Ethics, a matter of style?

Introduction to the French edition*

Bernard Williams

In addition to the great pleasure that I feel that a book of mine should appear in French[1], I appreciate the opportunity of adding a few pages to introduce it to French readers. In the case of a work of philosophy, as this is, such an introduction does run the risk of creating or sustaining the impression that there is some almost unbridgeable cultural divide between the French and the English-speaking worlds, which the well-meaning services of the Introduction and the translator will almost certainly fail to bridge. It may be helpful, therefore, if I say first why I think that there need be no such divide, even though certain differences of style may create the misleading impression that it exists.

Works by British or American philosophers, on the occasions that they are offered in French translation, are often announced, by themselves or by others, as being examples of a certain style of philosophy, presumed unfamiliar and possibly unappealing to French readers, called "analytical philosophy". I say in the Preface to this book that I do not much care whether the style of philosophy that it presents is called "analytical philosophy" or not; I merely recognize – I say there – that it will be.[2] In saying this, I wanted to make clear to my British and American readers that I did not attach any great importance to the distinctions that attach themselves to that label. However, precisely for that reason, I should say here a little more about the limitations of the label,

* First published in Bernard Williams, *L'éthique et les limites de la philosophie* [1985], trans. Marie-Anne Lescourret, Editions Gallimard, NRF Essais, Paris 1990, pp. V-XIX. The present edition of this Introduction has been supplemented by a number of footnotes. They have been added by Paolo Babbiotti, Nikhil Krishnan and Mathis Marquier, the authors of "Commentary to B. Williams's French Introduction to Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy", published in *Philosophical Inquiries*, IX, 2-2021: 259-268.

[1] I should like to express my gratitude both to my admirable translator for the skill she has devoted to my text; and to M. Eric Vigne, for making this publication possible. [Footnote in original. Any footnotes for which this is not indicated have been added for the purpose of this republication.]

[2] See ELP: xvi.

philinq IX, 2-2021, pp. 269-284
ISSN (print) 2281-8618-ETS doi: 10.4454/philinq.v9i2.378

"analytical philosophy". I do this, in particular, because one of the main functions that the label performs in the English-speaking world is to introduce a contrast with something else that is often called "continental philosophy", and this contrast seems to me misconceived.

About thirty years ago, I took part in one of the first conferences that brought together French philosophers (in particular) with British and American representatives of "analytic" philosophy.[3] Some of my British colleagues, with a xenophobia perhaps more robustly displayed in those days than now, frequently referred to the other participants as "the continentals"; and I vividly remember the silky tones in which Maurice Merleau-Ponty opened his first intervention with words to the general effect: "nous les continentaux, avec tout que ça comporte de restrictif et d'insulaire…"[4,5] He went on to recall the famous headline in an English newspaper: Fog in Channel, Continent Cut off. But the fault of the expression "continental" is not merely that it belongs to a rhetoric of parochialism, and correspondingly serves to banish certain philosophers to an academic or pedagogic ghetto. Again, the problem is not simply that the expression confuses, absurdly, questions of method and questions of geography, and so (apart from anything else) suppresses the fact that philosophers central to the "analytic" tradition, such as Frege and Wittgenstein, came equally from Continental Europe.[6] The main point is that the contrast of "analytic" and "continental" philosophy marks no one opposition at all, whether of content, or interest, or even of style. There are indeed some differences, some of them important, between typical examples of philosophical writing to which these terms might be applied, but those differences do not stem from any significant basis of principle. The terms mark, one might say, a difference without a distinction.

At the time of the conference to which I have referred, it was possible to entertain the idea that there was a distinction of principle between these kinds of philosophy. At that time, analytic philosophy was said to be distinguished from other styles of philosophy by its interest in language. The force of this was not simply that it was interested in philosophical problems raised by language: that is true of many styles of philosophy. Rather, analytic philosophers supposed that the correct method for discussing all philosophical problems

[3] For discussions of this conference, see Glendinning 2006 and, more recently, M. Marion 2018.

[4] "We continentals, with the limitations and insularity that it implies…"

[5] The proceedings of the conference were published as *La Philosophie Analytique*, Cahiers de Royaumont Philosophie No IV ; Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1962. Merleau-Ponty's intervention appears in part (p. 93 seq), but the remarks I recall, together with other informal contributions, have not been preserved. [Footnote in original].

