Yao, and Claire Kirwin for offering detailed comments on this paper at various stages. We are also grateful to participants at the conference "30 Years of Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*" and at the Cambridge Political Philosophy workshop.

Bibliography

Arendt, H. (2006). *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin.

Ayer, A. J. (1977). *Part of my life*. London: Collins.

Ayer, A. J. (1984). *More of my life*. London: Collins.

Babbiotti, P. (2020). Compression: Nietzsche, Williams, and the Problem of Style. *European Journal of Philosophy*.

Babbiotti, P., Krishnan, N., and Marquier, M. (2021). Commentary to B. Williams's French Introduction to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. *Philosophical Inquiries*, 9(2), 259–268.

Barnes, J. (1993, April 23). Like Us, Only Better. *Times Literary Supplement*.

Berger, C. (1985). *Forms of Farewell*: *The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Berger, C. (2016). War. In G. MacLeod (Ed.), *Wallace Stevens in Context* (pp. 259–66). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Blackburn, S. (2019). Lonely in Littlemore: Confidence in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. In S. G. Chappell and M. van Ackeren (Eds.), *Ethics Beyond the Limits*: *New Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (pp. 27–36). London: Routledge.

Bloom, H. (1976). *Wallace Stevens*: *The Poems of our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Camus, A. (1956). *The Fall* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). New York: Vintage.

Conradi, P. J. (2002). *Iris Murdoch*: *A Life*. London: Harper Collins UK.

Darwall, S. L. (1987). Abolishing Morality. *Synthese*, *72*(1), 71–89.

Filreis, A. (1991). *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fricker, M. (2000). Confidence and Irony. In E. Harcourt (Ed.), *Morality*, *Reflection*, *and Ideology* (pp. 87–112). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fricker, M. (2020). Bernard Williams as a Philosopher of Ethical Freedom. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *50*(8), 919–33.

Gaukroger, S. (2020). *Civilization and the Culture of Science*: *Science and the Shaping of Modernity*, *1795-1935*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Greco, L. (2007). Humean Reflections in the Ethics of Bernard Williams. *Utilitas*, *19*, 311–25.

Hall, E. (2014). Contingency, Confidence, and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams. *Social Theory and Practice*, *40*(4), 545–569.

Hans, J. S. (1990). *The Value(s) of Literature*. New York: SUNY Press.

Harcourt, E. (2013). "Happenings Outside One's Moral Self": Reflections on Utilitarianism and Moral Emotion. *Philosophical Papers*, *42*(2), 239–258.

Hare, R. M. (1972). *Applications of Moral Philosophy*. London: Macmillan.

Hare, R. M. (2002). A Philosophical Autobiography. *Utilitas*, *14*(3), 269–305.

Huddleston, A. (2019). *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ignatieff, M. (1998). *Isaiah Berlin*: *A Life*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Jaeckle, J. (2005). 'These Minutiae Mean More': Five Editions of Wallace Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal'. *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *29*(2), 233–248.

Janaway, C. (2017). On the Very Idea of 'Justifying Suffering'. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, *48*(2), 152–170.

Jenkins, M. P. (2012). Williams, Nietzsche, and Pessimism. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, *43*(2), 316–325.

Leiter, B. (1997). Nietzsche and the Morality Critics. *Ethics*, *107*(2), 250–85.

Leiter, B. (2019). The Death of God and the Death of Morality. *The Monist*, *102*(3), 386–402.

Leiter, B. (2022). Williams's Debt to Nietzsche: Real or Illusory? In A. Szigeti and M. Talbert (Eds.), *Morality and Agency*: *Themes from Bernard Williams* (pp. 17–35). New York: Oxford University Press.

MacIntyre, A. C. (2007). *After Virtue*: *A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Magee, B., and Williams, B. (1971). Conversation with Bernard Williams: Philosophy and Morals. In B. Magee (Ed.), *Modern British Philosophy* (pp. 150–165). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Mariani, P. (2016). *The Whole Harmonium*: *The Life of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

May, S. (2011). Why Nietzsche is Still in the Morality Game. In S. May (Ed.), *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality*: *A Critical Guide* (pp. 78–100). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McDonald, D., and Williams, B. (1983). The Uses of Philosophy: An Interview with Bernard Williams. *The Center Magazine*(November/December), 40–49.

