Commentary to B. Williams's French Introduction to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

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The English original of Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was published in 1985. Since its publication, it has provoked a substantial body of philosophical commentary, sympathetic as well as critical.[1] It was seen from the beginning as an important book. But its earliest reviewers were frustrated by its oblique, allusive and fragmentary style.[2] It stood in an awkward relationship to the tradition that had produced its author, that of mid-century Anglo-American "analytic" philosophy. This was so in the obvious sense that much of the book was sharply critical of moral philosophy done in that tradition, but also in the less obvious sense that Williams's prose marked him as a highly atypical representative of his tradition.

Williams's introduction to the 1990 French translation of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was composed in English, to be translated with the book by Marie-Anne Lescourret. The translation is an accurate and faithful rendering of the English text. As Williams spoke and read French well, we can be confident that the translation will have had his approval. The introduction is an unusual text, and an illuminating new source for readers of Williams. Refreshingly, it reflects an effort on Williams's part to establish a connection with a new set of readers. It is also the work of a philosopher relishing the freedoms that come of not having to connect with the old one.

Does his introduction itself benefit from a further introduction? We believe that it does, and for the same reason that the book needed some prefatory words before it could be put into the hands of French readers: because the work is not, or no longer, fully self-explanatory. Williams raises and attempts to answer the question of why that might be so; in other words, what in his book might puzzle a reader unaccustomed to works in the British/analytic tradition, and more specifically, a reader accustomed to philosophy written in the "French" tradition?

[1] The most recent volume of papers inspired by the book is Chapell and Van Ackeren 2019.

[2] See for example Hart 1986: 49-52 and Blackburn 1986.

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Williams himself identifies some reasons why a French reader might need to be eased into his book. The first is that a French reader might be thought to belong to a tradition of "Continental" philosophy distinct from and hostile to anything "analytic". The second is that Williams's range of reference, while wider than that of most of his British and American colleagues, was still dominated by a canon of figures relatively unfamiliar in France: among others, GE Moore, RM Hare, John Rawls and Peter Singer. His occasional references to figures more likely to be familiar (Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein) are few and brief, and his fleeting references to "phenomenology" owe little to the German and French tradition of that name.[3] The third is that the problem – or "problématique" – with which Williams is concerned is hard to bring into focus outside the tradition that is the most explicit object of his critique.

On first glance, Williams's main thesis in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, i.e. that the theory-building aspirations of much analytic moral philosophy are misconceived, is not one likely to bother a French reader. As Williams more amusingly puts it, "French readers … may think that my critical enterprise is like shooting at dead ducks, indeed at ducks that have died in another country." The purpose of his introduction is to invite French readers to look again. It may well be that French moral philosophy has, to its credit, resisted the temptations of the "moral theory" that Williams thinks a wrong turning in analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for them to attend to his critique. The more obvious reason is that the theoretical impulse may be contagious, and "it will be well to have certain vaccines to hand in advance". The second, deeper, reason is that ethical theory is only a superficial symptom. The disease, the "basic condition", that Williams is concerned to diagnose has to do with "conceptions of ethical rationality and the nature of ethical conviction". In the course of the book, Williams identifies many forms that these conceptions can take both in everyday and in philosophical thought: the overestimation of the powers of rational argument, the tendency to assimilate rationality with utilitarian ('cost-benefit') reasoning, the assumption that all conflicts between values must be rationally resolvable by means of some discursively laid out procedure.

However, Williams rarely makes explicit the connections between his criticisms of these distinct phenomena. Seldom does he underline the wider cultural relevance of his arguments. In the text of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, references to the cultural resonance of his critique are consigned largely to footnotes and parenthetical asides. They are, moreover, alluded to in the

[3] See B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), London and New York, Routledge, 2011, chapters 5 and 6.

obscure epigraph – a sentence from Albert Camus's *La Chute:* "Quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode". Camus's original lines appear in the context of a discussion of the systematic, "methodical", approach of the Nazis to the logistics of the Holocaust. Williams makes very few explicit references in the text to this history, except a footnote where he directs the reader to Hannah Arendt's well-known discussion of Adolf Eichmann and the "banality" of his evil.[4]

In fact, French readers receive a statement of Williams's larger project – the critique of ethical rationality – more detailed than the one to be found in the book itself.[5] Moreover, they receive a more detailed account of how the arguments of the book might ramify into social and political thought, topics which are at most obliquely hinted at in the text. Strikingly, Williams refers to figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein more often, and more freely, in this introduction than he does in the original book. It is plausible that these figures had silently informed the book all along, but Williams had judged it more prudent not to announce these influences too loudly to his Anglophone readers. Re-reading the book in light of the French introduction, one has a better sense of how the book coheres – the epigraphs and the *obiter dicta* with the arguments. It is somewhat ironic just how much an Anglophone reader has to gain from an account of Williams's aims directed at a quite different audience. In respect of its clarification of its themes, the introduction needs little further explanation.

