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Character

Paul Seabright

Bernard Williams's new book is the nearest thing to a systematic and comprehensive discussion of moral philosophy we can hope for from someone who thinks a yearning for systematic and comprehensive discussion is the main defect of moral philosophy today. The author identifies ethics as the subject constituted by certain kinds of attempt to answer Socrates's question: how one should live. As the title suggests, much of the book consists of an attack on the claims of philosophy to provide ethical answers to the question. More precisely (since it never quite explains what is to count as philosophy), it attacks the claims of a certain rationalistic and foundationalist method in moral philosophy, a method broadly though not exclusively associated with Kant. In general, Professor Williams represents his target as an entire dominant trend in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy (though occasional grumblings in the footnotes suggest an annoyance at more specific currents, such as evangelical vegetarianism). In his first three chapters he contrasts it with some elements in classical ethical thought, which he thinks closer to providing an attractive account, even though its attempt to ground ethics entirely in considerations about human nature is a failure. But though some of the classical debris is salvageable, Williams is in no doubt that philosophy can provide ethical guidance only by accident: he concludes his book by affirming a substantial ethical individualism, a belief in 'the continuing possibility of a meaningful individual life, one that does not reject society ... but is enough unlike others, in its opacities and disorder as well as in its reasoned intentions, to make it *somebody's*. Philosophy can help to make a society possible in which most people would live such lives, even if it still needs to learn how best to do so. Some people might even get help from philosophy in living such a life – but not, as Socrates supposed, each reflective person, and not from the ground up.'

The book is an important one, not simply because of its anti-philosophical ambitions. There is no shortage nowadays of philosophers urging us to save ourselves from the unworldly abstractions of philosophy, often out of an equally unworldly romanticism about the innocence of ordinary speech, one that forgets how second-rate philosophising (what Wittgenstein called 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language') can originate

just as much in the saloon bar or at the dining-table as in the lecture hall. Bernard Williams's writing shows few traces of such sentiments, and his criticism of the Kantian method is from within the tradition of clear argument and careful distinction, the tradition that thinks logic can be used to progress. A preface explains of his work that 'I do care that it should be what I call "clear",' and though this remark is followed within a quarter page by a sentence that the reviewer needed five readings to understand, the lapse is as exceptional as it is ill-timed, and the book itself amply justifies the author's hope. Its careful conviction also suggests he is far from believing that philosophers have nothing distinctive to contribute to ethics, and warns us that his strictures against philosophy need thoughtful interpretation.

A quotation from Camus provides a much more direct clue to the book's theme than is found in most epigraphs: *quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode.* The search for a *method* of resolving ethical problems is, Williams argues, distinctly inferior to an ethical concern with character, a now unfashionable concept in which what is valuable in the personality is seen as consisting chiefly in habits or dispositions, some of which we know as virtues or vices. The fact that such dispositions are usually well ingrained by the time people reach intellectual maturity is only one reason why there is unlikely to be a fruitful philosophical method for determining how one should live; even the character formation of third parties is not something for which we may expect to find comprehensive methods, Thomas Arnold and Benjamin Spock notwithstanding. Nor is the main reason even the fact, which Williams discusses at some length, that certain admirable dispositions are intrinsically unsuited to being the object of conscious cultivation: people who are generous, humble or independent of mind are unlikely to be characterised by undue concern for their own generosity, humility or independence (they may, of course, be characterised by an equally methodical concern for something else). The main reason an appraisal and appreciation of character is not likely to be philosophical in nature is that, like all exercises of judgment, it has to start from somewhere. 'Somewhere', in this context, stands for a specific social and cultural environment – embarrassment at which, and a futile ambition to escape from which, are chief among the failings of the Kantian project, as first and famously pointed out by Hegel. The rationalistic approach to moral philosophy stands convicted, in the eyes of Professor Williams and others, of trying to offer ethical directions while all the time insisting, with a grave shake of the head like the rustic in the Irish joke, that 'if I were you I wouldn't start from here.'