[6] See PHD: 201; see also Glock 2008, ch. 3.

lay in the study of language. It was not merely that there was, as indeed there still is, an important area or field constituted by the philosophy of language; rather, at that time, analytical philosophy was or tried to be in some distinctive sense *linguistic* philosophy.[7] But if this was then an important ambition of the philosophy commonly called "analytic", it is much less so now. Moreover, to the limited extent that it does remain an ambition of such philosophy, it is less so of moral philosophy; and, to the extremely limited extent that it remains an ambition of some moral philosophy, it is even less so with regard to this book, for reasons that I have tried to lay out explicitly in the course of it (in chapter 7).

At that same conference, several speakers suggested that French philosophers were typically more involved in the history of philosophy than were British or American ones. There was perhaps, very broadly speaking, some contrast to be drawn, but I suspect that even then it was a fairly superficial matter. Some French philosophers felt a greater responsibility to *rapprocher*[8] their positions to past philosophies; while analytic philosophy often adopted, as some of it still does, a scientistic style in which the giants of the past figure only as those on whose shoulders the present philosopher is standing (that is to say, they are out of the bottom of the photograph). There was an analytical approach to the history of philosophy itself, but it made a profession of treating the arguments of "the great dead philosophers" as though they were contemporaries.[9]

Since then, a good deal has changed with respect to the history of philosophy. Some writers emphasize to a greater extent the context, particularly the non-philosophical context, of past philosophies; some call in question the possibility of recovering any meanings from the past; some (mysteriously) do both. Under these influences, both the serious history of philosophy, and also the philosophy of history, have changed. But I suspect that the way in which past philosophy is mostly used by philosophers who are not primarily historians of philosophy has not changed much; and that it is used by them in much the same way, whether they are anglophone or French, namely as providing caricatures of the familiar, which are designed to bring out the features of the new. A cartoon of the famous dead may help to establish the legitimacy, and perhaps the inheritance, of one offspring, as it may equally demonstrate the independence and saving difference of another. Some historical accuracy is needed in order to perform this task: but not too much.[10]

[7] See "Spell".

[8] Williams uses the French word in the English typescript. Literally, to bring closer to, meaning to compare while underlining resemblance.

[9] See SP: 258; see also Van Ackeren 2019.

[10] See SP: 257-264.

In the present book, two philosophers of the past, Aristotle and Kant, are given particular attention, as offering different paradigms of the idea that ethical thought might be given a foundation in practical reason (as I try to explain, it is only that kind of foundationalism that seems to me of interest even as a project.) In both cases, the philosophies are offered in a highly schematic way, designed to bring out those aspects of them that are relevant to the questions I take up, to the complete exclusion of many matters which would have to be mentioned in a balanced historical presentation. In the case of Kant, indeed, I do not try to give a direct exposition of his thought at all, but merely work my way towards what I take to be one of his central ideas, by a route that runs through other ideas which are more immediately accessible.[11]

Although the accounts I give of both these philosophers are partial, distorted, and inaccurate, I do claim that they are accounts *of these philosophers*; I have not merely appropriated their names to lend dignity to my own methodological constructions. Their historical reality, as I take it to be, is relevant to the criticisms I make of them, and to the way in which those criticisms are related to the general account I give of the subject, moral philosophy. Of Kant, as I have represented or sketched his thought, my criticism is rooted in current concerns: he is treated as one who proposes a foundation for a certain project of modernity, a liberal morality of rights. I say in the course of the book a good deal about that project, and I try to show how important it is that Kant's philosophy failed, as I suppose, in its attempt to provide a foundation for it.

In Aristotle's case, on the other hand, my criticism itself involves his distance from modernity. I draw attention to the large assumptions, unrecoverably archaic, that are needed to support his images of human nature and of its relation to the ethical life.[12] I mention in the book some recent works which have sought to reinstate an ethics of virtue, of Aristotelian type, in place of more typically modern systems, such as the Kantian. I am well disposed to the motivation of these attempts, and in some degree to their specific proposals, but, as I have said in the text and can only underline here, I am amazed by the assumption made by some of these writers, that a theory of human virtues offered by Aristotle or by S. Thomas Aquinas is well adjusted (with a little tinkering, no doubt, to deal with such matters as their views of women) to serve us in the present day. This is a strange enough assumption if one takes modernity roughly as it seems, in terms of its own self-understandings. The assumption is even stranger if those self-understandings are themselves questioned (as I

[11] ELP: 60-78.

