

Focus

The Legacy of Bernard Williams' Ethics
and the Limits of Philosophy

Preface

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This year marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, the work that definitively places Bernard Williams among the most influential philosophers of our times. As Richard Norman writes in his review: “Bernard Williams’ book is better read not as an introduction to ethics, but as an attempt to take stock of the present state of the subject. As such, it is a splendid piece of work” (Norman *Times Higher Education Supplement*). This Special Issue seeks to present some of the ‘refreshing’ and wide-ranging questions Bernard Williams posed to moral thought in and through his philosophical works.

Williams’ moral philosophy offers an important challenge to current ethical debates: the claim about the concreteness and finitude of agents whose life is meaningfully vulnerable and whose ethical ideas are the result of a complex interaction of reflection and experiences. Specifically, Williams seeks to retrieve the notion of *experience* as morally significant to an account of agency and subjectivity. This acknowledgment goes hand in hand with considering the concrete experience of individuals as a standard of adequacy for moral theorizing itself. Such a claim appears to be at least controversial in the philosophical agenda of the early 1960s – years that were deeply suspicious of the use of psychological arguments for analytic inquiries as well as critical of any substantive claim about subjectivity (Williams 1985; Anscombe 1958; Murdoch 1956). At the basis of this rejection lies the purported conviction, mostly defended by Utilitarian and Neo-Kantian accounts, that moral agency fully coincides with rational agency. Correspondingly, ethical theory is conceived as a rationalistic enterprise modeled on an allegedly scientific view of reflection and objectivity.

According to Elijah Millgram “the unintended lesson of Williams’ work is that we have made an astonishing mistake about who we are.” (Millgram 2009: 142) This insightful comment suggests that philosophers of the past half-century have gone astray in their most fundamental agenda. They over-simplify the very nature of ethical inquiry, and are blind to the distorting consequences

of their methodology, i.e., the reduction of the ethical resources to few impersonal ideas. In a famous remark Williams wrote:

Theory typically uses the assumption that we probably have too many ethical ideas, some of which may well turn out to be mere prejudices. Our major problem now is actually that we have not too many but too few, and we need to cherish as many as we can (Williams 1985: 117).

It is precisely in this respect that Williams offers a challenging alternative to moral theorizing. Despite taking moral reflection just as a bankrupt intellectual enterprise he takes deeply seriously the idea of developing a plausible and rigorous methodology for moral thought. Throughout his philosophical career, and most notably in *ELP*, Williams focused on the limits of the objectivist strategies in ethical theory. His main claim is that the way ethical theories account for objectivity, as a distinctive mark of practical necessity, stands in stark contrast to the agent's own experience of moral objectivity. Williams' conclusion is that the project of providing morality with an objective foundation is bound to fail, suggesting that a more promising way to include reflection about experiences and the phenomenology of ethical life in philosophical reflection must be found.

Williams challenges what he defines to be moral theories' restricted view of moral experience and moral agency by challenging the fundamental view inherited from Richard M. Hare's perspective that:

- (i) moral philosophy is (roughly) a logical or linguistic subject;
- (ii) it provides foundations;
- (iii) it helps us to reflect clearly on our moral thoughts, and in particular – because of (i) – to think about what we mean;
- (iv) when we do so, we discover (ii) (Williams 2006: 83).

These themes are closely related, since Williams's effort to retrieve a more complex conceptual framework for ethical life entails a correlative shift in our view about philosophical activity and in our philosophical thought about experience. Pointing to the question of skeptical threats to ethical considerations, he argues that philosophers have overestimated the need for *justification* and the search for an Archimedean point; indeed as Williams argued, "the ethical involves more, a whole network of considerations" (Williams 1985: 25), and the key to his reflection is to situate ethics within a general view on human experience. This allows the moral domain to be expanded to include cognitive activity that is not restricted to *deliberative model* of moral reasoning and, in particular, not to be restricted to the appeal to faculties, process or psychological states that are involved *only* in moral cases.

Regarding this point, Williams' most important achievement is that of showing how this appeal is indeed deeply problematic, emphasizing the many ways in which experiences and life can emotionally and reflexively touch and be significant from the point of view of an agent; all these thoughts and feelings about experience are, in Williams' view, constitutively connected to our ideas about agency. This is part of the reason why we should reject not only the appeal to special faculty of *intuitions* that gives us direct access to moral truth, but also the idea that moral psychology involves a distinct type of will or a form of self-consciousness not required in other cases of action. In his important discussion of Nietzsche's minimalism about psychology, Williams asks:

'How much should our accounts of distinctively moral activity add to our accounts of other human activity?' it [the minimalist] replies 'as little as possible', and the more that some moral understanding of human beings seems to call on materials that specially serve the purposes of morality certain conceptions of the will, for instance - the more reason we have to ask whether there may not be a more illuminating account that rests only on conceptions that we use anyway elsewhere (Williams 1995: 68).

