

The Moral Philosophy of Bernard Williams

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Edited by

Alexandra Perry and Chris Herrera

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Spring, 2013

—C. D. Herrera and Alexandra Perry, Society for Moral Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

SO MUCH FOR ETHICS

C.D. HERRERA

"A true philosophy must accept and justify every side of human nature, including itself. Like other things it has its place in that system where at once every place and no place is supreme. The mastery of that system of thought, however far we carry it, leaves philosophy still the servant of an order which it accepts and could never have made."

—F. H. Bradley, 1914, p. 14

"Ethical life is not a unitary given thing, and there are many different possibilities within it for education, social decision, even perhaps for personal regeneration. Within the kind of ethical life we find ourselves in, there are diversities, incoherences, and instruments of self-criticism."

—Bernard Williams, 1985, p. 4

Overview

If I was to declare my skepticism towards religion, I would in the process hand you a number of assumptions about what I believe and how you should interpret my behavior. You might then think that you know how to read my actions if, say, you saw me leaving a church. Having heard me claim to be a religious skeptic, you could assume that I must have been at a friend's wedding. Were you to believe in things like god or an afterlife yourself, you might even have some sense of how you could try to bring me around. You might think that you could at least provide reasons for the superiority of your own beliefs. Would this kind of response be possible if I had announced that I am a moral skeptic instead? We can imagine an ethicist answering that it would not be.

That is because, the ethicist might say, moral skeptics can appear to not understand what is, or needs to be, going on when we judge behavior or beliefs. As a result, they give us, instead of meaningful discussion of ethical issues and concepts, a confused account of how our moral systems

work. There are also, the ethicist might add, inherent ambiguities in the idea of moral skepticism that, on some interpretations, make it sound self-refuting or incoherent. One of the best reasons to devote an anthology to the work of Bernard Williams is that he seemed, among moral skeptics, to see most clearly what he was up against. For several decades, Williams wrote as one who knew that the skeptic's message will often sound this way, more intriguing than worrisome, and sometimes more confused than anything else. In this Introduction, I will try to say a bit about this perception, and where Williams might have said that ethics can go after, and in spite of, moral skepticism.¹

The Credibility Gap

In the religion example, there might be no real question of what the skeptic remains unconvinced by. We might also think that it would be easy, along these same lines, to get at least a rough idea of which beliefs the religious skeptic might try to get the theist to discard. Of course, in actual cases, this characterization might seem optimistic; beliefs can be more complicated, as can the process of clarifying them. But the analogy does at least get at an important point that arises in the discussion of moral skepticism. Given the variety of moral beliefs that we encounter, and the moral problems that we at least think that we can solve, it can seem that moral skepticism ought to be taken seriously. Yet there are ethicists who can seem unmoved, if not a little disappointed with the warnings about the difficulty in proving a moral point or showing how moral judgments relate to empirical facts. It is still common to observe ethicists who nod approvingly when they hear these skeptical thoughts, mumble something about the complexity of it all, and go on doing ethics.

Why would this be so? An ethicist might contend that if moral skeptics face a credibility problem, it is not one very different from what epistemic or metaphysical skeptics encounter. How many of us even pretend to care, the ethicist might ask, that we could be dreaming or that the sidewalk on the way home might not be real? If we do bother at all to address the skeptic who raises such warnings, we might claim to be at a loss when it comes to knowing how the warnings are supposed to apply to us. We might offer a few quick references to David Hume and backgammon, and be on our way.² The ethicist might say that we are justified in expressing puzzlement, sometimes in response to the epistemic skeptic's derision, when we hear the message. Short of constantly re-inspecting the sidewalks and the rest of the world around us, what would the epistemic skeptic have us do differently?

So it is with moral skepticism, the ethicist might claim. But I think that this analogy is misleading on several fronts. On one hand, moral skeptics raise a number of interesting philosophical issues, so should be willing to explain this error in reasoning that everyone else is supposed to commit when he or she judges behavior. Where skeptics seem uninterested in doing this, they have more than a simple problem of credibility. They run up against the expectation that they show why, in an ordinary day, most of us seem to navigate just fine through what can seem to be countless moral choices, if not moral dilemmas. This seems to me a reasonable demand if a critique of ethics is to gain much traction. There is little question that many of us do feel that we know *enough* about how we should treat each other in these cases, and which moral rules should apply. We do not seem to encounter confusion or a false sense of security, for instance, at every turn in our moral lives.

On the other hand, I don't think that this indicates a disconnect between what the moral skeptic is getting at and the kinds of things that non-skeptics use ethics for or the way that others speak of ethical issues. Once those discussions begin, it turns out that skeptics usually hold many of the same beliefs that ethicists hold. While moral skeptics will probably rule something out, for example, just what they are skeptical of is usually left to interpretation (Machuca, 2006). Williams used the example of operating without anesthesia when it was available to the surgeon (as Bambrough, 1979 had earlier). But Williams and other skeptics typically are quick to add that we can list more mundane acts which seem to be clearly wrong, or we might say, wrong enough. Skeptics will also, in my experience, usually concede that it would be premature to advocate for significant changes to the way that society is organized and governed.