[12] See Altham and Harrison 1995: 185-224.

seek to question them at various points in the book, and most especially in the critique of morality in the last chapter.)[13]

This inquiry, then, is historically situated, and addresses itself particularly to problems that arise for ethical thought under the distinctive conditions of modernity. Such a concern, presented at that very general level of description, should not be unfamiliar to French readers. But precisely because the general description of the undertaking may be familiar, the way in which it is actually conducted may seem in certain respects all the more strange. Here we run into certain differences in philosophical style: differences more genuine than the supposed distinction of principle that is thought to separate two traditions of philosophy.

There is a style of French philosophical writing about ethical, political and cultural questions – I am not in a position to say how typical it is, but certainly it is familiar – which is marked by a combination of the extremely abstract with the vividly particular.[14] Its particular observations relate to contemporary society, manners or politics, which it interprets in relation to very abstract conceptions, such as those of the self, identity, teleology etc.[15, 16] The interpretation operates through a kind of *metaphysical analogy*, the significance of the concrete phenomena being given by descriptions that reveal them as expressing, in some sense, conceptions of the world at the very abstract level.[17] The historical origin of this procedure is to be found, I suppose, in Hegel, and in some cases, the abstract description indeed has its significance in terms of some Hegelian, Marxist or other "meta-narrative". But this is not necessarily so, and at a time when "*les grands récits*" have retired – perhaps for ever? – their absence itself may, in one way or another, be registered in this style – a style that assigns an abstract metaphysical significance to social or psychological facts which are themselves invoked in a vivid and imaginative way.

[13] See MacIntyre 2007 and 1988. See also Williams's reviews of these two books in ER: 184-186 and 283-288.

[14] We have added a comma after 'ethical' that was not present in Williams's typescript.

[15] Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'ère du Vide* (Gallimard, 1983) is a vivid example of this style. [Footnote in original].

[16] *The Era of Emptiness* is a collection of essays in which Lipovetsky identifies a certain the emptiness in our "postmodern culture" left by the departure of the great narratives and filled by a new, narcissistic individualism. A quotation from the Foreword provides a sample of what Williams might have had in mind: "Hence this plethora of shows, exhibitions, interviews, and utterances which are totally insignificant to anyone and are not even a matter of atmosphere anymore […]. Communicating for the sake of communicating, expressing oneself with no other aim than expressing oneself and to be recorded by a micro-audience, narcissism reveals here as elsewhere its connivance with postmodern desubstantialisation, with the logic of emptiness" (translation ours).

[17] See BAP.

It is this style in particular that is absent from so-called "analytic" philosophy. That philosophy has typically avoided the vivid invocation of the concrete, complimenting itself on a certain austere conception of relevance which, in its relation to the everyday, is not ashamed of being thought unimaginative or even banal. At the same time, it is distrustful of characterizing the everyday by analogies that operate at a very high level of abstraction. It prefers a middle level of generality; and in ethical connections, particularly, it is concerned in the first place with processes of everyday ethical thought – or at least ethical thought which it takes to belong to the [A]nglo-[S]axon everyday.[18] It typica[l]ly takes its first task, at least, as that of trying to apply, extend, and understand reflectively those processes of thought; and also to criticise them, either with regard to their internal coherence, or by attacking their presuppositions.

I have merely gestured here to such differences of style; no doubt they will be obvious in some form to a reader familiar with French philosophy who glances at my text. There is a disadvantage that these differences impose on my text as presented to a French reader (apart, of course, from whatever disadvantage such a reader may think it sustains merely from the fact that it is itself – in these terms at least – an example of the "analytical".)[19] One way in which analytical philosophy, in its own style, has pursued the aim of making ethical thought philosophical is by making it more systematic; that is to say, by developing "ethical theories", theoretical structures that seek to present the content of ethical thought in a generalized and ordered way. It is a general theme of my book that the construction of ethical theories is misguided, and I criticise both the general enterprise and notable examples of it.[20] There is an obvious danger: French readers, for whom this is not a typical way of making ethical thought philosophical, and for whom ethical theories have been less a matter of interest, may think that my critical enterprise is like shooting at dead ducks, indeed at ducks that have died in another country.

