**Bernard Williams: Ethics from a human point of view**

*Examining Bernard Williams’s attempt to make sense of ethics, without a moral system*

By Paul Russell

https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/bernard-williams-ethics-human-point-view/

**W**hen Bernard Williams died in June 2003, the obituary in The Times said that “he will be remembered as the most brilliant and most important British moral philosopher of his time”. It goes on to make clear that Williams was far from the dry, awkward, detached academic philosopher of caricature.

Born in Essex in 1929, Williams had an extraordinary and, in some respects, glamorous life. He not only enjoyed a stellar academic career – holding a series of distinguished posts at Oxford, UCL, Cambridge and Berkeley – but was also a public figure in British political and cultural life. He played, for example, a leading role in several high-profile government committees and reports, and served for almost two decades on the board of the English National Opera. He had, moreover, an easy confidence and charm, a lucidity of expression, and a sharp and, at times, acerbic wit (which could alarm both friends and foes alike).

Although these achievements and qualities are impressive, what he will be remembered for chiefly is his significant contribution to philosophy, which spanned a wide spectrum of topics. It is in the field of ethics, in particular, that his contributions are of the most lasting importance. And yet there is a real sense in which he remains a rather enigmatic figure – and the interpretation of his work continues to be a matter of considerable debate.

Two factors are especially relevant here. The first is that Williams wrote in a highly compressed and elusive manner, a feature that became more pronounced in his later work. Related to this, many of Williams’s most influential ideas and contributions were presented not in his books but in various papers and essays. Unlike some other major figures of this period, Williams has no single work that we could all agree represents his best or most important thinking. (A case of obvious contrast is John Rawls and his A Theory of Justice, 1971.) The fact that his philosophical ideas and work take this form has encouraged some critics to present Williams’s contributions as largely “negative” in character, fragmented and lacking unity. These criticisms are mistaken and reveal a failure to grasp the complexity and subtlety of Williams’s thought. Showing why this is so, however, involves advancing a number of perhaps controversial claims.

In an interview that he gave near the end of his life, Williams says that most of his efforts in philosophy are focused on this point: “to make some sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can’t have an idealized version” (Williams’s emphasis). He pursues this fundamental theme by way of his two-sided critique of what he calls “the morality system”. It is two-sided because not only does it aim to discredit the forms of “idealization” that the morality system has encouraged, it also seeks to provide an account of what we are left with when we discard or abandon its assumptions and aspirations. His central text for this programme is *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). Understood this way, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* constitutes Williams’s pivotal work, in part because it is his most ambitious and wide ranging. Beyond that, however, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* both brings together the diverse threads and strands of his earlier work – much of which is critical in character – and lays the foundation for his later work, particularly his last two books: *Shame and Necessity* (1993) and *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). All these contributions “hang together” (to use Williams’s own expression). In the final analysis, it is not possible to have a complete understanding of the central concerns of Williams’s philosophy without putting Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy at the heart of it.

We must qualify these observations by pointing out what Williams does not propose to offer his readers. He has, in the first place, no ambition to develop a “philosophical system”. To the extent that he offers an “outlook”, it is one that embodies “a scepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics”. What he is especially sceptical about is “moral theory”, understood as an effort to provide secure philosophical foundations for the morality system. Although many of Williams’s critics take it to be a failing of his philosophy that he offers no substitute for the various “theories” that he rejects, he is clear that it is possible to make sense of human ethical life without relying on “moral theory” of any kind or any of the illusions and distortions it encourages.

What, then, is “the morality system”? Its most fundamental feature, as Williams describes it, is a special notion of “obligation” that aims to generate a sharp boundary between “moral” and “non-moral” considerations, giving the former overriding weight that uniquely serve as “practical necessities” for all rational agents. This sense of obligation is intimately related to concepts of voluntariness and blame. It is a core feature of the morality system that agents who voluntarily violate its demands are subject to blame and retribution. With these concepts in place, we are invited to see ourselves as members of a community of rational, free agents governed by demands that apply equally to all – what Williams memorably describes as “the notional republic”. The moral community, so ordered, generates a kind of “harmony” whereby our human needs and interests neatly dovetail together with the claims of morality itself. One especially significant feature of this “peculiar institution” is that it transcends luck and aims to ensure that human existence can be “ultimately just”. In this sense, there is a “purity” to morality that expresses a strong degree of optimism about the human predicament. Although Williams does not deny that morality, so understood, has been in some respects a constructive or positive influence (for example, in promoting the ends of justice), it is, nevertheless, fundamentally untruthful about our ethical predicament and situation. We would, Williams maintains, be “better off without it”.

