BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas, Alan, ed. *Bernard Williams.*
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It is impossible to deny the powerful influence of Bernard Williams on anglophone philosophy over the past thirty or so years, particularly in the sphere of ethics. But, perhaps surprisingly, there has been, until recently, relatively little work done on assessing his overall contribution to the subject. Among the possible reasons for this are that Williams was not a system builder or associated with any particular "school" of moral philosophy, and this, coupled with the extraordinary quickness and subtlety of his thought, makes his views dauntingly tricky to evaluate. A further factor no doubt was the sense that Williams's ideas were continuing to evolve and that his fertile mind was still likely to produce fresh and unexpected developments in his thinking. But since his death in 2003, the secondary literature on Williams has grown: a number of evaluations of his work in encyclopedia entries, a valuable introductory book (by Mark Jenkins), and now Alan Thomas's timely collection of critical essays, which is sure to be followed by several others (Daniel Callcut's *Reading Bernard Williams* is scheduled to appear next year).

The present volume opens with two heavyweight contributions by Adrian Moore and Alan Thomas, which focus on one of the most potent parts of Williams's legacy—his critique of ethical objectivism. That critique stemmed from a fundamental contrast between ethics and science. As Moore begins by pointing out, Williams did not wish to deny that we have ethical knowledge; his claim, rather, was that "the best reflective explanation of our having the ethical knowledge we have, unlike the best reflective explanation of our having the scientific knowledge we have, cannot directly vindicate that knowledge: it cannot directly reveal us as having got anything right" (25). In science, we can expect to vindicate our knowledge via the idea that we are suitably sensitive to *how things are*—a notion that does not necessarily depend on our occupying a certain point of view. Science, as Williams famously argued, strives toward an "absolute conception" of reality, a conception which is not from any point of view, since "it might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us" (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985], chap. 8).

Developing some of his previous reflections on this idea, Moore vigorously refutes as "simply unfair" (28) the attack on the idea of the absolute conception mounted by John McDowell and others, namely, that it thinks of science as a mode of inquiry in which the facts as they really are can directly imprint themselves on our mind in an unmediated way. Williams's position, Moore argues, "does nothing to foreclose the possibility that what is known is essentially conceptual" (29). But what then exempts science from simply amounting, like ethics,

to a conception operating from a point of view that admits of equally legitimate and incompatible alternatives? Moore's answer (whose details are too intricate to be unraveled here) hinges on the point that the absolute conception "can indicate what makes any given items of knowledge true, in such a way as to form part of an account of *how* they are made true" (36).

In his own equally intricate contribution, Thomas examines the way in which Williams's arguments are unsettling for those who wish to hold on to some kind of ethical objectivism. Williams's long-standing interest in "thick" ethical concepts (those such as 'blasphemous' or 'unfaithful', which have, inseparably, both a descriptive and a prescriptive aspect) might seem at first to offer the basis for the kind of objectivism or realism espoused by McDowell and by David Wiggins, where the virtuous person, in virtue of their induction into a certain culture and their grasp of the relevant thick concepts, is regarded as having access to perfectly genuine and objective features of ethical reality. Thomas argues that Williams's sketch of the "hypertraditionalist" society is deeply subversive of such forms of would-be ethical objectivism. In Williams's fable, the hypertraditionalists find, to their dismay, that their own hitherto confident form of ethical life is, as Thomas puts it, "*just one way of going on* amid a range of equally viable alternatives" (50). Once the full implications of this are digested, Thomas argues, the prereflective innocence about ethical reality is irrecoverable: "When reflection destroys our knowledge there is no way back" (61). That said, Thomas ends his essay on a more upbeat note, by deploying some Wittgensteinian resources (what he calls "moral contextualism") as "the best route to avoiding Williams' pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of moral knowledge"—although he concedes that "no sensible form of cognitivism is going to emerge from Williams' critique entirely unscathed" (6).

Williams's resistance to ethical objectivism was linked to his famous 'internalism' about reasons for action—the view that (roughly) someone has reason to φ only if they can reach the conclusion to φ by some sound deliberative route from motivations they already have. In the time since Williams coined this notion, the terms 'internalism' and 'externalism' have been used in so many ways by so many commentators that they now arguably cause more confusion than enlightenment. John Skorupski's essay offers an interesting contribution to the debate by attempting to free Williams's internal-reasons thesis from the Humean belief/desire model of motivation with which it is often associated. Many recent critics of the Humean line have followed Tim Scanlon's lead in pointing out that what gives me reason, for example, to thank you for doing me a good turn does not hinge on what beliefs or desires I have but instead is a matter of what you actually did for me. Accepting this, Skorupski now considers a character, Tom, who has been helped by Mary but who simply has no sense of gratitude— he simply doesn't "get" what it is all about. Do we want to say Tom has reason to thank Mary? Skorupski argues that our response to this question is "interestingly uncertain" (88). On the one hand we want to say, "Of course he does— look what she has done for him!" But on the other hand, we can understand the basis for answering "no"—namely, that Tom just doesn't see the reason-giving force of the fact that she has done him a good turn. This enables Skorupski to offer a revamped version of Williams's internalism: "Only considerations which the agent has the ability to recognize, for him or herself, 'from within', *as* reasons,

can *be* reasons for that agent." Such a thesis, Skorupski argues, "retains its interest even for those who are unimpressed by Humeanism, psychological or normative, about practical reasons" (89).