However, there is more than one reason why I believe that the critique of ethical theories need not be irrelevant to French concerns. One is merely the suspicion that ethical theory may be on its way to lands where it has not previously flourished.[21] In particular, there is some risk that the retirement of *les*

[18] For a classic statement of this contrast, see Murdoch 1987: 78-79.

[19] We have corrected "may be think" in Williams's typescript to "may think", and "it itself is" to "it is itself".

[20] See ELP ch. 5 and 6; MSH: 153-171.

[21] The recent reception of the translation of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, is in my view one of the signs which are worth noting. [This footnote only appears in the French edition, not in the English original, but is attributed to Williams; the translation is ours.]

grands récits may leave a space that invites ethical theory to move in and to play the role of the philosophical representation of ethical thought, the role it has tried to play in societies where *les grands récits* were never so popular in the first place.[22] If ethical theory threatens to cross the frontiers, it will be well to have certain vaccines to hand in advance.

Another reason for hoping that this critique will not be irrelevant is that the critique of ethical theory does not speak only to ethical theory. It speaks more generally to conceptions of ethical rationality and the nature of ethical conviction, and these play important parts in ethical thought and experience even if the philosophical form they have taken is not necessarily that of ethical theory. In a sense, 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.

This point takes a special form with Utilitarianism. As a philosophical ethical theory, this has had perhaps even less influence in France than other such theories. A strong tendency to Utilitarianism may be, as Nietzsche was disposed to think, a peculiarly English weakness[23] (though it has now spread to America and Australia.) Yet its importance – and so, perhaps, the importance of its being criticised – reaches further than its pretensions to being a complete and self-sufficient guide to ethical life. Its concepts, and its image of rationality, are intimately related to those used in economics. Work in economics has refined the concepts of welfare and preference that Utilitarianism uses: refined them, indeed, to a point at which it is easy for some people working in micro-economics and rational decision theory to claim that it is a necessary truth that rational practical thought aims at maximization of preference-satisfaction in the Utilitarian style, and that objections to this idea are based on out-dated conceptions of Utilitarianism.[24] This is an error; but the importance of such ideas to much economic thought, together with the

[22] See the epigraph from Wallace Stevens's poem (*Esthétique du Mal*) that opens *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, some lines from which seems to describe this phenomenon: "The tragedy, however, may have begun, / Again, in the imagination's new beginning". See also : M. Queloz and N. Krishnan, "The Shaken Realist: Bernard Williams, the War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique" (unpublished manuscript). We have italicized both uses of "les grand récits" in this paragraph.

[23] See the epigraph from Nietzsche to "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (1973) collected in J.J.C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 77: "If we possess our why of life we can put up with almost any *how*.—Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that".

[24] A notably brash use of this strategy is made by Brian Skyrms in a technically sophisticated recent work, *The Dynamics of Rational Deliberation* (Harvard University Press, 1990), chapter 1. Powerful arguments in the opposite direction have been offered by A.K. Sen in many publications, some of which are referred to in the present book. [Footnote in original.]

importance of economic thought itself, mean that there is a constant pressure in favour of these conceptions, which is exercised outside the field of philosophical discussion itself.[25]

There are in any case philosophers (if not so many in France) who declare themselves Utilitarians. Their theory, strictly applied, certainly diverges from much current ethical thought, and those (myself included) who point this out are engaged in a discourse that is as old as any distinctive formulation of Utilitarianism. Utilitarians are still, for instance, discussing with their critics, in a more sophisticated style and with rather less ideologically objectionable examples, a problem left to them by one of their ancestors, William Godwin. Godwin claimed that the rational Utilitarian person would clearly save from a fire, if the choice had to be made, Fénelon rather than the chambermaid's baby; and that it would be irrational to depart from this conclusion because the baby was also, as it happened, one's own. What is the moral power, Godwin asked, of that monosyllable, *mine*?[26] Utilitarians still wonder whether they should agree with him.