Might the ethicist claim that there is something incoherent in a set of beliefs which includes doubts about our ability to justify moral claims and support for the incarceration of murderers? That is a complicated issue, but again, it does not have to mean that skeptics are confused, or that they must have in mind a very abstract, meta-philosophical conception of ethics. That charge is almost always misplaced. Williams did distinguish between ethics and moral philosophy, and he had somewhat novel views about philosophical progress.³ Although it was not always clear what he meant his distinction to come to in practical terms, Williams seemed to understand moral philosophy as a specific development within Western philosophy, one that might or might not be seen as separate from ethics. Williams referred to morality as "the peculiar institution," and reserved the term "ethics" for the pre-philosophical, jumbled, often conflicting beliefs that the average person holds about right and wrong. As we have seen, the

skepticism enters into the account that Williams gave where he claimed that moral philosophy can only do so much to help us with those beliefs about ethics.⁴

Much of this does go against the conventional wisdom, Williams realized, and with some hindsight, we can think that it tends to make him look as much like a skeptic of moral philosophy as he was a moral skeptic (another distinction that might annoy the ethicist). But it would be strange to suggest that the arguments that Williams made in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and other works were somehow out-of-touch. What were those arguments not acquainted with or aware of? An obvious answer is that the skeptic's arguments are insufficiently grounded in knowledge about what we might think of as moral *reality*. But even that term is loaded, since there is no consensus on what type of reality we are speaking of, and what kind of access we have to it. Nor is there agreement on what should be done when two rival moral claims compete. Not surprisingly, one of the most controversial issues in moral philosophy has been just when we should lift up the rope, and let those from another moral reality into ours. These are not trivial concerns, the skeptic will say, and they are not foreign to the kinds of demands that ethics places on us in a typical day.

As Williams explained, there are risks in the way that we tend to place so much faith in philosophy when it comes time to justify our moral claims. This has us traveling in a circle, Williams believed, where we begin to think that there must be a continuous and transparent line of reasons for thinking that someone should do X, for instance, or that we can have an obligation to Y. In that regard, Williams seems to have been correct to attribute our confidence in this process to assumptions that we have about philosophy, which is where we usually turn when asked to supply the necessary reasons.⁵ It does seem true that we usually think that we must justify our moral judgments, and that we can be expected to show, usually through argument, how this might be done.

Overall, then, the skeptic does not have to deny that some of the distinctions Williams was working with when explaining this process are more fine-grained than ones that we would come across in a discussion with non-academics. But the burden of proof still seems to be on the ethicist to show that Williams and other skeptics are talking about something far removed from the ethics that others recognize. And, it is worth pointing out, Williams did not claim that this progression was unique to moral philosophy, only that it posed the greatest challenge there. Where it is uncertain how one might, so to speak, do ethics without also having to do philosophy, the moral skeptic therefore has a reasonable

concern. If anyone is out-of-touch, the moral skeptic might say, it is the ethicist.

Why, then, would there still be some support for the objection that skeptics can come across as disingenuous, intellectual phoneys who are aware that it would be unreasonable for them to take their own skeptical thoughts very far? In other words, why would ethicists object that in their daily lives skeptics are as willing as anyone else to play a role in the construction of the moral systems which they, once back on campus, claim to doubt? Once, while interviewing at a large university, I was asked how I would feel about serving as the ethics consultant for business leaders in the area. When I said something to the effect that I would try to get the execs to understand the limits of our ability to defend moral judgments, I could almost hear my name being scratched off the list of recruits. I gathered that comments like mine struck the interviewers as so much posturing, almost as if they thought I was using irony to make a cynical statement about morality. But moral skeptics are owed some explanation of what it is that they are accused of being so ironic about. Or, to put the issue another way, we could ask which moral truths the skeptic is supposed to be putting on a show of denying.

Initially, we can understand how an ethicist, hearing these remarks, might grow frustrated: "is there really nothing that would count as a compelling moral argument? Surely we all can't throw up our hands, and swear off moral judgments!" If that is what skepticism seems to point towards, the ethicist might say, then so much for skepticism. We now know, however, that skepticism does not have to own-up to this characterization, and it is rare to meet a moral skeptic who urges that we all stop evaluating behavior. We should know this, one might say, if we survey the history of moral philosophy, since this caricature of the skeptic was first proposed, and dealt with, in Ancient times. Admittedly, getting this message across, that skeptics are more willing than is sometimes assumed to cut deals with the ethicist, is not always a straightforward process. What is frustrating, however, is the way that this often seems to be more of a rhetorical or social problem than one having to do with logic or internal consistency.

Could the problem be that where we should locate the burden of proof for points like these is itself a difficult philosophical tangle? Who gets to define what counts as a reputable approach to doing ethics? It is hard not to get drawn into a much larger dispute, when responding to questions like these, about the prospects of making headway on moral problems. The skeptic is often portrayed as doubting whether such headway is possible, but I think that it is more common to find skeptics content to ask what

moral progress would mean, or how we could know if we had accomplished it. On issues such as those, it can seem that the ethicists are the ones ducking the request for evidence.