The book itself starts from a look at what Socrates's question might mean. The way it is formulated implies, first, that it is not addressed to any particular person, 'that something relevant or useful can be said to anyone, in general.' Second, it is not about what one should do 'now, or next. It is about a manner of life … a demand for reflection on one's life as a whole, even if we do not place as much weight as the Greeks did on how it should end.' It is 'in a sense a timeless question, since it invites me to think about my life from no particular point in it.' Third, 'it is also entirely non-committal, and very fruitfully so, about the kinds of consideration to be applied to the question.' There is a lengthy discussion of different kinds of consideration, urging that not all answers to Socrates's question need be ethically-based

answers, and resisting the tendency of many theorists to reduce all ethical considerations, or all deliberative considerations whatever, to a single common kind. For Williams, ethical considerations are distinguished as those that relate 'to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires and, generally, the lives of other people'. As taxonomy the discussion is valuable, and its anti-reductionism is attractive, but it makes the job of refuting the reductionists look deceptively easy. For instance, the argument that 'if one compares one job, holiday or companion with another, judgment does not need a particular set of weights' needs better defence than the claim that 'people's experience' shows that 'they regularly arrive at conclusions they regard as rational … without using one currency of comparison.' That people's experience can be read at face value in this way is precisely what the reductionists deny (for them the use of one currency of comparison need not be conscious, or formulable by the people concerned: it need merely be formulable by someone).

Whom might an adequate answer to Socrates's question be intended to help? Three chapters are devoted to the possibility of a justification of the ethical life. Williams is very clear that the point of such a justification, if one existed, could not be to convince its traditional addressee, the ethical sceptic. For suppose one were to place a justification of morality before the sceptic, 'why should he be expected to stay where we have put it? Why should he listen?' Instead of asking what we can say to the sceptic, the philosopher 'should rather have asked what we shall have to say about him. The justification he is looking for is in fact designed for the people who are largely within the ethical world, and the aim of the discourse is not to deal with someone who will probably not listen to it, but to reassure, strengthen, and give insight to those who will.' Seeking a justification may still be important for someone within the ethical world 'who is considering what kinds of reasons he has for being there'. Two versions of such a justification are then discussed: first, an account found in some classical philosophers, particularly in Aristotle, which locates the ethical life, the life of virtue and reason, as central to the development of an individual's well-being in the fullest sense of that term. Williams offers strong criticism of much of Aristotle's programme, finding it over-optimistic about how much may be inferred concerning human well-being from the findings of the sciences, about the unity it ascribes to the virtues, and about the stability of our ethical judgments under radical reflection. But though he thinks it fails as a programme, 'the description of the ethical self' it offers, a self grounded in a particular society and way of life, a self constituted and given value by dispositions and habits of character, is one to which he is broadly sympathetic.

He is much less so to the foundationalism of Kant, or rather to the project of deriving ethical conclusions merely from considerations about the nature of practical rationality, a project of which he takes Kant to be the chief instigator. This project first derives certain conditions (notably freedom) as necessary to practical rationality, then seeks to establish that a person claiming these conditions for himself is required, by the symmetry of his position with that of other rational agents, to claim them on behalf of those agents too. Many things have been said about this argument, but the point at which Williams attacks it is at the alleged symmetry. He agrees with Kant that in factual deliberation reason requires the thinker to

adopt a standpoint outside his own perspective, to assess evidence impartially (a good reason for me to believe something must be a good reason for anyone in a similar situation to believe it). But 'practical deliberation is first-personal, radically so, and involves an *I* that must be more intimately the *I* of my desires than this account allows.' Why? 'Reflective deliberation about the truth indeed brings in a standpoint that is impartial and seeks harmony, but this is because it seeks truth, not because it is reflective deliberation, and those features will not be shared by deliberation about what to do simply because it, too, is reflective. The *I* that stands back in rational reflection from my desires is still the *I* that has those desires and will, empirically and concretely, act; and it is not, simply by standing back in reflection, converted into a being whose fundamental interest lies in the harmony of all interests.'

