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Bernard Williams

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**BERNARD WILLIAMS**

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**AN INTRODUCTION**  
**TO ETHICS**



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*To  
My Mother and Father*

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## PREFACE TO THE CANTO EDITION

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THIS text was originally intended to be part of a larger book, which was to consist of several novella-length pieces by different writers, forming collectively a substantial introduction to philosophy. When the editor, Arthur Danto, invited me to write the section on moral philosophy, he made it clear that while we were encouraged to write in an introductory way, we were not being asked to write merely a survey, but rather to pursue the interests and questions that each found most interesting or fruitful. The publishers in the end decided not to put out the big book (which, granted who they were, some of us had inevitably called 'Harper's Bazaar'), and published each section separately.

At least one of those books (Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects*) has grown in later life, acquiring new sections in further editions. This one, on the other hand, remains as it was. The main reason for this is that I have subsequently written other books and papers on some of the same subjects, and could see no point in loading this text with intrusive (and probably misleading) references to that later work. In the case of one topic, utilitarianism, this would have been particularly inappropriate, since in what I wrote later I tried to take account of what I had written here, and to develop rather different points; the relevant chapter here perhaps summarizes the central problem, as I see

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it, of the utilitarian project more compactly than I have done elsewhere.

For rather similar reasons, I have not tried to provide an up-to-date bibliography. Recent literature on subjectivism, for instance, has obviously changed and extended the questions beyond my treatment of the subject here, but to explain this so as to introduce that literature would have involved substantial further philosophical discussion. In fact, there is no bibliography, even an out-of-date one, but only a handful of references, perhaps rather idiosyncratic, to some writing that I had found helpful.

In one respect at least the book may seem dated, to the extent that it starts by complaining of a situation which no longer exists, one in which moral philosophy addressed itself to meta-ethical questions about the nature of moral judgement, the possibility of moral knowledge, and so forth, at the expense of discussing first-order ethical questions. Moral philosophy still, appropriately, discusses meta-ethical questions, but it is certainly not true any longer that first-order questions are not mentioned. On the contrary, issues such as abortion, feminism, and famine are now standardly discussed in moral philosophy courses and textbooks. I must confess that some of these discussions, assuming as they do that ethical thought is made more rational by deploying ethical theory, seem to me as distanced from real experience as the forms of uncommitted moral philosophy about which I complain here. The spirit in question is, unnervingly, the same. But the complaint is certainly different.\*

There are points at which the two complaints unite. I have criticized in some more recent work the assump-



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tion often made, not just by moral philosophy but by ethical reflection more generally, that we are clear enough about what count as 'moral' considerations and sentiments, and that what moral philosophy must seek is the basis and status of these considerations, taken more or less as a whole. I have wanted to ask a prior question, about what the distinction between the 'moral' and the 'non-moral' is supposed to do for us; and I have suggested that considerations of the moral kind make sense only if they are related to other reasons for action that human beings use, and generally to their desires, needs and projects.

Those concerns are perhaps not altogether explicit in this book, and in particular it does not observe a certain verbal distinction which I have more recently found useful, between a broader conception of 'the ethical', and the narrower concerns (focused particularly on ideas of obligation) of what may be called the system of 'morality'. Others may not find this terminology helpful, but since I have suggested it, it is perhaps worth mentioning, in particular, that the title and sub-title of this book do not use those words in that way. It would surely be possible to discuss morality – in my current, restrictive sense – as an introduction to ethics (though I doubt that it would be the best way to get introduced to it); but this is not in fact what this book does. Rather, it discusses, a lot of the time, ethics

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\* I have pressed the later complaint, against the supposed power of ethical theory, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins, and Harvard University Press, 1985), where I also discuss some peculiarities of the 'morality system', which I mention below.

as an introduction to the problems and limitations of morality.

The placing of morality in relation to other ethical considerations and to the rest of life – in relation to happiness, for instance – is in fact a theme here, although it is not expressed in those terms. Because it does contain that theme, the book has a characteristic which I did not consciously have in mind when I wrote it, but which was pointed out to me by a classicist who had used it in his teaching, that the concerns from which it sets out are those more typical of the ancient world and its philosophies than of modernity. In a recent book,\* I have tried to develop more reflectively and on a larger scale this interest in ethical ideas of the ancient world (and not only of its philosophies), and a sense of their relevance to our present situation.

Near the beginning of this book, I talk about the problems of finding a style for moral philosophy. I still think that these problems are real, and also that moral philosophy involves such problems to a greater extent than most other areas of philosophy. What I should not want to accept now is an implication to be heard in this discussion, that there might be one general solution to this problem, and that once one had found it one would know how to write moral philosophy. That cannot be so: the problems of finding a convincing, adult, and unmechanical way of approaching the subject must be faced on each occasion. Sometimes literature or history can be called upon, to give some idea of the weight or substance of ethical concepts that we use or have been used by others; analytic argument, the philos-

\* *Shame and Necessity* (California University Press, 1993).

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osopher's speciality, can certainly play a part in sharpening perception. But the aim *is* to sharpen perception, to make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling. Philosophy invites us (perhaps more insistently now than when this book was written) to ask whether what we say in morality is true. One thing I felt in writing this book, and feel even more now, is that it is vital not to forget another question that is to be asked both about morality and about moral philosophy, how far what we say *rings* true.

BERNARD WILLIAMS  
Berkeley, March 1993.