We would probably over-simplify things if we attempted to mediate the dispute by asking the ethicist whether, if things like moral truths exist, we can take a book on ethics from the 19th Century and show how the claims in it have been superseded by books from the 20th or 21st. Still, if we think that such a test does over-simplify the matter, what would be a more practical measure of progress or certainty? The skeptic will say that we can't set aside the idea of moral progress, even if it is a complicated one, for very long: in many settings, we have grown accustomed to thinking that skeptic's stance is regressive. The skeptic ponders while the ethicists roll up their sleeves and get to work. The ethicist can charge that, because skeptics are already using some of the ideas and concepts that they claim to find problematic, they should set aside their agenda in the interest of the greater public good. The skeptic who refuses to put much stock in a distinction between killing and letting-die, for instance, can seem to be holding up progress on the moral discussions about euthanasia. There is some appeal in putting philosophy to work, and I don't see why skeptics would have to deny that much. But the skeptic can still ask what it would mean to be invited onto the team, since it may not be accurate to claim that skeptic ever walked away from the project of trying to resolve social and ethical problems in the first place.

The ethicist can try to show that this is in fact what skeptics are doing, even if those skeptics are not forthcoming about their isolationism. But the arguments used to show this never seem very convincing, particularly when analogies are again employed. That is, the ethicist might charge that the epistemic skeptic who refuses to trust sidewalks is only acting irrationally, not acting immorally. In contrast, moral skeptics can appear negligent if they claim that, because of their doubts, they cannot say much about Right and Wrong (in the classroom or outside of it). The trouble with this comparison is that it smuggles in too many assumptions that, the skeptic will argue, are themselves in contention. The objection this time might build on the idea that scholars who work in moral philosophy have a duty to get to work "in private and public human life where what people think, feel, and do make all the difference there is" (Callahan, 1973, p. 71). So far, so good, but if there is confidence in that kind of mission, Williams might have said, it could only derive from a more diffuse confidence in philosophy as a whole. If Williams was right, the doubts about the soundness of our moral judgments almost have to spill over into substantive concerns about the confidence that we can have in philosophy

itself. In particular, Williams warned, we should be more cautious about accepting the idea that moral philosophy can provide us with answers to the "how should I live?" question. We should be equally concerned, Williams thought, with the idea that moral philosophy can tell us how to sort through the different ways that people act on those answers.

Still, it is common to read fairly encouraging accounts of the promise of philosophy. As one commentator puts it, "by its systematic exploration of reasons and reasoning, analytical philosophy helps to consolidate the intellectual infrastructure that is needed for systems of social organization within which disputes are reflected in argument and counter-argument, rather than in the use or threat of violence" (Cohen, 1986, p. 61). It is then customary to narrow the view in a way that makes the ethicist's duty out to be even greater. "We must all take responsibility," another writer tells us, "for the resolution of the moral problems that confront us. However, . . . moral philosophers have an important and distinctive intellectual contribution to make" (Miller, 2009, p. 194). The problem is, many skeptics might be willing to grant the importance of addressing social issues, working within the limitations of moral arguments, and trying to do what they can to correct unjust policies (Nelson, 2003). These skeptics could only be concerned that in many cases, it will seem to be all too easy to think that we can administer the necessary dose of ethics and be done with it.

This might sound, to the ethicist, as if the skeptic's message is still too gloomy. Is ethics really in such bad shape? The ethicist might note that, in the period in which Williams was writing, there were advisories from ethicists about the dangers of relying too much on principles like respect-for-autonomy, and on ethical theories like deontology or utilitarianism. This was a time when advocacy for theories built from "care ethics" and contractualist ideas could be heard along with recommendations that ethicists pay closer attention to ordinary life experience, that they better appreciate great fiction (e.g. Phillips, 1992; Diamond, 1982), and that they rediscover classical models of the virtues and casuistry, for instance (MacIntyre, 1984). Also during this period, ethicists who were starting to go public as consultants or even experts were warned by other ethicists not to over-emphasize Ivory Tower thinking, or tired interpretations of thought experiments in moral philosophy (see, Gorovitz, 1986; Jamieson, 1988).⁶ Recommendations like these are still heard today (Holmes, 1990), as is the advice that ethicists better acquaint themselves with science and mind their facts (Buchanan, 2004). Setting aside the differences in scope and possible application, the gist of the recommendations is that things are not nearly as

bad as the skeptic would have us believe. If there are problems in the way that ethics gets done, ethicists aren't standing on the sidelines watching, and skeptics shouldn't be either.

It might seem that suggestions like these show a discipline in the process of continual renewal and self-criticism, and as before, I don't see why a skeptic would have to deny the promise in such suggestions.⁷ But for each of the suggested refinements to methodology that one might come across in the literature, it is usually not clear what sort of test we might apply. One observer of the discipline claims that

[T]he neo-Aristotelian movement has provided an important injection of vitality to the field of analytic moral philosophy. The concerns of neo-Aristoteleans have provided fresh air. . . . Moreover the general atmosphere of ethical theory is currently one where a broad range of philosophical approaches are encouraged and where the mutual benefits of taking opposing approaches seriously are emphasized (Hamalainen, 2009, p. 543).