While “morality” is not “an invention of philosophers”, it is intimately bound up with philosophy and its particular way of “theorizing”. The aim of “theory” is to provide us with a general test for the “correctness” of our ethical beliefs and principles (or to show that this cannot be done). The paradigmatic representative of the morality system in this respect is Kant, although utilitarianism is, at least, a “marginal member”. Among the features of ethical theory to which Williams specifically objects are its propensity to reduction and denial of diversity, along with its efforts to compress various ethical considerations and concepts into “one pattern”. All theorizing of this kind conceals the messy and problematic features of ethical life. It also diminishes the resources available to us for critical, ethical reflection. In general, Williams is “deeply sceptical” about “philosophical ethics” conceived in these terms. Although we can certainly think about ethics in a critical and reflective way, according to Williams, “philosophy can do little to determine how we should do so”.

The fundamental reason why moral theories fail, on this view, is that they do not provide an adequate conception of moral agents as individual and distinct persons who have a life of their own to lead. (It is no coincidence that Williams made significant contributions to problems of personal identity, as this issue is of central concern for him.) For Williams, each person should be understood as a situated and embodied being with a wide range of particular attachments and projects. It is these attachments and projects that provide life with whatever meaning and significance it has for the agent. Without them we have no reason to want our lives to continue – and, failing this, the very condition of our thinking about morality would simply evaporate.

In contrast with this, “moral theory” insists that we begin our investigations from some God-like, impartial and impersonal perspective – such as that described by Henry Sidgwick as “the point of view of the universe”. This starting point for thinking about ethics is further encouraged when moral theory models itself after science, with an aspiration to secure some form of knowledge and truth about ethics. We are also encouraged to find value and obligation as somehow embedded in “the fabric of the world”, as seen from the same “absolute conception” that is available to science. When we follow any model of this general kind, Williams maintains, morality simply collapses under its own philosophical weight.

Perhaps the most disturbing and destructive aspect of “morality” and the forms of “theory” on which it depends is that it transforms the demands of ethics from an important part of human life into the whole of human life – leaving little or nothing for whatever else we may find valuable and worthwhile. Where “morality” comes to dominate, it tends to consume all of human life. And so we need a very different starting place for our reflections about ethics and its proper place.

A better place to start, Williams suggests, is with Socrates’ question: how should we live? In order to answer this question we must draw on a set of motivations and interests that are richer and more diverse than those provided by moral theory. The motivations and interests available to us must be those of a person situated in a particular historical and social location, an individual with a particular identity. It is only from this perspective that we can make proper sense of the force and weight of ethical considerations and the extent to which they can or cannot be integrated with other concerns we may have – keeping in mind that not all (important) claims and interests in human life are ethical claims and interests. In taking this approach, however, we must not expect that nothing will change – or that there will be no costs involved in abandoning “morality”.

The alternative to trying to make sense of ethics from “the point of view of the universe” or some analogue of that is to consider ethics from a human point of view – which is, as Williams wryly notes, “not an absurd thing for human beings to do”. To a considerable extent, Williams’s critique of “moral theory” is based on the moral psychology provided by David Hume. This includes, among its most important elements, an emphasis on the role of desire and emotion in moral life. According to Williams, it is our ethical dispositions themselves – as constituted by the matrix of our attitudes and sentiments – that serve as “the ultimate supports of ethical value”. Many Humeans regard this as enough to sustain our existing ethical commitments and practices and assume that nothing much needs to change when this is made transparent to us. Williams finds this response too complacent. For him this Humean response underestimates the importance of ethical and cultural diversity and overestimates the uniformity of the general sentiments of mankind.

Although our shared human nature may well demand a commitment to some form of ethical and social life, it radically underdetermines what the options are. Faced with ethical diversity and the modes of “confrontation” that accompany it, we are liable to lose the moral knowledge that comes with belonging to a society where our normative and descriptive concepts are so fused together that they structure our sense of reality itself. To this extent the growth of reflective consciousness is not entirely positive and involves what some might experience as a kind of “Fall”. What is lost in these circumstances is belief in some objective grounding for our values. We are, moreover, forced to abandon the hope that we can make “ultimate sense” of the way in which ethical life, in its various forms, neatly and reliably integrates with human needs and interests of a broader kind. In light of reflections of this kind, the world must be viewed as a less accommodating place for those who seek an answer as to how they should live. Our response to this situation may well be one of disenchantment.