Where the French introduction might benefit from further examination is as an expression, as well as an account, of Williams's distinctive style as a philosophical writer. Such an examination is invited by the title Williams gave to his introduction: "Ethics, a matter of style?" Style was one of Williams's abiding concerns, and not just as a superfluous feature of prose but as an answer to the question of what one is "really trying to do".[6] What is Williams *really* trying to do in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*? Certainly he was making arguments, but why did he make them in his distinctive way? As Martha Nussbaum once described his style, it was "more like poetry than like standard philosophical prose, illuminating by elusive compressed signs. It was, superficially, discursive in the usual manner of philosophical prose, but possessed some of the qualities of the (Nietzschean, or possibly La Rochefoucauldian) aphorism: 'vivid wit,

[4] See *Ibid.*: 254. Williams's epigraphs are the subject of an unpublished paper, N. Krishnan and M. Queloz, "The Shaken Realist: Bernard Williams, the War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique" (unpublished manuscript).

[5] See for example *Ibid.*: xv-xvii and 20.

[6] See B. Williams, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (1972), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. xix.

terse enigmatic utterance, decoding left to the reader'" (Nussbaum 2003). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is full of these qualities; what did they achieve for Williams?

Certainly, one detects the presence of Nietzsche in the background. Williams both owns and disowns his debts to Nietzsche in his introduction. Nietzsche is, he says, "indispensable" to any future moral philosophy. But he is not to be treated as an authority, least of all in his utterances about, or against, liberal politics. But beyond what Nietzsche provides in the way of a critical target – "morality", or to use Williams's own phrase, "the morality system" – he provides also a set of stylistic ideals. One of those ideals is that of compression: trying to say in a paragraph what others say, if at all, in a book.[7] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is a very compressed book, each of its chapters containing enough material for several books. But the other, less obvious, ideal that Williams identifies in his introduction is that of being "theorist-proof". Why did Williams think of this as an ideal, and how, if at all, does he try to realise it?

The contrast that he draws between Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is instructive in this regard. What they had in common was the desire to write "a text that refused even to look like a work of expository metaphysics, a text armed to resist those who want to turn it into a system". It was clear by 1990 that Wittgenstein had failed in this ambition. Writers inspired by Wittgenstein had felt free, after the man's death, to do exactly what he had most abhorred. On this point, Williams is sympathetic to the systematisers, on the grounds that much of Wittgenstein's philosophy concerned topics (language, the mind) that quite properly invite and reward a systematic approach. In contrast, at the time Williams was writing, there was no comparable body of Nietzsche-inspired academic theory in English. It is an open question whether that is still true today: there is certainly a good deal of highly theoretical writing in philosophy that purports to be a systematic presentation of Nietzschean ideas (e.g. Richardson 1996; Leiter 2002; see also *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*). But Williams's own uses of Nietzsche do not have that quality. And despite the considerable and still growing body of responses to Williams, no one has yet managed to present a systematic theory as being the "Williamsian" one. Further, remarkably for a philosopher who taught or otherwise influenced a number of able younger philosophers and scholars who have since had successful academic careers, there is no group of

[7] In the *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche writes: "It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book— what everyone else does *not* say in a book". See F. Nietzsche, T*he Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 223. On compression as a stylistic method for both Nietzsche and Williams see Babbiotti 2020.

philosophers who identify themselves primarily as "Williamsians".[8]

What does the absence, even now, of a "Williamsian theory" tell us about the nature and success of his project? For one thing, it means that Williams has managed to remain in death what he was in life: the asker of questions rather than the provider of answers. To the extent that he is identified today with certain positions, they are specific theses – most notably, a position in the metaphysical debate about personal identity, and more relevant for his work in ethics, a thesis about the relationship between an agent's reasons for action and that agent's motivations ('internalism'). Neither has the scope and ambition of a real theory.

What he does defend is a picture of ethics with a strictly limited role for philosophy – which puts his position into conflict both with analytic ethical theorists and such "Continental" figures as Heidegger – and an expanded role for empirical material (psychology, history, anthropology). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* does not itself carry out this project. Its main aim is to show why such a project is worth pursuing. In a very general sense, then, Williams's project is therapeutic. If he has succeeded, it will not be success in converting his readers to a different theoretical orientation. The measure of his success will be the extent to which his readers are willing to ask the sorts of questions that don't demand or reward theory, and to adopt a different view of how much (or how little) philosophy can by itself do to answer them.