The reactions of Utilitarians when their doctrine, strictly applied, diverges from unreconstructed moral sentiment, have always taken two different forms, the intransigent and the accommodating. Both parties have their present representatives. The intransigent understand Utilitarianism to be a revolutionary instrument of reform, and denounce recalcitrant sentiments as irrational or prejudiced or self-serving. Intransigent Utilitarians will claim, for instance, that starvation and suffering in the Third World make as urgent a moral demand on one as suffering on one's own door step; some claim that buying a luxury instead of giving the money to an agency for famine relief is the moral equivalent of murder. Another current concern is that for other species. The issue of "animal rights", as it is often called (though not very happily by Utilitarians, who have traditionally denied that there are such things as rights), has been advanced by philosophers who are not Utilitarians, but many of the prominent advocates do take a Utilitarian position.[27] Utilitarians of the more accommodating persuasion, on the other hand, may take radical attitudes to some issues, but they have less confidence than the intransigents that the whole structure of our moral sentiments can or should be moved by the one lever of the Greatest Happiness Principle (or its modern more technically sophisticated descendants.) They hope, rather, to explain our sentiments, even if they are apparently at one level not Utilitarian, in terms of

[25] See UB. See also Williams's reply to Sen's Tanner Lectures in Sen 2009: 94-102.

[26] See B. Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism", cit. See also "PCM".

[27] See Singer 1972 and 1975.

the utility of a state of affairs in which people have sentiments of that kind.[28] Whether this is a realistic or helpful view of our ethical life is a question I discuss in some detail.[29]

"Our"; this powerful monosyllable, applied to our ethical beliefs, gives philosophy many of its problems. Who, relevantly, are "we"? Members of this society or community? Representatives of all humanity? Just some sentient creatures among others, whose concerns should be directed to all of them? Utilitarianism assumes the last answer. At the opposite extreme is a kind of view that takes the community, the particular social space to which one belongs, as the centre of one's ethical experience. It has been a recurrent theme of modern moral philosophy, a problem perhaps first explicitly set by Hegel, to try to bring into some comprehensible relationship two different kinds of pull: on the one hand, that of local practices and understandings which provide, or have provided in the past, much of the weight of ethical life, and, on the other, claims of abstract rationality and universality, which are likely to condemn as irrational or parochial practices which cannot be justified within some very general framework of thought, a framework that could in principle be applied to any set of people anywhere.[30]

There is one style in recent moral philosophy, influenced by the later work of Wittgenstein, that particularly emphasises concrete practices and shared understandings as against abstract ethical theory, and indeed has no time for that sort of theorizing. Unlike some other critics of ethical theory, this view arrives at its opposition to it not in the first instance by reflection on ethical or social issues, but from considerations about meaning. It takes from Wittgenstein a basic idea that all our understanding of language is a matter of picking up practices, being inducted into a "form of life"; nowhere is it a matter of applying abstractly formulated rules. This is true even of mathematics – Wittgenstein emphasised that even with a mathematical rule one needs a shared understanding of what counts as applying it, and this cannot be supplied by some further rule.[31] The use of ethical language, equally, depends on a shared form of life and the practices of a community within which we pick up the terms of our ethical experience. One thing that has been usefully brought out by these philosophers is the importance of "thick" ethical concepts, as I call them, such as *treachery* or *lie* or *cowardice*, as contrasted with thin and general

[28] See, for instance, Sidgwick 1874. See also MSH: 153-171 ("The point of view of the universe: Sidgwick and the Ambition of Ethics").

[29] See ELP ch. 6.

[30] See the reference to *Sittlichkeit* in ELP: 115.

[31] See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) (4th ed.). London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. See also Kripke 1982.

terms such as *good* and *right*; it is the thin terms, by contrast, that exclusively interest the ethical theorists.[32]

I agree with the Wittgensteinians about the importance of the "thick" concepts (I discuss their use and their significance in ch.8.) However, as soon as one looks at these matters not just from an analytical or epistemological point of view, but in the light of the Hegelian and post-Hegelian problems I have already mentioned, then there is an obvious difficulty, which these writers typically overlook. The difficulty is to know, in the ethical case, who "we" are, whose practices and form of life are in question.[33] When Wittgenstein spoke of mathematics resting, in the end, not on any absolute foundations, but only on how "we" go on, the "we" would seem naturally to embrace all those who share an understanding of mathematics. But "thick" ethical concepts are not typically shared by everyone; and the concepts belonging to other cultures that we (that is to say, we here) may come to understand, we by no means necessarily share with them. If the "we" to which the Wittgensteinian account speaks includes all humanity, then it still needs to explain how it is that some of us structure our ethical life with concepts that are unknown, strange or even repellent to others. If, on the other hand, the "we" that is relevant is that of a real community, a set of people whose ethical language and practices have a genuine social identity, then this philosophy still has to tell us how we can pick up and understand the ethical concepts of others (as to some extent we clearly can) and yet reject those concepts. The possibility of the *ethnographic stance*, of understanding an alien structure of values which one does not share, is a basic datum for moral philosophy.[34]