The skeptic is within bounds to ask how anyone can say whether progress is really being made on an ethical controversy. One might also ask whether there is proof that the "fresh air" mentioned here has led to improved moral reasoning. The skeptic can object that ethicists who offer recommendations about methods and progress often do not sound completely persuaded themselves that we can really say whether progress is really being made on an ethical controversy.

For its part, science can tell us a great deal about world, the skeptic might say, and this might seem enough reason to think that the more facts that we pack into our moral arguments, the better. In our discussions about moral issues we do not simply state that something like abortion is right or wrong. We also state, implicitly or otherwise, many other things about the world that abortion is a part of. Even our reliance on the more nebulous concepts like blame or praise is shaped by a cultural inheritance of beliefs about factual evidence, and about the cause and effect behind the changes that we introduce (Williams, 1994). But the moral skeptic can reply that any theoretical account of how we ought to incorporate facts into our arguments, or how we might model our reasoning on the experimental method, will beg the questions about justification and moral reality that we looked at earlier.

In some ways, it is hard to see how a skeptic could deny this today: it would take a thorough-going false consciousness on our part to overlook the sometimes bewildering amount of information that science delivers to us about other peoples, cultures, and times as well (Hampshire, 1989).⁸ Nevertheless, we know that the skeptic and ethicist will differ on the

question of whether this information will do much to help us do what morality seems to demand. When we take a position on a moral issue, we abstract from a larger view of the relevant features about our world. Despite this, the skeptic will say, we should not forget that ethics is also a part of that world. It is in that respect that the skeptic can argue that recommendations that we be more scientifically informed must be judged the same way that we assess advice about learning the lessons from novels and opera. We surely have more facts at our disposal than the ethicists of previous generations did, but that we do not have proof that this has led to better moral arguments.⁹ What we still lack is consensus on what *moral* relevance this or that method ought to have (Larmore, 1987).

Where ethicists do seem to solve moral problems, that might be only because the definition of the problems, and the tone of the solutions, have become very predictable.¹⁰ Williams was probably onto something when he warned that a lot of the activity among ethicists continues "for no obvious reason except that it has been going on for a long time." That should not be taken as evidence that Williams wasn't being sincere when he remarked that our moral systems are like rafts which we can repair while at sea. Rather, we might think that Williams was advocating that we look for approaches that hold a greater possibility of success, and that this will mean not simply retreating into moral philosophy. If the question is then what such reform in our thinking might involve, skeptics can answer that we can take a hard look at what we want moral systems to do, identifying how those systems might have led us astray, and how much of the work we want to share with disciplines outside of philosophy. Reform might also involve questions about how much of the work should be left to scholars or specialists in the best of cases.

Some of these ideas are compatible with the recommendations that ethicists have made, usually those directed at the work of other ethicists. Best of all, the skeptic could envision changes in the role that we assign to moral philosophy without this also involving an attempt to prune ethics away from that. It might be that there is no practical way to compromise on some issues; key among these would be questions concerning how we should understand, and respond to, the diversity of beliefs, and disagreement about moral problems. But it seems that meaningful reform would have to involve increased attention to our history, and the lessons that it might or might not hold. This was one of the most important contributions that Williams made to our study of moral skepticism: he seemed to say that our own history holds what might be crucial implications for the way that we think about morality and moral philosophy.

Williams did leave it somewhat unclear where we should think that the causal arrows point, and whether, for instance, the Ancient Greeks possessed a kind of naivete that allowed them to believe that they could manage ethical problems better than we would say that they really were able to today (the controversy over "thick concepts" relates to this point). But the issue is not simply whether moral philosophers can learn from the past.¹¹ The issue is still that of what it would mean to say that our handling of ethical issues in the past was better, or even that it could be improved now (cf. Brentano, 1973, esp. p. 66-68; Schmitz, 1995, esp. pp. 131-137). Ethicists and skeptics seem to have an equal interest in clarifying such things, which brings us back to the task of reconciling the confidence that we have about the scripts and routines of ethics with the urge we have to see that such things can be rationally justified.

There is much work to be done, but it is to his credit that Williams did speak with condescension on this, as some skeptics do, and we have seen that he did not write in a defeatist tone. Williams did not hint that we land in this predicament when we are misled by nuances in the language of philosophy, for example, or when we under-estimate the relationship between ethics and power. Better still, Williams did not try to convince us to dispense with moral philosophy, or announce that philosophers should now resist the temptation to weigh-in on ethical issues. Other moral skeptics had of course gone in that direction. In their own way, Nietzscheans, Continentals, and Critical Theorists express a similar distrust of morality and philosophy. Williams offered no pronouncements about how at this point in our history morality is a mere prejudice, and that we should free ourselves from philosophy.

As Williams might have warned, there is little reason to think that we could really pull that off. We can't pull it off, at any rate, if breaking free would call for us to start thinking of morality as a cluster of social conventions, with equal parts of prejudice and religious carry-overs, which we should by now have outgrown. We still need ethics, Williams argued, and we may need ethical knowledge now more than we ever have. Again, the skeptic can grant that satisfying these needs will require philosophy, just as it will require that we take notice of the legacy of concepts and distinctions that have come down to us in moral philosophy. This is, admittedly, not always an uplifting message: Williams argued that philosophy can no longer claim to have a monopoly on rational, reflective thought. But this is partly because, as Williams explained, institutions like law and medicine are becoming more reflective and critical all the time. Where that is so, it is hard to see why such developments are anything other than positive. (If nothing else, the more that applied ethics spreads

itself across the disciplines, the more we can hope for improved job security for applied ethicists.)