At the time Williams was writing this introduction, he was at work on revising the Sather lectures he had given at Berkeley in 1988–89 for publication as his next book, *Shame and Necessity* (1993). At one level, *Shame and Necessity* is a work of classical scholarship, contributing to debates on Greek epic and tragedy. At another, it is a simple continuation of the project initiated in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. As he puts it in this introduction, it is a mere platitude to say that "To live a life is to live it in a world which one has not created, and which one to a very limited extent … either understands or controls". But what would it be to have a philosophy that was able to account for this platitude? It would, he contends, take us away from "Cartesian or, just possibly, Kantian man": a man who is a disembodied mind or will, ahistorical and depsychologised. *Shame and Necessity* is a defence of the philosophical anthropology needed to sustain the ethical project: a vision of human freedom not in terms of "absolute or metaphysical freedom", but the minimal ideas of action, intention and voluntariness that make it possible for "my life [to be] mine rather than nobody's", and also "mine rather than somebody else's".

[8] E.g. Sophie-Grace Chappell, Miranda Fricker, Edward Harcourt, Kinch Hoekstra, Jennifer Hornsby, Jonathan Lear, Simon May, Adrian Moore, Richard Moran, Martha Nussbaum, Paul Russell, Jennifer Saul, John Skorupski.

In all this, a constant (but unstated) concern of Williams's is how to avoid "kitsch" in ethical thought and in philosophical writing. As he wrote, in an essay published near the end of his life, philosophy writing that is "only too heart-breakingly involved in the end of humankind or the horrors of the 20th century" runs the risk of being kitschy when its aim should be truthfulness. However, he adds, "a truthful style is not likely to make it immediately obvious what the [philosophical] work has to do with our most urgent concerns, because its interest is in the less obvious roots and consequences of our concerns.'[9] The style of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, compressed and ironic almost to a fault, does not make it easy to see what the work has to do with "our most urgent concerns", in particular, our social and political concerns. But the useful context provided by the French introduction makes it easier to trace the connections that Williams left it to his readers to decode: between the impulse to ethical theory and the temptations to adopt unrealistic and pernicious theories of rationality, between mistaken aspirations to objectivity and the dubious claims of the "morality system", between inflated and moralised conceptions of politics and the struggles of liberal democracies to give an adequate account of their own legitimacy.

Why didn't Williams make these themes more explicit in his text? It is certainly not because he was confident his Anglophone readers would pick up on the subtle signs that his Francophone readers needed help deciphering. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* remains poorly understood as a unified work (as distinct from as an anthology of suggestive remarks). It is possible that Williams was proceeding in the spirit suggested by that Cartesian maxim, *larvatus prodeo*: "I proceed in disguise". Or, as Nietzsche put it, *Alles, was tief ist, liebt die Maske*: "Everything that is profound loves the mask". The mask behind which Williams customarily appeared was that of the British analytic philosopher, advancing theses, making arguments, devising objections and so forth. But we should take seriously the possibility that behind that mask, there was a figure who was much closer to the kind of intellectual figure familiar in France: the philosopher as cultural critic, as provocateur, as wit.

Williams shows some awareness of both his closeness and his distance from these French modes of philosophising when he refers in passing to "a style of French philosophical writing". This style, he says, is characterised by its "combination of the extremely abstract with the vividly particular", by its attempt to interpret "contemporary society, manners or politics … in relation to very abstract conceptions, such as those of the self, identity, teleology etc."

[9] See B. Williams, "On Hating and Despising Philosophy" in *Essays and Reviews 1959-2002*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015: 363-370.

His treatment of this point is somewhat schematic in this essay.[10] He suggests that the general method might have Hegelian and post-Hegelian roots. In this, he correctly identifies one important influence on 20th-century French philosophy,[11] especially in its Marxist tendency. The other, with which Williams was better acquainted and for which he had greater sympathy, is the Cartesian tradition, which marks the non-Marxist Republican tradition within French philosophy.[12] In their different ways, these traditions can be contrasted with the Anglo-American-analytic tradition.