Equally philosophy has to tell us how we can come to embrace new ethical concepts. A philosophical account that considers only the concepts that we pick up from our local community will find it hard to explain the criticism and alteration of ethical practices. It runs the risk of sharing with a certain kind of Right Hegelianism (though without Hegelianism's confidence in history) a cultivation of an inarticulate conservatism of the folk-ways. It is natural that people who are anyway drawn to a Right Hegelian enthusiasm for the folkways (or rather, as is their habit, for a condescending fantasy about the folkways) often welcome the Wittgensteinian line, interpreted in this way. They see it as the continuation of Hegelian conservatism by other means.

However, there should also be a Wittgensteinian analogue to Left Hegelianism: this will be a view that accepts the insights about the thickness of our

[32] See ELP: 143-144 and note 7 to ch. 8, where Williams acknowledges his debt to Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot.

[33] Another place where Williams talks about who "we" are is SN, note 7 to ch. 1.

[34] See ELP, ch. 8. For later discussion on this topic see: Gibbard and Blackburn 1992; see also the more recent work by James Laidlaw.

primary ethical understanding and its relation to social practices, but leaves room for a radical critique in the name of interests not adequately expressed in the folkways.[35] The search for such a position is the present concern of more than one style of political thought.[36]

Moral philosophy naturally stands close to political and legal philosophy, and in political and legal connexions an emphasis on community and social solidarity has, in the United States, given rise to what has rather vaguely been called a "communitarian" stance, as against the emphasis on individual rights and opportunities that has been prominent in the liberal tradition, notably as it was expressed in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, an immensely influential work which I discuss at several points.[37] Particularly in constitutional connexions, communitarians are often identified as conservatives, who are more reluctant than liberals are to interpret the provisions of the constitution in such a way as to advance general objectives of social justice, (though some who have been classed as communitarians would want to claim more radical positions.)[38] In this debate the central issue is not, as in the discussion with the Wittgensteinians, the nature of ethical understanding itself, but rather the wider question of the extent to which the state and major social institutions should be committed to some rather than other "conceptions of the good", that is to say, ideas of what is a worthwhile human life. Should modern societies favour particular conceptions of how people may best live? Should they, rather, continue the liberal tradition of accepting that modern states are essentially pluralistic in this respect, and are to be understood as giving their citizens equal opportunities and equal protection in pursuing whatever the citizens may, individually or in more local communities, conceive of as a good life?[39] [40] Rawls himself, whose views have continued to develop since his book was published, sees this pluralism as the central issue for a modern political philosophy; and he now considers his theory of justice as a solution to a modern political problem, rather than as a timeless interpretation of the values of social justice.[41]

[35] We have removed a redundant use of 'there' that was present in Williams's typescript.

[36] See "W-M".

[37] For the references to John Rawls in ELP, see ch. 5 and 6.

[38] For a discussion of the thinkers Williams had in mind, see Mulhall and Swift 1996.

[39] Related questions are discussed by Alain Finkielkraut, *La Défaite de la Pensée* (Gallimard 1987), in a historical context; he is concerned not only with the relations between universal values and those of a given culture, but with a further issue, not taken up in my text, of the interpretation of a given culture as that of a given nation. [Footnote in original.]

[40] Finkielkraut's 1987 book, *The Undoing of Thought*, defended some of the strong views which he still holds today. In this book, Finkielkraut opposed both pluri-culturalism and the nationalist defence of "cultural purity", which he claimed "profess the same relativism" (1987: 125).

[41] See Rawls 1993.

Such political concerns lie close, obviously enough, to much of the moral philosophy discussed in this book. Yet the book starts by insisting on a certain question as the correct starting point for ethics – a question which was in fact central to discussions of ethical life in the ancient world, to a greater extent than it is in typically modern styles of thought. This is Socrates's question, as I call it: "How should one live?" If this is the right starting point for ethics, as I claim, and if it is also true that ethical thought must lead into social and indeed political considerations, then a question inevitably arises about the relation between the individual person who raises this ethical question for himself or herself, and his or her society: a society which not only provides the situation in which the person will live the answer to the question, but also acculturated that person, no doubt, to be disposed to give one kind of answer to the question rather than another. The structure of moral philosophy itself, that is to say, raises the questions of individualism.