Skorupski's essay concludes with some stimulating reflections on the scope of blame: how do we deal with people who simply do not recognize the reasons we see as ethically crucial? Williams, always suspicious of the tyranny of the "morality system," followed Nietzsche in criticizing the "fantasy of ressentiment," a vengeful wish to hurt those who do not follow our norms, which clothes itself in the specious garb of 'externalism', insisting that the nonconformists *do* have reason to conform and hence *deserve* blame and punishment. Skorupski himself persuasively argues that we can move away from this disquieting Nietzschean picture by acknowledging that being able to respond to moral reasons is not an all-or-nothing capacity but "comes in degrees." Partial or inchoate responsiveness can be fostered by a process of dialogue, so that I can "come to appreciate reasons that I wouldn't have come to see on my own, by listening to what people I respect think," and hence, by degrees, be "willingly recruited into [a] deliberative community" (101). What we are being offered here is a kind of reconciling project. If Skorupski is right, it is possible to retain at least some of Williams's ethical and psychological insights and develop them in ways that move us away from Nietzsche and appreciably closer to something like a Kantian framework of respect and rational dialogue.

The prospects for such a reconciliation are not made easier by Williams's fierce opposition to the claims of the "morality system," which forms a major theme of three of the four remaining essays in this volume (the final essay, by Edward Craig, offers some methodological reflections on genealogies and state-of-nature stories, which bear indirectly on some of the themes in Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*). Robert B. Louden (who, incidentally, firmly positions Williams in the neo-Humean camp from which Skorupski wants to extract him) brings some formidable Kantian scholarship to bear on the question of how far the "peculiar institution" of morality, about which Williams was so dubious, can be laid at the door of Kant himself. Kant's actual teachings (notably on the role of the emotions in ethics and the legitimacy of self-regarding projects) are, as Louden elegantly shows, considerably more accommodating to the psychology of our ordinary human makeup than Williams's somewhat broad-brush characterization sometimes suggests. On the substantive question of Williams's rejection of the morality system as something we would be "better off without," Louden's response is strong and unequivocal. The categorical imperative "at least puts forward a fundamental criterion . . . by means of which we are to test and evaluate the conclusions of our practical deliberations," whereas Williams gives us nothing in its place: "Agents are charged with determining which projects are 'essential' to their own lives, but they are given no conceptual tools by means of which to ascertain what should really count as essential and why" (120–21). Michael Stocker's essay reaches a similarly critical conclusion in discussing Williams's celebrated (or notorious) "Gauguin" example: "We might well agree that Gauguin would have suffered . . . if he had been false to his identity as a painter and remained at home. But we can still hold that nonetheless, in many, even though not all, important ways, he should have stayed with his family. . . . Sometimes a correct response upon hearing what it would

take to be true to someone's identity is 'That's too bad!' or 'You must be joking!'" (143–44).

Many regard *Shame and Necessity*, the book in which Williams explored some key contrasts between ancient Greek ethics and our modern ethical outlook, as his masterpiece. In his rich and thoughtful essay, A. A. Long focuses on Williams's admiration for ancient Greek ethics, which he saw as "shame-based" and hence, in important respects, in better shape than our supposedly more mature and sophisticated modern moral outlook based on guilt and responsibility. Long demonstrates that Williams's view of Greek ethics was "highly selective" (163). The figure of Ajax, for example, whom Williams sees presented in Sophocles' play as concerned with authenticity and being true to himself, is in fact depicted as responding to "husbandly and fatherly responsibilities" which are "required of him" (172). So the picture is more complex (and contains more similarities with our modern moral outlook) than Williams suggests; in general, Williams's "interest in stigmatizing the modern concept of moral guilt and its Kantian and Christian associations muddies the waters as far as understanding early Greek ideas is concerned" (174).

The matters raised by Long are clearly not simply textual and interpretative but connect with a certain disquiet, found in several of the essays in this volume, at Williams's onslaught on the "morality system." But both the reconcilers who want to mitigate the unsettling force of his conclusions and the critics who want to resist them head-on are united in acknowledging the subtlety and power of Williams's ethical vision. This excellent collection sharpens our understanding of many aspects of that vision, whose implications are still far from being fully digested by the philosophical community. Williams may not have produced a grand system of philosophy, but he did, as Long notes at the close of his essay, have a remarkable mission—"to make moral philosophy an enterprise that is true to the complexity of human life as it is actually lived or brilliantly imagined" (178).

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