Closing Thoughts

I have tried to show that there is not always as much separation as we might think between the skeptic and the ethicist. In addition, I have tried to show that in at least some cases, the skeptic is unfairly accused of being too tolerant for his or her own good, and at the same time, being cavalier about moral diversity. If continued discussion of these issues can do anything, it is appealing to think that it might at least overcome the perception that the skeptical position is far too cheerful towards relativism. I will close with a few thoughts about that.

The perception that the skeptic is willing to recognize that different cultures have different moral codes might not be so bad: as we have seen, it is what seems to be a scientifically informed position. The trouble, however, is that in the hands of some ethicists, this model of skepticism is presented as though such beliefs must also commit the skeptic to belief in nihilism. The brand of nihilism which is then cashed out is said to support a belief that all opinions about right and wrong are on equal footing. The general idea seems to be that we should view skepticism as though it is a threat, not merely a mistaken theory about ethics.

I have heard of teachers who address what they see as the dangers of skepticism by publically shaming any student who confesses to having some sympathy for the skeptic's doubts about things like moral facts. These young skeptics are asked, in front of their classmates, whether they would mind living next door to a Nazi, or if they regard cannibalism as a live option as supertime approaches. After all, the reasoning goes, as moral skeptics, aren't they supposed to deny that we can make any moral distinctions? Some Ethics textbooks do not do much better than this (e.g., Sterba, 2001, esp. pp. 2-19). The trend there is for authors to give an overview of moral skepticism, make that position out to be defeatist and incoherent, and then proceed to the various moral theories. "With *that* out of the way," the authors seem to say. Finally, there is also the empirical prediction, sometimes heard in responses to skepticism, that society would cease to exist if too many people were to sign-on to the skeptic's moral doubts and live by them (Naess, 1969, p. 60).

However effective these setups of skepticism are in rhetorical terms, too much effort seems to go towards making a point about the limits of tolerance which I think that many skeptics would readily grant. Williams was clear on the question of whether skepticism had to signify a

disinterested acceptance of any and all lifestyles. He stressed that we can believe that there is some truth to what the relativist says without also having to adopt an extreme liberal view of what it means to be for or against something. This is good news, if the skeptic wants to agree that cannibals might have what they consider a legitimate moral code without that meaning that, as outsiders, we have to follow their lead. The skeptic's point is that things are going to get very dicey when we try to explain the significance of this diversity, and moving on to moral theory doesn't seem like the best way to respond to that need for explanation. Both ethicists and skeptics seem to need to say what it would mean for there to be another moral code, legitimate or not, and it is hard to understand why the responsibility for that explanation should fall to the skeptic.

I am skeptical that we can make sense of claims about moral progress, but it is an interesting concept, and it is hard to see any harm in our giving it a go. If we are to do that, it seems that our chances for moral progress rest on our being able to explain moral disagreements, what they represent, or why they are usually seen as something that we can smooth over with the right theory or list of principles. I think that the skeptic is right to be concerned that we take too much of a shortcut if we simply deny that anyone who doesn't agree with us cannot therefore have a genuine moral code. For the skeptic, that move puts important issues off for later, which, the skeptical will complain, are almost never taken up again. In addition, the skeptic can maintain that we should be more concerned than we usually are about the lack of support for the confidence that we have in the very ideas which we usually regard as being central to activities like promising, judging, and criticizing.

We could expand that category of activities to include the attempts that we make to see that our beliefs form a coherent set, and that they are universalizable. The skeptic can concede that, at some level, we will want to believe that moral judgments can be universalized, that we not contradict ourselves, and so on. J. L. Mackie, a contemporary of Williams, is also a representative skeptic of this position. As skeptical as he was about such things as moral facts, Mackie also stressed the importance of obligations, and universality in moral judgments (Mackie, 1977, pp. 64-102). Not only that, it does seem true that people expect that moral rules will apply to everyone in a particular community, for instance, regardless of social or economic class. Regardless of how common such ideas are, the skeptic can be troubled by the fact that moral philosophy has not put much effort into showing how these beliefs are justified (or justifiable).

The skeptic can, in other words, grant that it is good to be confident about our ability to arrive at moral judgments, or when we make the

distinctions that seem necessary if we are to rank one lifestyle against another. And the range of concessions that the skeptic has to make to a kind of folk-ethics should be enough to help rehabilitate this negative image of the skeptic, one that has him or her looking like an enemy of private and public values. Where we can move beyond the image of the cynical, ironic skeptic, there are a number of important things that skeptics and ethicists might come to agree on (or, we might say, things that they have agreed on all along). Williams, for instance, wondered why ethicists have usually been confident that their theories do not have to cover those we might think of as holdouts:

[W]hen an amoralist calls ethical considerations in doubt, and suggests that there is no reason to follow the requirements of morality, *what can we say to him?* But what can we say to him if there is a justification of morality? We can put the justification before him. But why should he be expected to stay where we have put it? Why should he listen? (1985, p. 22; Williams, 1972/1993, p. 9).