Michel Foucault strikingly said: "Où 'ça parle', l'homme n'existe pas".[42] [43] Expressed like that, it is hard to deny; but the underlying idea seems to me in error, for reasons that are expressed in some remarks in the very brief Postscript to this book. Even if the basic categories by which people understand the world and live in it were best understood as social formations, or some other kind of impersonal structure, this fact in itself would not turn those people into automata, or imply that they were not agents. Nor would it show that the conceptions were not *their* conceptions. It would only remind us that "their" does not mean the ones that those people, collectively or individually, have freely invented. But why should anyone *ever* have supposed that this is what it should or could mean? 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: this should be the flattest of platitudes.[44] But if it is, then the supposed "end of man" that follows on these supposed discoveries is not the end of man at all: it is only the end of Cartesian or, just possibly, Kantian man, and those "men", as a great deal of modern philosophy in all styles serves to remind us, were not man.[45]

[42] "L'homme est-il mort ?", *Arts* 15 june 1966; quoted by Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *La Pensée 68* (Gallimard 1985), p. 41. [Footnote in original].

[43] Slight misquotation : the sentence would be "Where (ça parle) man *no longer* exists", instead of "does not exist" (italics ours) ; "ça" refers to the id ("where the id speaks…"). See the English translation by Mary H. S. Cattani, *French philosophy of the Sixties. An Essay on Antihumanism*, p. 16, and the translator's note ad. loc.

[44] We have removed a second, grammatically redundant, use of 'one' that was in Williams's typescript.

[45] The question of the limitations on the subject in Kant's philosophy has been much discussed: it raises the issue of transcendental idealism (and of the sense in which that is an idealism), and also the difficulties of Kant's notion of agency. I make some remarks about the latter in ch.4 of the pres-

In fact, it is not true that every conception that a person may use in thinking about how to live his or her life – or, less reflexively, merely in living it – is an expression of such structures. Here there is a further dimension of individualism, to the extent that not only is my life mine rather than nobody's but mine rather than somebody else's. That, again, is something that can be understood without invoking the fantasies of a metaphysical or absolute freedom.[46]

The issues discussed under the titles of "individualism" or "humanism" do better, it seems to me, if they are considered at a less abstract and general level than has recently been current, particularly among writers influenced by Heidegger. The wish that the discussion should be less abstract, and that it should be less general, relates to two different things: what is needed is on the one hand more empirical and historical material for reflection (for instance, on the question of how peculiar the structures of modernity indeed are), and also more detail – and that detail may be philosophical detail.

It is partly because he is concerned (some of the time) with detail that Nietzsche seems to me, of all the philosophical writers who have been invoked in these connections, the most valuable.[47] He is all the more so because he was concerned (most of the time) to produce 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: one that would be genuinely *theorist-proof*.[48] Wittgenstein failed in this; or rather, he accomplished it only to the extent of his own life-time, by not publishing any of his later writings. When published, they have proved only too fruitful in generating the kind of theory that, I take it, he detested. In part, this is because he was mainly concerned with subjects, such as meaning, that do properly invite philosophical theory; in part, and relatedly, because he himself had no adequate account of why there should be no theory. Nietzsche, on the matters that concerned him most, had more than one such account.[49]

At certain points in this book, particularly in its attention to philosophies of the ancient world and in its critique of morality, it is possible perhaps to hear a Nietzschean tone. It was not developed with Nietzsche consciously in

ent book. – Related questions are discussed, but more favourably to Kant, by Alain Renault, *L'Ere de l'Individu* (Gallimard 1989); it will be seen that the present discussion coincides in certain respects with the direction of his, and Luc Ferry's, critique of contemporary "anti-humanism". [Footnote in original].

46 See the Postscript to ELP.

47 Williams refers to Nietzsche just four times in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Two mentions appear in parenthetical asides (discussing Nietzsche's remarks on cruelty at page 15, and what he called "pessimism of strength" at page 190) and two appear in the main text (discussing Nietzsche's saying "God is dead" at page 38 and his remarks at page 220 on the failure of Enlightenment).

