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The View from Here and Now

Thomas Nagel

* *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy* by [Bernard Williams](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Williams,+Bernard), edited by[Myles Burnyeat](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Burnyeat,+Myles)  
  Princeton, 393 pp, £26.95, March 2006, ISBN 0 691 12477 9
* *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* by [Bernard Williams](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Williams,+Bernard), edited by [Geoffrey Hawthorn](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Hawthorn,+Geoffrey)  
  Princeton, 174 pp, £18.95, October 2005, ISBN 0 691 12430 2
* *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* by [Bernard Williams](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Williams,+Bernard), edited by [A.W. Moore](http://www.lrb.co.uk/search?author=Moore,+A.W.)  
  Princeton, 227 pp, £22.95, January 2006, ISBN 0 691 12426 4

Bernard Williams had a very large mind. To read these three posthumously published collections of essays (there will be a fourth, on opera) is an overwhelming reminder of his incandescent and all-consuming intelligence. He brought philosophical reflection to an opulent array of subjects, with more imagination and with greater cultural and historical understanding than anyone else of his time.

The collections have been brought to publication by Williams’s widow, Patricia, in each case with the help of one of his friends, who has added an informative introduction.

Some of the essays have not been published before, and most of them are not easily available, so these books are of great value. *The Sense of the Past* was largely planned by Williams himself before his death in 2003; *In the Beginning Was the Deed* treats topics he would have addressed more systematically in the book on political philosophy he planned but didn’t live to write; *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* brings together the most important essays not collected elsewhere, including the fullest statement of Williams’s conception of philosophy, its purpose and its relations to science, to history, and to human life.

In each of the collections there are some slight pieces, and some that overlap, but all three are marvellous books. While they range over many topics, they are held together by Williams’s acute sense of historical contingency and his resistance to the aspiration of so much philosophy to be timeless. This project, of pulling philosophy, particularly moral philosophy, down from the stratosphere and resisting its most universal theoretical ambitions, is what has set Williams against the general grain and given rise to the strong responses to his work. He was the foremost representative in our day of the view that philosophical reflection of the highest rational order need not lead to transcendence of the more contingent features of human life. He believed that instead of trying to view ourselves with maximal detachment, from the point of view of the universe, we can obtain a more illuminating form of reflective distance from our concepts and values through historical self-consciousness, which is an immersion in contingency.

The history of philosophy itself is one part of this enterprise, and in Williams’s hands it becomes a subtle appreciation of ideas that may be fundamentally unlike anything we could think now, but that also help us to understand our own ideas better. Two of his best books were on historical subjects: *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (1978) and *Shame and Necessity* (1993), a profound study of Greek concepts of responsibility and luck that draws on literary, legal and historical sources as well as philosophy. He also developed, in later years, an absorbing interest in and admiration for Nietzsche, whose philosophical method of historical self-interpretation he more or less adopted.

Yet he always retained an unsurpassed admiration for Plato, whose ‘discontent with the finite’ and hope that philosophy could lift us to a pure and timeless reality represents the polar opposite view. Williams loved Plato both for his powerful expression of the transcendent impulse that must be resisted and for his understanding, so vividly expressed in the dialogues, of points of view opposed to his own. Seven of the essays in *The Sense of the Past*are about Plato and Socrates, including ‘Plato: The Invention of Philosophy’, a superb tribute to this magical, protean, essentially unacademic figure. Williams says:

“Plato was recognisably, I think, one of those creative thinkers and artists – it is not true of all, including some of the greatest – who are an immensely rich source of thoughts and images, too many, perhaps, for them all to have their place and use . . . We should not think of him as constantly keeping his accounts, anxious of how his system will look in the history of philosophy.”

So Williams denies that there is such a thing as ‘the theory of forms’. But there is much tough and complex philosophy in Plato, and Williams provides penetrating analyses of Platonic discussions of justice, of knowledge and perception, of intrinsic goodness, and of the ‘immoralism’ of Thrasymachus in the *Republic* and Callicles in the *Gorgias*.

Williams is much less drawn to Aristotle, who he says invented scholasticism and is therefore unique among great philosophers in deserving the more tedious parts of his legacy. But *The Sense of the Past* offers some fine discussions of Aristotle’s doctrines, especially ‘Justice as a Virtue’, which brilliantly exposes the error of trying to link the vice of injustice to the special motive of greed, and ‘Hylomorphism’, which provides a critical but sympathetic understanding of Aristotle on the relation between mind and body. There are also interesting essays on Descartes, Nietzsche, Collingwood and others, including a wonderful discussion of Descartes’s *Meditations* as a work of fiction, whose first-person narrator, describing his process of thought over a succession of days, cannot be identified with Descartes, the author, who of course knows the outcome in advance. Williams comments:

This might have been a work in which the thinker’s fictional ignorance of how his reflections would turn out was convincingly sustained. To some extent it is so, and to that extent, one of the gifts offered to the reader by this extraordinary work is a freedom to write it differently, to set out with the thinker and end up in a different place. The rewriting of Descartes’s story in that way has constituted a good deal of modern philosophy.