With this "amoralist" in mind, Williams meant to suggest that moral philosophers since Plato have been too quick to assume that someone will value being an ethical person (or can learn to value that). It does seem true that moral philosophers have generally presupposed that obligations can be backed by reasons, and that arguments can be offered which will make us all take comfort where we think we are right, or realize where we must mend our ways where the arguments show us to be wrong. This was what Williams described as the "Archimedean point," a phrase Stuart Hampshire had used earlier, with a similar meaning. But common experience, the skeptic will say, should lead us to question whether there is much behind assumptions like these, and whether such leverage can be found.

The ethicist might reply that these are reasonable concerns, but that it isn't obvious which conclusions one should draw from these reflections on moral reasoning or moral psychology (Lear, 1983). Still, Williams was not suggesting that this was only a problem of establishing the objectivity of ethics (though it is at least that). Nor was Williams the first to see something problematic in the way that moral philosophy rests on there being a way to bring people into line via rational argument. Many who might not have described themselves as moral skeptics have expressed similar reservations. Much earlier, F. H. Bradley had suggested that

[I]f a man asserts total skepticism, you can not argue with him. You can show that he contradicts himself; but if he says, 'I do not care', there is an end to it. So, too, if a man says, 'I shall do what I like, because I happen to

like it; and as for ends, I recognize none', you may indeed show him that his conduct is in fact otherwise; and if he will assert anything as an end, if he will but say, 'I have no end but myself', then you may argue with him, and try to prove that he is making a mistake as to the nature of the end he alleges. But if he says, 'I care not whether I am moral or rational, nor how much I contradict myself', then argument ceases (Bradley, 1927, p. 58; see also Frader, 1992; Weinstein, 1994).

Traditionally, moral philosophers defer, on issues like these, to other areas of inquiry. This means that certain conversations do not take place within the mainstream of Western moral philosophy. Williams might have said that is because the conversation which started with the ancient Greeks has led us to assume that the persons whose moral judgments apply to will want to flourish, they will want to be rational, maximize happiness, and so on. But even if we don't fully accept that historical interpretation, assumptions of that nature do seem to rest on the prospects of arguing a person into moral considerations, as Williams and Bradley seem to have believed. The skeptic seems to have a point when noting that we often do ask why a person ought to internalize moral rules, or why one should care whether those rules are being applied fairly. Where we continue on without asking where we get the answers to such questions, it is worth wondering why.

That skeptical stance does not have to include an allegation that ethicists ignore such meta-ethical concerns outright. A more reasonable position would be that the inertia within the discipline nudges ethicists towards an idea that they have important work to do, and cannot afford to dwell on lingering doubts about relativism, for example, or whether we can really put a progressive spin on the drift of moral values over time ("they used to deny women the vote, whereas we know better....").¹² For the skeptic, reform would mean that the discipline consider whether it functions too much like a Philosophical-Industrial Complex, within which ethicists can assume that their readers will see the benefit of following the moral law, and they can employ concepts like justice or obligation when they want a reader's intuitions to point in the right direction. As we have seen, some ethicists might prefer that skeptics take their public admission of doubts about such things somewhere else. But if skeptics are right, it is for now unclear where they might relocate to. Ideas taken from systems of morality extend so thoroughly across cultures that revising beliefs about a particular act, or the way that we should judge it, will require that one be prepared to revise a great deal more. Even our beliefs about skepticism are by now part of our cultural inheritance.

On the campus where I first taught philosophy, a few drunken students were caught one night defacing a Native American lodge which was set up in the Quad (they had also urinated on it while some students were sleeping inside). The University President ordered that, as their punishment, the guilty students would have to take a course on ethics, and some of those students enrolled in mine. Would this have been the wrong time to lecture the students on moral skepticism? I was collecting a paycheck for teaching, so in some respects I would have been professionally irresponsible to have used that opportunity to acquaint the students with the idea that, when it comes to moral truths, each culture or group ought to have its own set of those. But, we can now ask, if that would have been a lesson better left for another time, what time would have been better, and which lesson would we someday want to share?

At issue in the conversation between skeptics and ethicists are important meta-philosophical concerns, having to do with how any of us can know when we are going about things the right way. I think that the skeptic has a strong case that before we can say that this or that interferes with our ability to address real-world problems, we need to have a fairly complicated theory, and the skeptic will hope that it is not simply another ethical theory, to show that a particular style of reasoning should receive attention over another style.¹³ By the same token, a claim that an ethicist is not relying on the proper formulation of a principle or theory is a claim that we can solve a moral problem (one having to do with methodology) in its own right. The skeptic might insist, at the same time, that skeptics and ethicists will need to compromise on the idea that our moral narratives and judgments can be localized, not just to physical geography, but historical context as well (for similar ideas, see Flyvbjerg, 2001). The skeptic who holds these beliefs can grant that there are many things that we can do to improve our ability to say how one ought to live. What the skeptic will I think also have to believe, however, is that the makeup and evaluation of our moral arguments will for some time have to be a function of the bargains that we are willing to make, and the collective values that we want a moral system to sustain.