It is possible to share Williams's antipathy to the Kantian project without thinking that its protagonists will let him get away with the argument just outlined. The *I* that stands back in rational reflection from my perceptions, too, is still the *I* that has those perceptions and will, empirically and concretely, form beliefs about them; indeed, it's hard to see where empiricism and the concrete are getting us. Naturally, one can perform actions spontaneously, without stopping to consider whether one's reasons would be good reasons for any agent similarly placed – but one can form spontaneous beliefs too. The basis of the Kantian claim is that impartiality enters in once we seek to reason about our deliberations, either factual or practical; it is its impartiality that is the hallmark of reason. Not to consider my reasons for action impartially may not be reprehensible, but it is not an exercise in rational deliberation either (a neo-Kantian would claim). A more modern twist to the argument might point to rational deliberation as an essentially social activity, couched in the essentially social medium of language. If Williams is right that practical deliberation is radically first-personal, he has not yet shown it – there is, I think, a better argument for it than the one he has given.

More telling than the argument from asymmetry, though, is the evident sparsity of the ethical conclusions which can be established with such austerely formal machinery as the Kantian project allows. Not every ethical theory (by which Williams means 'a theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which account either implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles or else implies that there cannot be such a test') need be so miserly. But a chapter on two of the most influential styles of ethical theory, contractualism and utilitarianism, shows with great cogency how a theory's openhandedness with ethical conclusions can usually be traced to some dubious entries in the logical accounts. Some principle of the conservation of ethical specificity seems to be at work, and the upshot for Williams is that instead of seeking 'considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible … critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that in the context of the shared understanding makes some sense and commands some loyalty.' The discussion leading up to this claim is not all relevant, for it invokes the holistic picture of knowledge 'in which some beliefs can be questioned, justified or adjusted while others are kept constant, but there is no process by which they can all be questioned at once.' This picture of knowledge, based as it is on the *impossibility* of our questioning all our beliefs at once, says

nothing about the *undesirability* or otherwise of our questioning as many beliefs at a time as we can. The claim that we should question fewer at one time than we currently do is a separate claim, and to assess it we need to see where it will lead us. In particular, is the only alternative to comprehensive theory an unreflective prejudice?

This book is at its most powerful in arguing that there *is* a better alternative. Three chapters discuss how ethical argument can be deep-rooted in a specific culture or personality without being parochial, before the author returns to hammer the last triumphant nails in the coffin of the rationalistic project in a fine chapter on 'Morality: the Peculiar Institution'. In the progression of the argument this chapter belongs somewhat earlier in the book. In it he castigates the sub-system of ethics he calls 'morality' for its obsession with the notions of obligation, blame, universality and purity (this last refers to its focus on the voluntary character of actions and its distrust of all kinds of what Williams has previously christened 'moral luck'). These notions are set in contrast to a richer conception of ethics, one in which ethical considerations are not all reducible to obligations, and ethical shortcomings are not all the subject of blame; one in which admirable characters can be acknowledged as such without our delving into their history for the traces of free will; one in which ethical discussion uses all the conceptual resources its participants share. The major obstacle to the acceptability of such a richer conception remains the persistence of disagreement among those with different ethical outlooks. For Williams, the problem this raises is not that the ethics he envisages will lack a method for resolving such disagreements, since he thinks the search for a method is futile. It is rather that consensus, when it occurs, may be fortuitously audience-dependent, the product of the accidentally cosy relationship of the participants.

With these concerns we are led into the difficult issue of objectivity: is there any important sense in which ethics is objective, and does it matter if it is not? Williams's answer to both questions is guardedly in the negative. Two senses of objectivity are in question. One concerns the existence of an objective foundation or justification for ethical systems. Williams has already given reasons for thinking no such grounding exists: he now emphasises that even if considerations of human needs and interests could tell us anything about the best form of social life, 'it is probable that any such considerations will radically underdetermine the ethical options even in a given social situation' (he does not consider the possibility that they might adequately determine a pluralistic set of options). The second sense of objectivity is borrowed from science, and is used to justify the claim that 'science has some chance of being more or less what it seems, a systematised theoretical account of how the world really is, while ethical thought has no chance of being everything it seems.' The reason is that 'in a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope.' There follows a complex discussion in which not all the threads are disentangled (for instance, on page 139 it is stressed that 'the contrast with value should be expressed not in terms of knowledge but of science,' but by page 152 the distinction is being expressed in terms of knowledge again, without an intervening account of how the two distinctions are related),