Williams insists on the importance of history in making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. An example is this comment on slavery and modern economic inequality:

The standard Greek attitude to slavery was not that it was a just institution; nor, again, that it was an unjust institution . . . Their view rather was that the institution was necessary, and that for those subjected to it it was bad luck. In that sense, it lay outside the considerations of justice.

For us it does not lie outside those considerations, and is a paradigm of injustice. However, this does not mean that those same traditional materials, economic or cultural necessity and bad luck, make no contribution to our thinking about social life. We use them all the time. It may be that we have the aspiration that no social or economic relation should lie outside considerations of justice. To the extent that we have that aspiration, we try either (with the Left) to replace necessity and luck with justice, or (with the Right) to show that the results of necessity and luck can be just. Neither project is such a success as to enable us to say that in these matters we have decisively gone beyond the ethical condition of the ancients.

An old saw has it that all politics is local. Williams believed that political theory, too, should be in a sense local, rather than universal, because it must be addressed to individuals in a particular place and time, and must offer them a justification for the exercise of political power that has persuasive force in the light of standards that are accessible to them.

Williams believed that the distinction between illegitimate and legitimate states depends on whether their exercise of power over their subjects is sheer coercion or not. But whether a society can meet this ‘Basic Legitimation Demand’ depends on whether its justification for the exercise of power will be morally persuasive in that historical situation. The requirement cannot be for justification sub specie aeternitatis. What is legitimate at one time may not be so at another. This is the meaning of Williams’s title, ‘In the Beginning Was the Deed’, taken from Goethe’s *Faust*: ‘No political theory, liberal or other, can determine by itself its own application. The conditions in which the theory or any given interpretation of it makes sense to intelligent people are determined by an opaque aggregation of many actions and forces.’

For example: even if liberal institutions and equal rights for women are necessary conditions of legitimacy for us now, this has not always been true. Justifications have to come to an end within the point of view of those to whom justification must be offered. There is no point, Williams says, in imagining oneself as ‘Kant at the court of King Arthur’, judging its institutions from a universal standpoint.

This is the ‘relativism of distance’ that Williams put forward in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). It is one of his most controversial claims, and goes together with the thesis that reasons for action in general must start from something in the agent’s subjective motivational set – that they must, in Williams’s terms, be ‘internal’ rather than ‘external’ reasons. The search for truth about reasons for action, personal ethics and political morality cannot aspire to the kind of objective validity that is a reasonable aim for science and mathematics. Williams claims that ethics is irreducibly perspectival, and that the perspective is local – not a universal human perspective.

In ‘Values, Reasons and the Theory of Persuasion’, one of the essays in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Williams observes that the internalist account of reasons does not by itself rule out the Kantian conclusion that every rational agent is implicitly committed to impartiality, and to its moral and political consequences. But he doesn’t think that either Kant or anyone else has offered a persuasive argument for that conclusion, starting from inside some motivational structure shared by all rational beings. Those who disagree may appeal to the force of moral arguments themselves as revealing that motivational structure. But Williams would reply that, even if we find the moral reasons for impartiality compelling, that does not show that they appeal to reason as such, as opposed to something more local about us. This is one of the most fundamental disagreements in ethics.

A similar disagreement occurs in political theory. While recognising that it is possible to create stable and effective institutions only with the social and human material available at any given place and time, a modern liberal may still think we are advancing in a positive direction, overcoming moral mistakes of the past, as future ages may overcome our mistakes. But Williams says that liberalism has no theory of error comparable to that which allows us to speak of progress in the history of science. He ridicules the idea that ‘if liberalism is correct, it must apply to all those past people who were not liberals: they ought to have been liberals, and since they were not, they were bad, or stupid, or something on those lines.’

That would certainly be an unreasonable theory of error. But one can believe in moral progress without accusing past ages of wickedness or stupidity (though there is plenty of both in all ages). Perhaps progress can occur only through a series of historical stages, in morality as in science. It is not because he was stupid that Thomas Aquinas was not a liberal, any more than it was stupidity that prevented Newton from discovering the theory of relativity – not to make more of the analogy than that.

Precisely because he is convinced that it is not a judgment from an absolute point of view, Williams sees no conflict between, for example, our confidence in the requirement of equal rights for all citizens and the refusal to judge that hierarchical societies in the past were unjust. Confidence need not be undermined by historical self-awareness. And he shrewdly adds:

That does not mean, as Richard Rorty likes to suggest, that we must slide into a position of irony, holding to liberalism as practical liberals, but backing away from it as reflective critics. That posture is itself still under the shadow of universalism: it suggests that you cannot really believe in liberalism unless you hold it true in a sense which means that it applies to everyone.