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CHAPTER ONE

BERNARD WILLIAMS: A REMINISCENCE

JEFF McMAHAN

Bernard Williams was my doctoral supervisor at Cambridge from 1979 to 1986. Derek Parfit had supervised my work toward the DPhil at Oxford for two terms, after which my funding there had run out. When I was offered a comparable level of funding at Cambridge, Parfit urged me to accept the position but to continue to spend most of my time in Oxford and to continue to work unofficially with him. He kindly arranged for my wife and me to have the top-floor flat in his parents' house in north Oxford. But Cambridge proved to be surprisingly generous. My college, St. John's, provided us with an entire house ideally located near the town center and, more gratifying still, Williams had agreed to be my supervisor. I divided my first year under his supervision between the flat in the Parfits' house and the house in Cambridge, but after that moved full time to Cambridge.

Although I was Williams's student for seven years, I was never more than that. I attended some of his lectures and classes and saw him occasionally at other events, but I did not know him socially and most of the many hours I spent in conversation with him were devoted to the discussion of ideas and arguments in my doctoral thesis on population ethics. It is one of my great regrets that I saw him again only a few times between my departure from Cambridge in 1986 and his death in 2003. What follows can therefore be no more than a superficial sketch, enlivened, I hope, by a few amusing anecdotes.

Williams was a strikingly handsome man. He had an energetic personality, though the energy was more of the mind than of the body. His movements were often rather languid, his posture somewhat slouching. He always wore a coat and tie, even during supervisions. He was slender and his clothes fit him loosely, so that they tended to hang from him. Among his most attractive features was a frequent smile that accented his

dazzlingly brilliant conversation. It was manifest more in a subtle crinkling beside the right eye than in the movement of his sensuous lips. The combined force of his powerful mind, his colorful and witty use of language, and that utterly disarming smile was overwhelming and irresistible.

He exuded self-confidence and intellectual authority, though this was combined with great charm and geniality. He could thus seem simultaneously patrician and egalitarian. Though there was much of which he was disdainful, he never impressed me as arrogant. Arrogance would have been beneath him. His manner was generally one of buoyant gaiety; he delighted in the play of ideas and the bon mot. Yet this demeanor contrasted with the general character of his thought, which was skeptical, disenchanted, and pessimistic. Thus, when a friend of mine once asked him about his attitude to life, he replied that it was nicely articulated in the final stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" – a bleak vision indeed. His observations about philosophy and politics were occasionally tinged with contempt or aversion. He detested Mrs. Thatcher and her cabinet, with their crass and complacent managerial cast of mind.

Williams was, of course, famous for his lacerating remarks not only about ideas he thought false but also about people or acts that displeased him. His genius for the cleverly scathing put-down was irrepressible and would emerge on occasion even during my supervisions with him. I recall, for example, his saying of one prominent philosopher that his "politeness is acquired." Another he described as "a robot cleverly disguised as a human being," and I also recall his referring to a rather aggressive ancient philosopher as a "Stagirite gorilla." I wish I could report that his targets were always well chosen, but some were people I greatly admire. Despite his general liberality, there were a few matters on which his views were surprisingly conventional. He was, for example, shocked by the suggestion that a permissive view about abortion might imply the occasional permissibility of infanticide, and he tended to be dismissive of vegetarianism and other manifestations of moral concern for animals. Philosophers writing on such issues therefore tended to elicit his derision. Many years later, when he was teaching at Berkeley and I gave a talk there on a topic related to these issues, I was not spared, though it was clear that his humor at my expense was intended in a friendly way and I endeavored, unsuccessfully of course, to give as good as I got.

While Williams's remarks about vegetarians and animal activists were always disparaging, I was always too intimidated by him to challenge them. So while I was his student, I never discovered what his reasons were for thinking that there was nothing seriously wrong in practices

involving the harming and killing of animals. But I assumed that they must be good reasons. I had become a vegetarian four years before I began the study of philosophy (and thus seven years before I met Williams). Hence, after I had begun to work in philosophy, I followed the emerging arguments about meat-eating and related practices and eventually came to believe that there were simply no good arguments in the literature for the permissibility of eating meat. This was perhaps the only area of active moral controversy in which it seemed to me that *all* the weight of the argument was on one side. Yet when I would express that view, I would qualify it by noting that Bernard Williams must have good arguments for the opposing view and that I wished I knew what they were. Shortly after he died I found out. For a friend sent me the text of a lecture he had delivered toward the end of his life called “The Human Prejudice,” which appeared a few years later in one of the several posthumously published collections of his essays, some previously unpublished. Though written with characteristic wit and flair, this essay was a profound disappointment (or, perhaps, given my own views, a great relief). In it he argues against vegetarians and other opponents of practices involving the harming and killing of animals by appealing to “thick” ethical concepts such as loyalty to and identity with other members of one’s kind – in this case, one’s species. This was disappointing in two respects: first, there was nothing new in it and, second, these concepts cannot plausibly justify the range of practices that Williams presumably wished to defend. One’s relations to others can indeed ground moral reasons of various sorts – for example, the moral reason I have to benefit my child, or to protect my child from harm, is stronger, and significantly stronger, than the reason I have to benefit or protect a stranger. Similarly, assuming that comembership in the human species is a significant special relation, the reason I have to benefit a radically cognitively impaired human being, or to protect that human being from harm, may be significantly stronger than my reason to benefit or protect an animal with comparable psychological capacities. But there is an asymmetry here between benefiting and harming. It is absurd to suppose that if the person before me were not my child but a stranger, my reason not to kill him would be substantially weaker. Similarly, if the human being before me has psychological capacities and potentials comparable to those of an animal, that my reason not to torment or kill him would not be significantly weaker if he were not in fact a member of my species.