McMahan, J. (2013). Bernard Williams: A Reminiscence. In A. Perry and C. Herrera (Eds.), *The Moral Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (pp. 18–25). Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Mehta, V. (1963). *Fly and the Fly-Bottle*: *Encounters with Contemporary British Intellectuals*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

Moore, A. W. (2006). Commentary on the Text. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (pp. 203–47). Abingdon: Routledge.

Moore, A. W. (2019). Realism and the Absolute Conception. In *Language, World, and Limits: Essays in the Philosophy of Language and Metaphysics* (pp. 165–81). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moran, R. (2016). Williams, History, and 'the Impurity of Philosophy'. *European Journal of Philosophy*, *24*(2), 315–330.

Newey, G. (1999, November 25). Effing the Ineffable. *London Review of Books*.

Nietzsche, F. (1999). *The Birth of Tragedy* (R. Speirs, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (2001). *The Gay Science*: *With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (J. Nauckhoff and A. Del Caro, Trans. B. Williams Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (2009). *Digital Critical Edition of the Complete Works and Letters* (P. D'Iorio Ed.). Berlin: De Gruyter. www.nietzschesource.org/eKGWB/.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2003, October 1). Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams Remembered. *Boston Review*. Retrieved from http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/martha-c-nussbaum-tragedy-and-justice.

O'Grady, J. (2001, January 11). Elizabeth Anscombe. *The Guardian*.

O'Grady, J. (2004, June 16). Sir Stuart Hampshire. *The Guardian*.

Queloz, M. (2021a). The Essential Superficiality of the Voluntary and the Moralization of Psychology. *Philosophical Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-021-01720-2.

Queloz, M. (2021b). *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Queloz, M. (2022). A Shelter from Luck: The Morality System Reconstructed. In A. Szigeti and M. Talbert (Eds.), *Morality and Agency: Themes from Bernard Williams* (pp. 184–211). New York: Oxford University Press.

Ridley, A. (2007). *Nietzsche on Art*. London: Routledge.

Ridley, A. (2013). Nietzsche and the Arts of Life. In K. Gemes and J. Richardson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche* (pp. 415–31). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Russell, P. (2008). *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*: *Skepticism*, *Naturalism*, *and Irreligion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Russell, P. (2015). 'Hume's Lengthy Digression': Free Will in the *Treatise*. In A. Butler and D. C. Ainslie (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hume's Treatise* (pp. 230–51). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, P. (2019). Hume's Optimism and Williams's Pessimism: From 'Science of Man' to Genealogical Critique. In S. G. Chappell and M. van Ackeren (Eds.), *Ethics Beyond the Limits*: *New Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (pp. 37–52). London: Routledge.

Sagar, P. (2014a). From Scepticism to Liberalism? Bernard Williams, the Foundations of Liberalism and Political Realism. *Political Studies*, *64*(2), 368–384.

Sagar, P. (2014b). Minding the Gap: Bernard Williams and David Hume on Living an Ethical Life. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, *11*(5), 615–638.

Seabright, P. (1985, 5 September). Character. *London Review of Books*.

Smyth, N. (2019). The Inevitability of Inauthenticity: Bernard Williams and Practical Alienation. In S. G. Chappell and M. van Ackeren (Eds.), *Ethics beyond the Limits*: *New Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (pp. 188–208). London: Routledge.

Stevens, W. (1944). Esthétique du Mal. *The Kenyon Review*, *6*(4), 489–503.

Tanney, J. (2021). Gilbert Ryle. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 edition ed.).

Vendler, H. (1969). *On Extended Wings*: *Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, B. (1973). A Critique of Utilitarianism. In *Utilitarianism*: *For and Against* (pp. 77–155). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1981a, June 4). Nietzsche's Centaur. *London Review of Books*.

Williams, B. (1981b). Persons, Character and Morality. In *Moral Luck* (pp. 1–19). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1985, October 4). The Right to Know: The Inside Story of the Belgrano Affair, by Clive Ponting; The Price of Freedom, by Judith Cook. *Times Literary Supplement*.