48 See MSH: 65-76 ("Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology").

49 See the discussion in Williams's replies to the contributors in Altham and Harrison 1995.

mind, and certainly not in any close relation to his writings. I do think that, on condition that one is ruthlessly selective and entirely disinclined to regard him as an authority[50], one must regard Nietzsche as an indispensable contributor to any future moral philosophy that has any hope of being worth doing; and – paradoxical though this may seem – this is so even if that philosophy is quite opposed to Nietzsche's own politics and addresses itself, as I think it should, to questions of how to sustain a liberal concern with social justice without the illusions fostered by much of the moral philosophy of modernity.[51]

How that Nietzschean contribution is to be made is itself one of the questions that needs to be considered next. The present book tries to make at least one point that can certainly be learned from Nietzsche: that in its relation to society, history, ethics, there is a serious question about the *authority* of philosophy. Once philosophy has abandoned the metaphysical models (Platonist, for instance, or Kantian) of how it comes to have anything to say about the ethical, the question must arise whether it has anything to say about it at all. What is quite incredible is an idea implicit in most ethical theory, that it should be in a position to say *everything* about the ethical, or everything of great importance; and that is one of several reasons why we should hope to see the last of the self-importance of philosophy (one lesson that Heidegger conspicuously failed to learn from Nietzsche.)[52] But a larger question comes after that, of what kinds of things philosophy might have to say about the ethical. The inquiry of the present book, critical as it is, by no means leads to the conclusion that the answer to that question is "nothing"; it may even suggest what some of those things may be. But it does insist that the question needs seriously to be asked.

Bernard Williams

References and abbreviations

Works by B. Williams

BAP = *British Analytical Philosophy*, with A. Montefiore, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1971.

[50] That is to say, in what was (almost all the time) his own spirit: compare for instance the marvellous passage about the philosopher and aging, *Morgenröte* 542. [Footnote in original]. Williams refers to this passage again in "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" (2000), to be found in the volume that bears the same title of the lecture delivered at the Royal Institute for Philosophy.

[51] See SN, ch. 5 and IBD.

[52] See Williams's review of Heidegger's *The Will to Power as Art* in ER: 179-184.

ELP = *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [1985], Routledge, London and New York, 2011.

ER = *Essays and Reviews 1959-2002*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2015.

IBD= *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. by G. Hawthorn, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

MSH = *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.

"PCM" = "Persons, Characters, and Morality" in *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981: 1-19.

PHD = *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006.

"Spell" = "The Spell of Linguistic Philosophy", in B. Magee, ed., *Talking Philosophy: Dialogues with Fifteen Leading Philosophers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001: 110-124.

SN = *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993.

SP = *The Sense of the Past. Essays in the History of Philosoph*y, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006.

UB = *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, with A. Sen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982.

"W-M" = "Left-Wing Wittgenstein, Right-Wing Marx", in *Common Knowledge*, 1, 1 (Spring) 1992: 33-42.

Other works

Altham, J., and R. Harrison, ed., 1995-, *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Gibbard A., and S. Blackburn, 1992, "Morality and Thick Concepts", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 66 (Supplementary): 267-299.

Glendinning, S., 2006, *The Idea of Continental Philosophy: A Philosophical Chronicle*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Glock, H-J., 2008, *What is Analytic Philosophy?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Kripke, Saul A., 1982, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

MacIntyre, A., 2007 [1981], *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

MacIntyre, A., 1988, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

Marion, M., 2018, "Was Royaumont merely a dialogue de sourds? An Introduction to the discussion générale'", in *Philosophical Inquiries*, 6, 1, "History of Late Analytic Philosophy": 197-214.

Mulhall, S., and A. Swift, 1996[2], *Liberals and Communitarians*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Murdoch, I., 1987 [1953], *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Viking, New York.

Rawls, J., 1993, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Sen, A., 2009 [1987], *The Standard of Living*, ed. by G. Hawthorn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Singer, P., 1972, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1, 3 (Spring): 229-243.

Singer, P., 2015 [1975], *Animal Liberation* (1975), The Bodley Head, London.

Sidgwick, H., 1907[7] [1874], *The Methods of Ethics*, Macmillan, London.

Van Ackeren, M., 2019, "Williams (on) doing history of philosophy: a case study on *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*", in S. G. Chapell and M. Van Ackeren (ed.), *Ethics Beyond the Limits. New Essays on Bernard Williams'* Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, New York and London, Routledge.

Wittgenstein, L., 2009[4] [1953], *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, Wiley-Blackwell, London