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WRITING about moral philosophy should be a hazardous business, not just for the reasons attendant on writing about any difficult subject, or writing about anything, but for two special reasons. The first is that one is likely to reveal the limitations and inadequacies of one's own perceptions more directly than in, at least, other parts of philosophy. The second is that one could run the risk, if one were taken seriously, of misleading people about matters of importance. While few writers on the subject have avoided the first hazard, very many have avoided the second, either by making it impossible to take them seriously, or by refusing to write about anything of importance, or both.

This sad truth is often brought forward as a particular charge against contemporary moral philosophy of the 'analytical' or 'linguistic' style: that it is peculiarly empty and boring. In one way, as a particular charge, this is unfair: most moral philosophy at most times has been empty and boring, and the number of great books in the subject (as opposed to books involved in one way or another in morality) can be literally counted on the fingers of one hand. The emptiness of past works, however, has often been the emptiness of conventional moralizing, the banal treatment of moral issues. Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all. Or, rather, it is not so much that a

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style of moral philosophy has been evolved which cuts the connection with moral issues altogether – that, if it were possible, would have the interest of being remarkable; but the desire to reduce revealed moral commitment to a minimum and to use moral arguments in the role of being uncontentiously illustrative leaves an impression that all the important issues are off the page, somewhere, and that great caution and little imagination have been used in letting tiny corners of them appear.

There are many reasons for this situation. A central one is that contemporary views about morality itself leave an unclarity about what qualities of mind or character are particularly called upon in constructive moral thought (indeed, in some accounts of morality it is not even clear that there can be such a thing as constructive moral thought); they hence leave one all the more uneasy about whether those qualities are likely to be the qualities of philosophers, when philosophy is largely a professional and academic activity calling principally, though not exclusively, on discursive and analytical abilities. If there were such an activity as deducing substantial moral conclusions from *a priori* premises, trained philosophers might reasonably be expected to be rather specially good at it; but there is not, and the fact that if there were, then professional philosophers would stand a specially good chance of being informed about morality, is itself one of the good reasons for thinking that there could not be such an activity.

Certainly the trouble is not, as some pretend, that if the philosopher is not patently detached and even methodological, then he must be *preaching*; that cannot possibly be the only alternative. It is rather a styl-

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istic problem, in the deepest sense of 'style' in which to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do. How does one combine argument (which is after all likely to constitute the philosopher's special claim on anyone's attention) with either the longer leaps or the more concrete detail which provide the more interesting stuff of moral thought? Can the reality of complex moral situations be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature? If not, can more schematic approaches represent enough of the reality? How much of what genuinely worries anyone is responsive to general theory?

If I knew answers to these questions, I should not have to ask them now.

This essay takes a rather tortuous course, and while I have tried to signpost the major bends, it may be worth sketching a plan in advance. I start with a figure who has often been of interest, indeed a cause of concern, to moralists, as providing a challenge to morality and a demand for its justification: the amoralist, who is supposedly immune to moral considerations. Some of the most interesting questions about him, which I have barely touched on, lie not so much in what might be said to him, as in what might be said about him – what the amoralist can consistently be like. From him, we move to those who do not reject morality, but do take certain special, and it may be almost as disquieting, views about its nature: subjectivists of various kinds, and an unashamedly crass (but common) kind of relativist. Here I try to examine carefully a project very close to the heart of much modern moral philosophy, which I have called that of *defusing* subjectivism.

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From there, to some considerations about goodness; and, trying to get clear about some ways a man can be good *at* certain things, and still more about things he can be good *as*, I seek to disentangle some purely logical considerations from what seem to me more substantial issues about what men are and the connection of that with goodness. Two questions in particular emerge from the many that crowd round that area: the relations of intellectual achievement to the standards of morality, and the question whether, if God existed, that would make any difference to the situation of morality. This raises some important general questions about moral and other motives. These in turn lead to some issues about the point or substance of morality, and whether it is ultimately all about human welfare or (more narrowly, perhaps) happiness. Lastly, the most simple-minded way of aiming morality at happiness, that of utilitarianism, is touched on, but only long enough to suggest how special and peculiar a system, properly understood, it is; and to point in the direction where its peculiarities are to be found. To follow them out is a task for another occasion.\*

One of the many ways in which this essay is not a textbook, even an introductory and outline textbook, of moral philosophy is that it offers no systematic theory. I am unashamed about that, since it seems to me that this subject has received more over-general and over-simplified systematization, while inviting it less, than virtually any other part of philosophy. I do not mean by that that one should approach moral philosophy without preconceptions (which would be impos-

\*See *A Critique of Utilitarianism*, which appears in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

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sible), or even without theoretical preconceptions (which might well prove static and sterile). It is merely that one's initial responsibilities should be to moral phenomena, as grasped in one's own experience and imagination, and, at the more theoretical level, to the demands of *other* parts of philosophy – in particular, of the philosophy of mind. There is no reason why moral philosophy, or again something in some respects broader, in some respects narrower, called 'value theory', should yield any interesting self-contained theory at all.

Another way in which this is not a textbook is that it leaves out large tracts of the subject. That is, at least, fully obvious. But it may help to put what is here in some better perspective if I mention one or two subjects which a larger treatment of moral philosophy should in my view have near its centre: what practical thought, and acting for a reason, are; what consistency in action is, and in moral thought; relatedly, how moral conflict is a basic fact of morality; how the notion of a *rule* is important for some, but not all, parts of morality (the present essay has nothing to say about its importance); how shaky and problematical is the distinction between the 'moral' and the 'non-moral' – above all in its most important employment, to distinguish between different sorts of human excellence.

That this essay should leave out most things of importance was inevitable; that it should follow a tortuous path, was not. Whether it was inevitable that it should fail to find an answer to the problem of how to write about moral philosophy, I do not know.