Resistance to the external standpoint has a central part in Williams’s rejection of utilitarianism, but he also thinks it tells against the possibility of ethical theory as such – if we understand by that a general theoretical explanation of the content of morality. He argues that what is fundamental in the ethical life are dispositions to act and feel in certain ways – dispositions to honesty and fidelity, for instance – and that these can exist only if truthfulness and keeping your word are valued in themselves, not merely as useful instruments for promoting the general welfare, impersonally considered, or for any other higher-order reason. This argument is clearly set out in an essay on Sidgwick included in *The Sense of the Past*, and in ‘The Primacy of Dispositions’ and ‘The Structure of Hare’s Theory’ in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*.

Williams’s objections seem to me more effective against utilitarianism than against theories inspired by Kant, which try to give independent weight to the personal perspective while pursuing a form of harmony among individual lives that can be universally acknowledged. It doesn’t seem so difficult to value fidelity or loyalty for their own sake while at the same time recognising that these values have to be included with others in a coherent system of standards that can apply to everyone. That is not mere dictation to the individual from the standpoint of the universe. And it combines naturally with a historical sense of the gradual expansion of the moral community, which can be expected to continue.

Three essays in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* are especially noteworthy. ‘Moral Responsibility and Political Freedom’ is only seven pages long, but it applies Williams’s characteristic resistance to excessive justification to the problem of punishment. (It should be read together with the discussion of blame in ‘Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology’ in*The Sense of the Past*.) Williams argues that the concept of moral responsibility has a use in dealing with our response to offences, but that it should not be taken too seriously and should not be turned into something metaphysically profound. He also says, strikingly, that retributive punishment is impossible in modern society, because ‘the paradigm of retributive punishment is a lynching, under the condition that the right person is being hanged . . . Under modern demands on what counts as being sure of meeting that and other conditions, even an execution, if executions are allowed at all, is not going to reach the expressive standard of a lynching.’

‘The Human Prejudice’ is a major essay, previously unpublished, analysing and defending our special concern for our fellow humans. Williams wonders mischievously whether Peter Singer, a leading critic of such ‘speciesism’, feels uncomfortable about his position as a professor at Princeton’s Center for Human Values: ‘I should have thought it would have sounded to him rather like a Center for Aryan Values.’ Williams’s main point is that being partial to humanity does not require a belief in the absolute importance of human beings. There is no cosmic point of view, and therefore no test of cosmic significance that we can either pass or fail. Those who criticise the privileged position of human beings in our ethical thought are confused:

They suppose that we are in effect saying, when we exercise these distinctions between human beings and other creatures, that human beings are more important, period, than those other creatures. That objection is simply a mistake . . . These actions and attitudes need express no more than the fact that human beings are more important *to us*, a fact which is hardly surprising.

So humanism is just a form of group loyalty. Williams doesn’t suggest that this warrants our brutality towards other species or complete indifference to their suffering, but he thinks our partiality to those who share our form of life does not need justification. He illustrates this with a wonderful science-fiction fantasy of superior but disgusting visitors from outer space. And he concludes:

When the hope is to improve humanity to the point at which every aspect of its hold on the world can be justified before a higher court, the result is likely to be either self-deception, if you think you have succeeded, or self-hatred and self-contempt when you recognise that you will always fail. The self-hatred, in this case, is a hatred of humanity. Personally I think that there are many things to loathe about human beings, but their sense of their ethical identity as a species is not one of them.

Finally, the title essay, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’, is a superb answer to the scientism that infects so much of contemporary philosophy. In his book on Descartes, Williams offered an illuminating interpretation of the aim of scientific objectivity as what he called the ‘absolute conception of reality’. Here he asks:

Why should the idea that science and only science describes the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective, mean that there is no independent philosophical enterprise? That would follow only on the assumption that if there is an independent philosophical enterprise, its aim is to describe the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective. And why should we accept that?

It is a scientistic error to think that the concepts of physical science, because they are ‘potentially universal in their uptake and usefulness . . . are somehow intrinsically superior to more local conceptions which are humanly and perhaps historically grounded’.

The marks of philosophy are reflection and heightened self-awareness, not maximal transcendence of the human perspective. Reflection can deepen understanding without leaving that perspective. For that reason Williams values historical self-consciousness and deplores its neglect, or outright avoidance, by most analytic philosophers:

The reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding . . . Philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry.

Williams applied these principles in the last book he published before his death, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (2002). With the essays in these three volumes, spanning his career, we have an indispensable summation of the complex thought of one of the finest minds of our age.

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