Review for *Mind* of *Ethics Beyond the Limits: New Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, edited by Sophie Grace Chappell and Marcel van Ackeren. London: Routledge, 2019. Pp. ix + 258.

Bernard Williams' books demand an unusual amount of work from readers. This is particularly true of his 1985 magnum opus, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (*ELP*)—a work so charged with ideas that there seems to be nothing more to say, and yet at the same time so pared-down and tersely argued that there seems to be nothing left to take away. Reflecting on the book five years after its publication, Williams writes that it is centrally concerned with a Nietzschean question: the question of philosophy's *authority*, in particular when it comes to telling us how to live (1990, p. XIX). Some ethical theories seem implicitly committed to the idea that philosophy has *everything* to tell us about how to live. This Williams rejects. But the question then is *how much* philosophy has to tell us, and as critical as Williams may be of philosophy's ambitions in this regard, his answer in *ELP* is certainly not *nothing*. The book even suggests some things that philosophy might say. But what Williams emphatically insists on, both in the book and in his later reflection on it, is that the question needs to be taken more seriously than it has been.

Given the difficulty of Williams' still under-explored book, the appearance of *Ethics Beyond the Limits*, a collection of new essays on *ELP* edited by Sophie Grace Chappell and Marcel van Ackeren, is particularly welcome. The collection grew out of a conference devoted to reflecting on the book not five, but thirty years after its appearance. Yet the pieces do not feel too occasional, and together they are remarkably successful in drawing out and disentangling the book's different themes. Also included is a reprint of Adrian W. Moore's authoritative chapter-by-chapter summary of *ELP*, a useful *aide-mémoire* for those already familiar with the book, but an invaluable resource for newcomers, because it alerts readers to the extreme density of Williams' deceptively simple prose. (I remember my own incredulity when, consulting Moore's summary, I realized just how much I had managed to miss on my first reading of *ELP*'s brief opening chapter.) In this as in other respects a thoughtful assembly of many of *ELP*'s most illuminating commentators and critics, *Ethics Beyond the Limits* is set to become an indispensable companion volume to Williams' challenging classic.

In the opening contribution to the volume, 'Lonely in Littlemore: confidence in *Ethics*

*and the Limits of Philosoph*y', Simon Blackburn indicates how *ELP* might have profited from drawing more on the Scottish sentimentalists, particularly Hume and Smith. Writing about the 'confidence' that sustains our use of thick concepts according to Williams, Blackburn argues that we should look to Humean vindicatory genealogies to strengthen that confidence. Genealogical reflection can not only explain, but also justify the practice of using a concept by showing how that practice helps us avoid what anyone would want to avoid, such as insecurity, violence, and chaos. 'If initially you are inclined to think of property as theft, or of promises as hot air, the Humean genealogy of each stands in your way', Blackburn writes, and these genealogies can boost your 'confidence that we don't just happen to do those things, but that they are adaptive and that we would be poorer without them' (p. 34). Had *ELP* been more sensitive to the vindicatory potential of genealogies in a Humean vein, Blackburn suggests, the book might have been less slash-burn-uproot-and-sow-with-salt in its approach to the morality system. That would have been an improvement in Blackburn's eyes, because he shares the Scotsmen's 'sound and grounded and decent confidence in the core morality system' (p. 35), and points to Peter Strawson as someone who has more recently shown that blame and other components of the morality system 'are not disposable add-ons, making a peculiar and parochial practice called "the morality system", which we might do well to be without' (pp. 33–34). Of course, as Blackburn is well aware, Williams himself later harnessed the confidence-boosting power of vindicatory genealogies in *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), offering a genealogy that precisely aimed to strengthen our confidence in our intrinsic valuing of truth. In its employment of a fictional 'State of Nature' and in its vindicatory upshot, moreover, that genealogy might be thought to owe more to Hume's genealogies than to Nietzsche's historical and predominantly critical genealogies—although a detailed comparison of the genealogical methods of Hume, Nietzsche, and Williams reveals a complex web of interconnections (Queloz 2021). But even in *ELP*, one might note in Williams' defence, there are thumbnail sketches of vindicatory genealogies of the conceptual building-blocks of the morality system. In Chapter 10, for example, he offers an initially vindicatory explanation of why it makes good sense for human beings to develop the concept of obligation for various purposes, and he points out, in a similarly conciliatory spirit, that the institution of blame *can* work coherently to the extent that it attempts less than the morality system demands of it. This suggests that 'the morality system' refers, not to any

ethical consciousness articulated in terms of ideas of obligation, voluntariness, blame, and guilt, but to a particular elaboration and configuration of these ideas, which may well have taken more benign forms before they were harnessed and pressed into a specially demanding shape by the morality system. Williams writes:

> In order to see around the intimidating structure that morality has made out of the idea of obligation, we need an account of what obligations are when they are rightly seen as merely one kind of ethical consideration among others. This account will help to lead us away from morality's special notion of moral obligation, and eventually out of the morality system altogether. (*ELP*, p. 202)

Part of what Williams invites us to do in *ELP*, then, is to step out of the system by recovering alternative and notably less demanding conceptions of obligation, voluntariness, blame, and guilt. So not only do we find vindicatory genealogies strengthening confidence in Williams' work; we also find them in the right places to meet Blackburn's second concern, that we ought not to jettison the building-blocks of the morality system altogether.

In 'Hume's optimism and Williams's pessimism: from "Science of Man" to genealogical critique', Paul Russell pursues the question of Williams' relationship to Hume. During a seminar in Leuven in 1998, Williams declared that he used to have great admiration for Hume, but that he had come to think of Hume as suffering from a 'somewhat terminal degree of optimism' (1999, p. 256). Russell carefully teases out the various respects in which Williams indeed came to diverge from Hume, but also shows that this gradual distancing falls far short of complete repudiation. Where Hume betrays an optimism that sets him apart from Williams is in clinging to the hope that reflection on morality would deliver good news, and that the virtuous could be assured of their safety from fortune's play. Hume, less impressed than Williams by moral diversity, was markedly more confident that genealogical reflection on our values would present them in a flattering light and reveal a connection between virtue and happiness. And yet, as Russell is able to show using a detailed taxonomy of the morality system, if we sort philosophers into advocates and critics of that system, Hume must still be counted firmly among the critics.

Marcel van Ackeren, in his 'Williams (on) doing history of philosophy: a case study on *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*', examines Williams' use of the history of philosophy in

ELP. Part of the point of drawing on ancient Greek philosophy and Kant in the way that Williams does, van Ackeren argues, is to achieve an *alienation effect*: to make the familiar seem strange and the strange familiar. The voices of past philosophers which can precisely *not* be heard as contributing to contemporary debates alert us to the unquestioned assumptions these debates rest on, thereby allowing us to critically distance ourselves from these assumptions and to familiarise ourselves with genuine alternatives to them. That is the salutary effect of philosophy that is *untimely*, as Nietzsche put it. Using ancient Greek philosophy in particular, *ELP* invites us to change the fundamental questions we ask about ethical issues. Socrates' question, 'How should one live?', is offered as an alternative to the Kantian question, 'What should I do?'. This ancient question, which Williams also renders as 'How has one most reason to live?', asks not just after the moral obligations that bear on my voluntary actions, but invites all kinds of considerations. This makes the Kantian question look narrow-minded and shows up its questionable presuppositions. As van Ackeren brings out, this use of the history of philosophy differs both from the *dialogue model* whereby the voices of yore are treated as having something to say to us now and from the *antiquarian approach* whereby the figures of the past are situated within their own historical setting and not treated as answering our present questions at all. Van Ackeren then also contrasts *ELP*'s use of history to achieve an alienation effect with Williams' later method of genealogy. While both uses of history trace back to Nietzsche and aim to reveal the contingency of our present conceptual framework, van Ackeren argues, the alienation effect can be achieved without genealogizing and constitutes a method in its own right. On this basis, he advocates a 'methodological pluralism' according to which the alienation effect and genealogy can take their place in our methodological repertoire alongside the dialogue model and the antiquarian approach.