but in which a very subtle and impressive argument is constructed. An explanation of why people hold (true or false) scientific beliefs, Williams argues, involves ineliminably some reference to the states of affairs to which the beliefs themselves refer, and to the way in which the evidence they generate acts upon their observers. With ethical beliefs the structure of explanation is different. Smith, a scientist, believes a certain flame burns yellow because it does burn yellow and his eyesight is good, whereas Jones, his colleague, believes it burns brown because it burns yellow but he has forgotten to take his sunglasses off. By contrast, Smith believes abortion is wrong because, well, he's a Catholic, whereas Jones believes it is right because he has long hair and enjoys free love. Unlike some others who have argued for such an asymmetry, Williams does not think all ethical beliefs fall on the nonscientific side of the line. Those that involve what he calls the 'thick' ethical concepts (those such as courage, chivalric honour, scrupulousness or chastity that are tied to specific social practices or patterns of behaviour), are indeed guided by 'the way the world is' – but as the list suggests, modern (Western) society is unprecedentedly sparing in its reliance on such thick concepts. A society that relies, like ours, on 'very general ethical expressions is a different society from one that puts greater weight on more specific ones'. Professor Williams believes modern ethics needs more thick concepts, but the nature and indispensability of the more general ones (right and wrong, just and unjust, and so forth), as well as the tendency of the use of thick concepts to be unsettled by radical reflection upon them, means that ethics cannot lay claim to the objectivity of science.

Arguments of this kind have received from a number of quarters the challenge that, after all, scientific objectivity is only scientific objectivity, that it is no news that ethics isn't science, and that none of this means ethics cannot lay claim to an objectivity of its own. There is some force in this challenge (in particular, reference to the truth or otherwise of the beliefs in question in the explanation of those beliefs may just be part of what defines science). But I shall not pursue it here, for there is a superficially similar objection to Williams's argument that strikes considerably deeper. It concerns the nature of the widespread ethical disagreement, both between and within societies, that underlies his view that ethics cannot be objective: the suspicion is that lack of objectivity, far from explaining such disagreement, may just be another label for it. Now Williams will rightly urge that he is explaining the existence of ethical disagreement not (or not only) by accidental features of human society but at least partly by the nature of ethical concepts themselves. That is true, but he has not shown that the features of ethical concepts to which he appeals are intrinsic to ethics, rather than being due to the way in which particular societies conceive ethics at particular times.

Philosophers often treat disagreement about the use of certain concepts as evidence of some divergence between two social practices, forgetting that contained disagreement is an intrinsic part of some institutions (in aesthetics, for instance, we usually refuse to admit that children have fully grasped the use of aesthetic concepts until they begin to disagree with us about their application). It is a mistake to think all social practices aim at consensus. Now it may be that increasing ethical disagreement in Western society since the Reformation is a symptom not so much of social fragmentation as of a change in the way we think of ethics,

taking it increasingly out of the hands of specialists at the same time as we have taken science out of the hands of the layman. A contrasting example may help to make the point clear. Among rural Tamils of South India, in a community of whom this review is written, beliefs about different kinds of food play an important role in day-to-day living. Some of these beliefs resemble those we would consider ethical: in particular, beliefs concerning the importance of vegetarianism among higher castes. In contrast to the West, however, people rarely if ever discuss why vegetarianism is (supposedly) superior, and there is little if any dispute that it is. Questions usually meet with puzzlement; explanations can be elicited in terms of respect for life, but they are usually lame ones, for they do not explain why among non-vegetarians eaters of chicken should rank lower than eaters of mutton. Furthermore the superiority of vegetarianism holds strictly within the caste framework: a low-caste Hindu switching to vegetarianism would generally be considered an upstart. Contrast this with dietary beliefs of a kind we would consider in the scientific domain. When I succumbed to a trivial stomach upset there was immense discussion and argument about what I should eat to speed my recovery; more than half a dozen folk recipes were proffered, the lack of consensus being considered quite normal. Beliefs about food and health involve the application of highly abstract concepts about which there is some dispute: for instance, foods are divided into 'hot' and 'cold', the former avoided during fevers and the latter during colds. The classification is immensely complex: some examples are obvious (rice and curry are hot, most fresh vegetables are cold), but others are very counter-intuitive (chillies are hot but pepper is cold; curd is cold but buttermilk is – usually – considered hot; grapes are cold but mangoes are hot). Native speakers of the language can argue about the applications of the terms 'hot' and 'cold' in a way they would never argue about the merits of vegetarianism (the situation is different among the educated and in cities). Behaviourally speaking, in this example discussion in the scientific domain operates much like Western discussion in the ethical domain, and vice versa (compare the hot/cold distinction with that between justice and injustice: one can't help feeling that both represent distinctions that people are, as it were, supposed to disagree about). Beliefs about vegetarianism seem more naturally describable as reflecting the way the world is (especially its caste structure), than are those about hot and cold. This may have something to do with the fact that the former beliefs involve less abstract concepts – in contrast, examples used to argue a greater objectivity for science usually involve very specific concepts (like 'flame' and 'yellow') in the scientific and very abstract ones (like 'right' and 'just') in the ethical case. The link between abstraction, disagreement and explanatory dispensability seems to be more than accidental. What this suggests is that on Williams's criteria of objectivity, ethics may be objective in some societies and not in others, or even that the question of whether ethics is objective may have no objective answer. This may be the right conclusion, but it is not the one he draws.