Williams, B. (1986). Reply to Simon Blackburn. *Philosophical Books*, *27*(4), 203–208.

Williams, B. (1988). The Structure of Hare's Theory. In D. Seanor and N. Fotion (Eds.), *Hare and Critics*: *Essays on Moral Thinking* (pp. 185–98). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Williams, B. (1990). L'éthique, question de style? (M.-A. Lescourret, Trans.). In *L'éthique et les limites de la philosophie* (pp. v–xix). Paris: Gallimard.

Williams, B. (1993). *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Williams, B. (1995a). Ethics. In A. C. Grayling (Ed.), *Philosophy 1*: *A Guide Through the Subject* (pp. 545–582). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, B. (1995b). How Free Does the Will Need to Be? In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers*, *1982–1993* (pp. 3–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1995c). Making Sense of Humanity. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers*, *1982–1993* (pp. 79–89). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1995d). Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers*, *1982–1993* (pp. 65–78). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1995e). Replies. In J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison (Eds.), *World*, *Mind*, *and Ethics*: *Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (pp. 185–224). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1995f). Saint-Just's Illusion. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers*, *1982–1993* (pp. 135–150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1995g). Voluntary Acts and Responsible Agents. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers*, *1982–1993* (pp. 22–34). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (1996). On Hating and Despising Philosophy. *London Review of Books*, *18*, 17–18.

Williams, B. (1999). Seminar with Bernard Williams. *Ethical Perspectives*, *6*(3–4), 243–265.

Williams, B. (2001). *Morality*: *An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, B. (2002). *Truth and Truthfulness*: *An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2005a). Conflicts of Liberty and Equality. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*: *Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (pp. 115–127). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2005b). Human Rights and Relativism. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*: *Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (pp. 62–74). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2005c). The Liberalism of Fear. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*: *Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (pp. 52–61). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2005d). Modernity and the Substance of Ethical Life. In G. Hawthorne (Ed.), *In the Beginning Was the Deed*: *Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (pp. 40–51). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2006a). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Reissue ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

Williams, B. (2006b). Introduction to The Gay Science. In M. Burnyeat (Ed.), *The Sense of the Past*: *Essays in the History of Philosophy* (pp. 311–24). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2006c). Janáček's Modernism: Doing Less with More in Music and Philosophy. In P. Williams and M. Tanner (Eds.), *On Opera* (pp. 118–20). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Williams, B. (2006d). The Legacy of Greek Philosophy. In M. Burnyeat (Ed.), *The Sense of the Past*: *Essays in the History of Philosophy* (pp. 3-48). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2006e). Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline. In A. W. Moore (Ed.), *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (pp. 180–199). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2007). Truth and Truthfulness. In J. Baggini and J. Stangroom (Eds.), *What More Philosophers Think* (pp. 130–146). London: Continuum.

Williams, B. (2009). A Mistrustful Animal. In A. Voorhoeve (Ed.), *Conversations on Ethics* (pp. 195–214). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Williams, B. (2014a). *After Virtue*: *A Study in Moral Theory*, by Alasdair Mac-Intyre,

Sunday Times (1981). In M. Woods (Ed.), *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002* (pp. 184–86). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2014b). Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, by Richard Rorty,

London Review of Books (1989). In M. Woods (Ed.), *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002* (pp. 295–300). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2014c). The Need to Be Sceptical. In M. Woods (Ed.), *Essays and Reviews 1959-2002* (pp. 311–318). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2014d). On Hating and Despising Philosophy. In *Essays and reviews*, *1959-2002* (pp. 363–370). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2014e). Why Philosophy Needs History. In M. Woods (Ed.), *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002* (pp. 405–412). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Williams, B. (2021). Ethics, A Matter of Style? Introduction to the French Edition. *Philosophical Inquiries*, *9*(2), 269–284.

Wiseman, R. (2016). The Intended and Unintended Consequences of Intention. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, *90*(2), 207–227.

Wollheim, R. (1994, June 23). Fifty Years On. *London Review of Books*.