Williams also fails to take account of the fact that the degree of partiality that may be licensed by a special relation varies with the objective moral significance of the relation. Thus, for example, while my

reason to benefit or protect my child is significantly stronger than my reason to benefit or protect a stranger, my reason as an individual to benefit or protect a stranger who is a citizen of my state is not significantly stronger than my reason to provide a comparable benefit or protection for a stranger who is a citizen of a different state. Williams never asks where along the spectrum of special relations comembership in the human species lies, but it clearly belongs, along with comembership in the same race, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the parent-child relation. This is a second reason for thinking that Williams's arguments in "The Human Prejudice" are largely irrelevant to the permissibility of meat-eating and other practices that inflict great suffering on animals or deprive them of their lives. Hence, on the assumption that the arguments in this essay are the best Williams could do on behalf of those practices, I no longer feel compelled to qualify my claim that there are no plausible moral arguments that favor the permissibility of our current practice of eating animals.

Vegetarians had no special claim to Williams's satirical attentions. He was quite catholic in his distastes. Among philosophers, his particular *bête noir* was Richard Hare. Since Hare deployed arguments reminiscent of Kant to arrive at utilitarian conclusions, it is hardly surprising that he earned Williams's disdain – a disdain that was reciprocated, though not so emphatically. But the animus went deeper than the theoretical. Williams once remarked that his relation to Hare was Oedipal. Hare, who was notorious for giving no quarter to his philosophical adversaries, even if they were undergraduates, had been one of Williams's undergraduate tutors at Oxford. (At Oxford and Cambridge, the principal form of instruction at both the graduate and undergraduate levels is the one-on-one tutorial – or supervision, as it is called in Cambridge.) Doubtless his early exposure in tutorials to Hare's intransigent defense of views that Williams sought throughout his career to demolish was at times frustrating and even galling, but it also provided Williams and a few of his contemporaries with some good sport. On days when Hare was scheduled to teach a series of tutorials, these students would implement a scheme in which the first would go in prepared to challenge Hare's position on some issue and then, after the tutorial was over, report to the next what Hare's response had been. The second student would then go in prepared to attack that response, and this procedure was repeated until they ran out of participants in the rota.

Hare's unyielding certitude about the correctness of his own views made him a particular provocation to someone of Williams's skeptical temperament. On one occasion, when a graduate student sought to find a

charitable explanation of Hare's stubborn immovability in the suffering he had endured as a Japanese prisoner of war, Williams snapped back that "he was just the same before the war: that's why the Japs couldn't break him."

Williams's Oedipal tendencies persisted even beyond Hare's death. Hare had chosen Peter Singer to deliver the eulogy at his funeral and had asked him to devote a bit of time to an exposition of the main elements of his philosophy. This Singer dutifully did, afterwards apologizing to those present who had no knowledge of philosophy for having done so. Williams, who had been one of Hare's successors to the White's Chair in Moral Philosophy at Oxford, was in attendance at the funeral. He leaned toward the person sitting next to him and commented, sotto voce, "It's not those who *don't* know about philosophy to whom he should apologize."

I do not wish to give the impression that Williams was an ungenerous man. He was, on the contrary, extraordinarily kind and generous in many ways. Despite the great demands on his time as the Provost of King's College, he met with me quite frequently for supervisions – a couple of hours every few weeks during term for seven years – for which I was the envy of the other philosophy graduates in Cambridge, most of whom were able to see their supervisors only at lengthy intervals and sometimes only after much pleading. This was quite important, as meetings with one's supervisor constituted the only formal instruction for the doctorate. There were neither course requirements nor even courses for doctoral candidates. (It is perhaps worth emphasizing how extraordinarily fortunate I was in my graduate work. Not only was I able to meet with Williams whenever I had new work to show him but also I was able to continue to work closely, though informally, with Parfit, who urged me to continue to work with him after I left Oxford just as if he were my supervisor. I recall insisting that I pay him whatever he had been paid by Oxford when he had been my official supervisor. That turned out, to my astonishment, to be a mere £20 per term. Parfit was, if anything, even more generous with his time than Williams. Although I met with him less frequently than I did with Williams, our meetings would often continue for many hours. I particularly remember one occasion on which I met with him in Princeton when he was a visiting professor there. The supervision began at 11:00 am and continued without interruption – we ordered in pizza for dinner, which we ate while continuing to talk – until 1:00 am.)

Williams made every effort to enter into the spirit of my project and to be constructive in his comments, despite his antipathy to the goals and methods of my work. Indeed, the period in which I wrote my dissertation on population ethics, which was an exercise in systematic