What does not follow from all this, Williams argues, is any form of nihilism. On the contrary, even without any “objective foundations of ethical life” we still have basic desires and interests to structure and direct our reflections about how to live. The stance we take here is not one that rests on either knowledge or arbitrary decision, but is rather a matter of what Williams calls (reflective) confidence. Confidence, he suggests, is essentially a social phenomenon and it is fostered and supported by means of certain forms of social institutions and relevant forms of upbringing. Most importantly, however, it is best secured by means of public discussion guided by rational argument (which does not itself demand or require objective foundations). While there is “no route back from reflectiveness” – and this has its costs – we have no reason to collapse into nihilistic despair.

Williams is, of course, well aware that this response will do little to reassure those who seek to satisfy the aspirations of the morality system. As such, the position that he takes leaves plenty of room for pessimism. Retaining ethical confidence is not, he points out, a matter of optimism but comes closer to what Nietzsche described as “the pessimism of strength”. What Williams emphasizes most, particularly in his later work *Shame and Necessity* (1993), is the loss of our belief in “harmony”. What makes his later work different, however, is that Williams takes what he describes as a “historicist turn” in order to elaborate on these important points. In *Shame and Necessity* his discussion focuses primarily on the ideas of the ancient Greeks, particularly Homer and the tragedians. Unlike the illusory understandings of the concepts of freedom and moral responsibility encouraged by the morality system, Williams explains, the Greeks acknowledged the extent to which human life – including ethical life – is shaped by luck and contingency. While we cannot return to their world, there is, in this respect, much that we can learn from them.

Williams ends his study on a related (dark) note, concerning the lack of “harmony” in the world. The question we encounter when we consider the works of the ancient Greeks, he suggests, “is whether or not a given writer or philosophy believes that, beyond some things that human beings have themselves shaped, there is anything at all that is intrinsically shaped to human interests, in particular to human beings’ ethical interests”. Greek tragedy has no room for a world that supposes that, if we understood it correctly, we could learn how to be in harmony with it. With the collapse of the illusions that “morality” fosters, we are now well positioned to recognize that our ethical situation is much closer to that which is portrayed in the works of the Greek tragedians.

Do these conclusions leave us trapped in a world stripped of all optimism and without hope? Williams makes very clear in his closing remarks in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that this is not his view, and much of his later philosophical work is devoted to elaborating on this point. One vital source of hope still available to us is that of truth. In *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002) Williams employs a genealogical method to account for the value of truth by way of an account of the twin virtues of truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity. The immediate target of these reflections and observations are those “deniers”, like Richard Rorty, who question whether there can be such a thing as “objective truth” and what value it might have. Another source of hope available to us is to be found in politics. In his posthumous collection *In the Beginning was the Deed* (2008), which includes a number of his later papers, Williams seeks to show that, whatever the failures of the Enlightenment, there is no reason to abandon our respect or hopes for freedom and social justice. What these values and ideals do not need, however, are political philosophies that are simply extensions of moral theory applied to the realm of politics. In place of projects of this kind Williams suggests that we embrace a form of “political realism” as a way of thinking about and justifying our institutions and practices. An approach of this kind would place proper emphasis on the relevance of historical circumstances, the need for a credible understanding of human psychology, and, in particular, it would take “the first question” of politics to be about securing conditions of safety, trust and cooperation. Suffice it to say that Williams’s discussion of all these matters is even more pertinent in the present state of the world than it was when first written.

One particular danger when considering Williams’s thought is to approach his work on a piecemeal basis (practical reason/ moral luck/ utilitarianism/ etc). Viewed in that way, it comes across as haphazard and lacking direction. The truth, however, is the opposite: the individual contributions that Williams made all relate to his wider and more ambitious programme. Taken as a whole, Williams’s philosophical contribution is greater than the sum of its parts – a point that deserves some emphasis.

What, then, are we to say about Williams’s legacy? Perhaps the most powerful source of dissatisfaction with Williams’s philosophy is that he does not provide “good news” of any kind. Delivering good news, however, is not something that Williams is interested in, since it involves sacrificing philosophy’s commitment to the value of truth. Williams remains confident, nevertheless, that we can lead worthwhile lives and that there are values and pursuits that matter and that can and should be protected and preserved. Beyond this, as Williams points out himself, an author’s legacy depends in large measure on what his or her readers make of the work. Like so much else in life, an author’s legacy is subject to luck.

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[December 2018]