In 'The good life and the unity of the virtues: some reflections upon Williams on Aristotle', Anthony Price then takes a closer look at Williams' relation to Aristotle in particular. First, Price labours to bring out some respects in which Aristotle is perhaps closer to Williams than the latter allows, in particular in their shared conviction that philosophy should not start from the amoralist, but from people who are already within the ethical life. Second, Price argues that although Aristotle's *ergon* argument may look like an attempt to find external reasons for virtue, it can be made compatible with Williams' internalism about reasons by casting it as an argument to the effect that even the

vicious have some natural inclination to act virtuously. Where Aristotle and Williams prove irreconcilable, according to Price, is with regard to the thesis of the unity of the virtues, which Price proceeds to defend against Williams' criticism.

In 'Humanism and cruelty in Williams', Lorenzo Greco draws on a wide range of texts to argue that a key to Williams' view of the role of ethics in politics is the importance he attributes to cruelty and suffering: a fundamental problem of politics is the human vulnerability to suffering at the hands of others, and a fundamental ethical solution to that problem is the human sentimental receptivity to suffering. By engaging people's imaginative capacities and rendering them more sensitive to the individuality of specific persons, Greco argues, this receptivity can be extended, and this is one reason why Williams advocated the practice of philosophy as a humanistic discipline that draws on other disciplines to foster a better understanding of human beings. But viewing Williams' oeuvre through the lens of suffering also reveals an under-appreciated facet of his humanism, Greco contends—a humanism centred on human beings' exposure and sensitivity to cruelty.

Sophie Grace Chappell's contribution, 'Beauty, duty, and booty: an essay in ethical reappropriation', takes up a line of thought that *ELP* labours to make room for but never gets around to developing, namely the idea that besides moral normativity, there is also *aesthetic* normativity. (In interviews, Williams often mentioned his early interest in conflicts between the aesthetic and the moral and in the artist as antinomian figure.) As Chappell notes in her densely argued and rich discussion, aesthetic normativity differs from moral normativity in several respects: it tends to be less demanding than moral normativity; it does not claim to override every other kind of demand in the way that moral demands claim to do; and it is not categorical. But besides guiding our passive seeing, feeling, and judging, aesthetic normativity can nonetheless also guide our actions, in particular when we produce rather than consume art. Our own society may place most people in the passive role of consuming art produced only by a few, but the balance in older societies was more favourable to aesthetic agency and its norms (while Hume wrote 'Of the Standard of Taste' and Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Aristotle still wrote *Peri Poietikes*). On the Neo-Aristotelian picture that Chappell develops, aesthetic normativity is the normativity of a particular *technê*, subordinated to other *technai* in a hierarchy whose overall end is the living of a good life. If aesthetic normativity is thus subordinated

to ends that are less conditional than those of aesthetic pursuits, it is no surprise that it should be less demanding, overriding, and categorical than the normativity that flows from ends we necessarily and indispensably pursue. But Chappell then seeks to recuperate or reappropriate from ancient Greek thought the idea that *to kalon*—the beautiful—can also be a reason for action *outside* artistic practice. We sometimes go for the beautiful gesture because it is beautiful, and refrain from doing something because it is an ugly thing to do. And Chappell suggests that aesthetic normativity is also woven more broadly into ideas of noble, fine, admirable, and virtuous action. The duty to do the virtuous thing does not always derive from the eudaimonic benefits it brings. As Chappell puts it, duty can arise from beauty as well as booty.

In 'Gauguin's lucky escape: moral luck and the morality system', Gerald Lang takes a fresh look at Williams' essay on moral luck and works through six different interpretations of the famous Gauguin example before considering how Williams' thoughts on moral luck inform his assault on the morality system. The import of the Gauguin case for *ELP*'s critique of the morality system, Lang argues, is that it illustrates how practical necessity, which the morality system encourages us to understand exclusively in terms of moral obligation, can also take a non-moral form while nonetheless expressing a justifiable concern. Moreover, since it is a matter of luck whether Gauguin ends up being blameworthy for acting on this practical necessity—it is contingent upon whether he succeeds as a painter—the morality system leaves us vulnerable to moral luck despite its promise to the contrary. On Lang's view, the Gauguin case thus functions as a Trojan horse, taking an idea the morality system regards as central to itself, and using it to undermine the system from within.