The Hegelian tradition's resistance to analytic philosophy consists both in its distinctive attitude to historicity and also in its approach to the analysis of consciousness. Analytic philosophy it charges with being unaware of its own postulates.[13] The Cartesian tradition, by contrast, combines abstraction and particularity in a different way, by making a claim to *generality*. Its main objection to the Anglo-American style is that the analytic idea of rigour descends into the mere pursuit of technicality.[14] In its 20th-century manifestations, Cartesian philosophy is attentive to accounts of ordinary situations and makes use of anecdotes. As such, it makes philosophical use of literature, but mostly as a stock of situations, characters and examples that might nourish reflection.[15] Alain is a preeminent figure in this tradition, but Bergson might equally be counted in its ranks. What Williams says could fit either tradition, but it is not hard to see why it is the Hegelian tradition that he identifies as lying on the other side of the contrast with analytic philosophy. Among other things, it is the Hegelian tradition – in the form of "existentialism" and "French theory" – that has been the Anglophone world's main idea of French philosophy in the post-war period, not the Cartesian.[16]

[10] But see the Introduction to this volume for a more detailed discussion of the differences between the philosophical cultures of Britain and France: Montefiore and Williams 1971.

[11] E.g. Jean Hyppolite, Jean Wahl, and most famously, Jean-Paul Sartre. Williams was well-acquainted with Sartre's work and the existential tradition more generally, as is suggested by his review of the English translation of *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (1939), and by his script for a BBC broadcast on existentialism. Both texts are collected in *Essays and Reviews*, cit., respectively 38-40, and 35-38.

[12] See B. Williams, *Descartes. The Project of Pure Inquiry* (1978), London and New York, Routledge, 2005.

[13] Such criticism is one target of Jacques Bouveresse in his essay "Why I am so very unFrench". This essay was first published in Montefiore 1982. Definitive French version in Bouveresse 2001.

[14] In a 1960 review of a Penguin translation of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*, Williams wrote with enthusiasm of Descartes's French prose: "in the elegance and simplicity it gives to abstract thought, [it] is a wonderful literary achievement. […Descartes] made himself the model for an enduring tradition devoted to the values of a rigorous yet unpedantic clarity", in *Essays and Reviews*, cit., p. 27.

[15] See "Entretien avec Pascal Engel" in *Le Philosophoire*, 54, 2020/2, p. 14.

[16] For further discussion of these figures see Engel 1987.

Another feature that distinguishes the Anglo-American from the French philosopher is the difference between the institutional backgrounds in which they have their formation. A highly distinctive feature of French philosophy, with no analogue in Britain or in the United States, is the widespread teaching of "general philosophy" in high school, and its influence on the higher education curriculum. "General philosophy" is an odd mix of the history of philosophy and a secular form of the *philosophia perennis*. This education aims to engender in its students a familiarity with the great philosophers, a form of conceptual rigour free of technicality, and also some degree of intellectual autonomy.[17] The practice gives philosophy a central place in higher education that it does not possess in the Anglophone world. Consequently, it makes the *philosopher* into a figure of wider cultural influence in a manner that has no parallel in Anglophone societies. As the widespread cliché has it, the French philosopher is a charismatic figure, a person of some glamour, an archetype of his culture, where the British philosopher is, when not simply an anomaly in his national culture, a more marginal figure rarely to be seen outside a university campus.

Williams was, in his person, a philosopher of some charisma. His regular appearances in broadsheet newspapers, on radio and on television, along with his role in government committees and policy commissions gave him a wider reach than most of his colleagues in British academia. Still, it would be a serious exaggeration to suggest that he was ever a "household name" – in the 20th century, perhaps only Bertrand Russell, or maybe AJ Ayer, ever attained such a status in Britain.[18] Given that fact, Williams's insistence on the limited powers of philosophy risked, in his home country, the impression of belabouring the extremely obvious. Equally, in a culture without a self-understanding centred around the ideal of *l'esprit cartésien*, his warnings about the dangers of certain conceptions of rationality risk appearing like solutions to foreign problems.

But in a culture and tradition with a more ambitious idea of the powers of philosophy, Williams's central thesis seems much more provocative. His warnings and prognoses are more ominous than they seemed when one read his book only as a critique of certain regrettable trends in Anglophone academia. Transplanted into the context of French intellectual life, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* can show itself a more rather than less urgent book. The publica-

[17] For a further discussion of the criteria and problems of "general philosophy" see "Editorial. La philosophie générale" in *Le Philosophoire*, 54, 2020/2, especially pp. 5-10.

[18] See Ryan 1988 and Collini 2006. Iris Murdoch had, in her lifetime, some claim to be a household name, but her popular fame rested almost entirely on her fiction, not on her philosophy.

tion of the original English text of his introduction to the French translation is an opportunity to reassess a book whose importance has not yet been appreciated in the philosophical culture out of which it emerged.[19]

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[19] We are grateful for the comments of A.W. Moore and Matthieu Queloz on an earlier draft of this essay.

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