If there is no objectivity, does it matter? The usual threat discerned by philosophers is relativism, of varying levels of subtlety from the 'anything goes' variety to the kind that philosophers allow to affect ordinary ethics only in their nightmares. Most of them, however, think relativism at each level is either true, period, or false, period. In an original twist, the

version Williams thinks acceptable is true for only some kinds of ethical judgment. 'We should distinguish between *real* and *notional* confrontations. A real confrontation between two divergent outlooks occurs at a given time if there is a group of people for whom each of the outlooks is a real option … a relativist view … can be understood as saying that … it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal … can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made.' The working-out of the idea is intriguing, but the biggest problems are bound to arise right at the start. Why should no judgments be made in notional confrontations? The most likely reason seems to be that there's no point, for nothing turns on it. But if that were so, the relativism of distance, as he calls it, would never cut any ice, for in all decisions that mattered it would be inapplicable by definition. This is evidently not Williams's view, but the reason for a relativism of distance remains unclear.

Even for someone who shares, as I do, a sympathy with Professor Williams's presentation of a conception of ethics more rooted in human society and less in rationalistic abstraction than those offered by most moral philosophy, it is hard not to feel that some of the problems in its way are more perplexing than he acknowledges. Take the question of the audience-relativity of ethical discussion. There is a vigorous paragraph in which Williams attacks a piece of influential baton-wielding by contemporary orchestrators of the secular conscience:

> The word 'speciesism' has been used for an attitude some regard as our ultimate prejudice, that in favour of humanity. It is more revealingly called 'humanism', and it is not a prejudice. To see the world from a human point of view is not an absurd thing for human beings to do. It is sometimes said that such a view implies that we regard human beings as the most important or valuable creatures in the universe. This would be an absurd thing to do, but it is not implied. To suppose that it is, is to make the mistake of identifying the point of view of the universe and the human point of view. No one should make any claims about the importance of human beings to the universe: the point is about the importance of human beings to human beings.

I doubt whether many animal liberationists will be convinced by this (try replacing the word 'human' by 'South African white' throughout: the prose may be gawky but the argument is no less convincing). The point is that the appropriateness of taking the human viewpoint is exactly what is in question. If it is to be defended – as it should be – something must be said about what human beings share and how this can constitute an ethically appropriate point of view. Professor Williams's strictures against abstraction tend to hide something important about the humanism that is profoundly present throughout this book. Though less abstract than Kantian rationalism, it is no less an abstraction, from the particularities and eccentricities of individual human beings and their several points of view. It is an abstraction that needs explanation and defence. Perhaps Williams believes that this stage of the argument is one in which philosophers should keep silence. But many philosophers have

written importantly on such themes (a comment in Williams's postscript that virtually identifies philosophy with 'formulations' is grotesquely unfair to many philosophers past and present). The air of self-denial with which Professor Williams's book closes is not to be taken entirely seriously; it is also a pity, in view of the many illuminating fragments of substantive ethical discussion that have been glimpsed along the way. After his account of what ethical discussion should be like, one would be glad to see him engage in some. In keeping with its theme, this is a book of great character, which many people will find rewarding: some at least will regret the work it leaves undone.