Geraldine Ng examines Williams' relativism in her 'The irrelativism of distance'. On the common interpretation of Williams' 'relativism of distance', Ng argues, moral appraisal is appropriate only in real confrontations with another social world and inappropriate in merely notional confrontations (where a real confrontation is one with a system of beliefs that is a *real option* for one in the sense that one could *go over* to it). But is this the right interpretation of the real/notional distinction? On the 'uncommon interpretation' that Ng proposes, a clue to a better interpretation is Williams' remark that 'to stand in merely notional confrontation is to lack the relation to our concerns that alone gives any point or substance to appraisal' (1981, p. 142). On Ng's interpretation, that relation to our concerns

is not a matter of 'going over' to another way of life, but of having an informed understanding of and genuinely caring about the way of life in question. Once the relativism of distance is recast in these moral-psychological terms, we can say of the eponymous character in Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog*, for example, that *pace* Williams, Ghost Dog's concerns are such that the ethos of the medieval samurai is a real option for him, in the sense that it is one he can genuinely and authentically adopt. With the focus thus shifted to questions of authenticity, it would be interesting to connect this reading back to Williams' discussion of stable concerns, integrity, and authenticity in *Truth and Truthfulness*.

Continuing the theme of relativism and moral appraisal across time, Regina Rini argues in 'Epoch relativism and our moral hopelessness' that just as we often condemn past practices as monstrous, our distant descendants will likely come to see us as morally hopeless. This realization gives us reason to endorse something like Williams' relativism of distance, Rini claims, because when forced to choose between the belief that we are morally hopeless in the eyes of future people and the belief that there are objective moral truths that hold across time, we should abandon the latter. This argument is modelled on Williams' remarks about the 'queasy liberal' (2005, p. 67) who is made uncomfortable by liberalism's implication that all the people in the past who failed to be liberals must have been poorly informed, superstitious, stupid, or bad. Realizing that this is a foolish thing to think about most people who ever lived, the liberal is driven either to doubt the truth of liberalism or to abandon the universalist belief that liberalism, if correct, must apply to everyone. And just as Williams urges liberals to give up the universalist belief in view of the moral diversity of the past, Rini urges us to give up the belief in timeless objective moral truths in view of our anticipated condemnation by future people.

In 'The inevitability of inauthenticity: Bernard Williams and practical alienation', Nicholas Smyth forcefully questions whether Williams, even in his purportedly vindicatory and confidence-strengthening reflections in *Truth and Truthfulness*, ever managed to put back in its box the scepticism about ethics that he unleashed in *ELP*. Smyth argues that the kind of practical alienation from our own projects and values that Williams accused ethical theories of engendering is in fact inevitable. Even Williams' own later reflections on the value of the dispositions of accuracy and sincerity end up instrumentalizing these dispositions and alienating us from them. This notably weakens

Williams' critique of ethical theories by leaving him vulnerable to a companion in guilt argument. But, as Smyth himself asks in closing: 'What would *non-alienating* reflection on our values look like, and would we even want such a thing?' (p. 204). Perhaps the real problem, when all our values are seen inevitably to fail to meet a certain standard, is not so much with our values as with the standard we bring to bear on them.

Roger Teichmann, in 'How should one live? Williams on practical deliberation and reasons for acting', critically examines Williams' picture of practical deliberation and reasons for action. In particular, Teichmann takes issue with Williams' claim that 'desiring to do something is of course a reason for doing it' (*ELP*, p. 21). Teichmann's argument is that in deliberating about whether to do something, one is *ipso facto* deliberating *whether to desire* to do it, and therefore one's deliberation must not, except in special cases, take one's desire as given (a truly paralyzing pattern of argument if allowed to apply equally to each successive link in the chain of reasons supporting one's desire to do anything). Teichmann then moves to consider Williams' internalism about reasons and traces it to a type of causalism, namely the view that actions can only be explained by appealing to their efficient causes. Finding this causalist thesis untenable, Teichmann concludes that we should reject the Williamsian picture of reasons for action and its concomitant subordination of practical reason to subjective desire, and that if we do so, the Aristotelian project of grounding the ethical life in a notion of human well-being looks more promising than Williams allows.