In her contribution to this Special Focus, Catherine Wilson takes up Williams' internalism about practical reasoning, stressing the claim that the adequacy required for practical thought must by necessity be based on some *relevant empirical information* about the agent; that is to say, certain aspects of our motivational architecture with respect to our values and reasons are matters of local empirical fact and cannot be discovered by the agent through simple reflection. However, contrary to what Williams and other internalists appear to claim, Wilson maintains that accounting for our *motivational set* 'empirically' rather than 'idealistically' does not necessarily entail discounting the fact that 'there are practical reasons that apply to but do not belong to the extendible motivational sets of their targets'. While clearly acknowledging the differences between moral and practical deliberation, a plausible doctrine of moral agency should resist 'exceptionalism' and codify some version of universalisation as essential to the capacity for subjective, free or spontaneous insight into moral requirements.

This issue has resonated deeply with contemporary moral philosophy and theory of agency. Authors sympathetic to Williams' concern for the concreteness of our psychological dispositions and attentive to the normative dimension of this background rightly points to the complexity of human practical standpoint as part of the cognitive resources we draw on in building our ethical sensitivity and our practical responses to situations (Wallace 2011; Heuer and Lang eds. 2012; Russell 2013). Rather than prompting us to embrace a unifying psychological explanation based on the *observation* of our responses

and conducts, Williams invites us to make sense of the ‘texture’ of our own experiences as agent, starting from the consideration that:

The notion of action itself is less than transparent, but the integrity of action, the agent’s genuine presence in it, [have to] be preserved [...]. The process by which we can come to see this may be complex and painful enough for us to feel, not just that we have learned a truth, but that we have been relieved of a burden (Williams 1996: 74).

The ‘burden’ Williams is pointing to is the result of the paradoxical combination of a moralized vision of human psychology combined with a reductionist tendency to consider human life as the object of some scientific truth to be discovered. In doing so, Williams seeks to defend the value of human subjectivity as irreducible and non-instrumental, and to emphasize that all attitudes related to one’s evaluative perspective exhibit a conceptual relation to *concerns*. Christopher Grau’s contribution to this Focus defends Williams’ thesis that among things that we value because they *matter to us* there is our species membership. Recently, philosophers from very different domains, e.g., Peter Singer, Elizabeth Anderson and Cora Diamonds, have contributed to develop a specific area of study devoted to the conceptual clarification of our relations to nature. Among these authors, some argue that all values in terms of which we think about the environment and non-human life must be related to a *human point of view*. Others think that this claim represents just a form of prejudice. As Grau clearly shows, Williams contributes to deepening this contrast with his argument in favor of the ‘humanistic’ concern. The key to understanding Williams’ alternative can be summed up as follows: we can make sense of our humanity in terms of a limited and egoistic point of view, something that should be overcome; otherwise we can acknowledge that this is exactly the point of departure for the intelligibility of our own values.

Among the many aspects that help us to articulate a human point of view, Williams emphasizes the fact that human life and agency has within it, interestingly and significantly, our *mindings* about others. He clearly believes that this human disposition is compatible with sincere efforts to *extend* our range of concerns to non-human animals. Likewise, our sensitivity to what others think and feel and our reflection on these judgments and relations changes our own way of conceiving specific moral issues. He invites us to take up this ‘mattering to us’ in our own philosophical understanding of practice and sentiments that shape our life as agents.

The idea that our self-comprehension requires a relation to others or, as Williams puts it, our “making sense of the others in relation to ourselves – and hence of ourselves in relation to them” (Williams 2006: 195) becomes, finally, a crucial element in his interesting understanding of the role of history

for philosophical explanations. These aspects are part of Roberto Mordacci's reconstruction of the 'genealogical turn' that characterizes Williams' works starting with *Shame and Necessity*. The author's argument raises important methodological questions concerning the problem of overcoming the objectifying third personal stance of both logical analysis and psychological approaches towards our ethical life. To be sure, our ordinary thinking stands in a complex relationship with the rich tradition in which our experiences and our reflections are embedded. Discussing what kind of effect 'the contingent history' may have 'in the space of reason' (William 2006: 195) and why we still care about the ancients, Williams repeatedly points to the fact that they tell us *something about us*. What he means is that their understanding of human agency, responsibility, regret and shame can illuminate our own understanding and point to something missing in our conceptions. We learn something about ourselves from the ways of thought thinking present in the works we inherit from culture, but also from confrontation with the enormous variety of experiences that are not just our own. According to Williams, it is a matter of good philosophical thinking to make these options (still) 'speak to us'.

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