Similar themes are addressed in David Cockburn's contribution, 'Practical deliberation and the first person'. Against a view of ethics as something essentially impersonal, Williams insisted that practical deliberation was radically first-personal: while deliberation about what I should *believe* can equally well take the form of asking what *anyone* should believe, deliberation about what I should *do* does not admit of the same substitution. Cockburn considers and casts doubt on various elaborations of that claim. It is implausible, for instance, to maintain that all reasons for actions involve some form of self-reference: neither *I* nor *my* valuings and desires need explicitly figure in the reasons functioning as premises in my practical syllogisms at all. So is Williams' claim perhaps that I must figure, not in the premises, but in the *conclusion* to my practical reasoning? Only if we suppose that the conclusion to a piece of practical reasoning must be a *judgement*, Cockburn maintains; if we allow that the conclusion might take the form of an

action, there need be no sense in which that action involves reference to me. And perhaps we should even say that 'I ought to do it' *expresses* rather than reports my stance towards an action, so that it is no more a statement *about* me than doing something is. Rather than focus on the alleged first-personal character of practical deliberation, Cockburn concludes, we should focus on the respects in which it is second- and inter-personal. But one wonders whether Williams was not getting at a different idea—one that has less to do with self-reference than with bringing one's personal attachments, concerns, and loyalties to bear on practical deliberation. When constructing a scientific theory about the world, bringing my personal attachments to bear would be a distortion to be avoided, as the theory is only incidentally constructed from my perspective, and should, if true, be the same for other people. But in practical deliberation, bringing my personal attachments, concerns, and loyalties to bear is surely not a distortion, since the evaluation is not just *incidentally* mine. As Williams puts it in 'The Point of View of the Universe': 'my life, my action, is quite irreducibly mine, and to require that it is at best a *derivative* conclusion that it should be lived from the perspective that happens to be mine is an extraordinary misunderstanding' (1995, p. 170).

Finally, Catherine Wilson, in 'Moral authority and the limits of philosophy', tackles one of the main themes of *ELP*, namely the question of how much moral authority ethical theories should be granted over our lives. She reconstructs Williams' case against ethical theories as an argument to the effect that ethical theories will lack authority over us insofar as they fail to tie in with our motivations in the right way. Kantianism or utilitarianism are in this respect like Owen Wingrave's father in Williams' well-known example, marshalling reasons that Owen simply does not have it in him to recognize as reasons *for him*. But this leads Wilson to wonder how morality can continue to perform its function of protecting the weak from the strong once Williams' argument is widely internalized. In particular, Williams' scepticism towards ethical theory's categorical authority gives rise to what Wilson calls the 'exceptionalist threat': someone might conclude that given their extraordinary motivational set, morality does not apply to them. Seeking to defuse that threat on Williams' behalf, Wilson proposes that even without ethical theories, we can still identify and avoid wrongdoing by looking to the best condemnatory or vindicatory narratives that we could tell in thick but truthful terms. Confidently making a moral assessment then involves being confident that our value-laden narrative of what happened

cannot be superseded by a better countervailing narrative. On this account, we can still claim to 'have made genuine epistemic progress in abandoning the tribal and class-based perspectives of our ancestors and taking on more generous forms of altruism' (p. 246), for the moral terms we today are disposed to use in telling such an evaluative narrative differ from those of the ancient world. Admittedly, Wilson notes, they do so partly as a result of the interventions of the likes of Kant or Bentham, who contributed to making us see 'what was wrong and limited in ancient ethics, its pride and indifference to the weak and the numerous' (p. 246). But what Williams compellingly argues, according to Wilson, is that even the best evaluative narratives we can now tell, historically indebted as they may be to supposedly aperspectival ethical theorizing, remain tied to our perspectives and draw their authority from their connection to our internal reasons.

It will be clear even from this brief overview that *ELP* continues to offer many rewarding veins to mine. But it was not always obvious that this would be so. Confronted in an interview with the routinely raised objection that *ELP* was a 'ferociously destructive' and purely 'negative' work, Williams responded:

> I don't see it as negative, I see it hopefully as liberating. It seems to me people get themselves in situations in which they feel they have no right to have certain kinds of moral thoughts because they don't fit in with some very impoverished theoretical picture of what constitutes moral thought. Roughly, if it isn't about obligation or consequences, it doesn't count. That's not the way most people think most of the time about most things. (Davies 1996, p. 15)

In view of Williams' hope for his book to prove liberating, *Ethics Beyond the Limits* is aptly titled, and judging by the breadth, curiosity, and adventurousness displayed by the essays in this new collection, that hope has not been in vain.

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