Review: Sophie Grace Chappell / Marcel van Ackeren: Ethics beyond the Limits. New Essays on Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy

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Bernard Williams probably is the best-known critic of the idea that building moral theories should be the central concern of moral philosophers. He claims that it is an illusion to think that such theories can tell us what is the right thing to do and that it is a confusion to think that moral theory somehow can ground our moral judgements. For him, the opposite is true: moral theories blur our thoughts and deform our moral judgements. In these respects such theories indicate an alienation from what really matters in ethical thinking. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (ELP), first published in 1985, contains Williams' condensed thoughts on what is wrong with moral theories. Thirty years later there has been a conference that took place in Oxford to celebrate this event and to discuss the merits and also the shortcomings of Williams' views. The essays in the collection *Ethics beyond the limits* are the outcome of this conference. Accordingly, most of these essays deal with exegetical issues and critically reflect Williams' ideas, but there are also some essays that develop themes from Williams in a less exegetical manner. Hereinafter, I will give a brief overview of the topics discussed.

The first two essays discuss Williams' relation to Hume. Obviously, Williams shared some important insights with the sentimentalist tradition that also contradicts the Kantian-utilitarian picture of morality which largely ignores psychological aspects of moral agency. According to Blackburn, Williams could also have learned from Hume that to base morality on psychological reactions can also deliver vindictory genealogies that are a supplementary counterpart to Williams' own Nietzsche-inspired debunking genealogies, leading to a more balanced assessment of the peculiarity of morality. Paul Russell wonders that Williams once claimed that he lost his admiration for Hume and elucidates how Williams to some extent misunderstood Hume's optimism about the possibility of a harmonious moral order. This optimism, Russell claims, must be seen as a part of Hume's attempts "to downplay the extent to which philosophical critique of religion and religious ethics would disrupt and alter human life" (47) and to show that a secular ethics need not lead to cynicism and nihilism. In his essay on

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Williams' political realism, Lorenzo Greco also discusses Williams' relation to Hume. Greco shows that Williams doubts that political action can and must be legitimated through ahistorical ethical principles but nevertheless thinks that today's liberal views are somehow justified. The justification Williams argues for is grounded, Greco claims, in a humane insight into the human capacity to suffer and the human capability of being sensitive to the suffering of others.

Three further essays discuss Williams' humane view of practical reasoning. Roger Teichman as well as David Cockburn both take as a starting point Williams' claim that practical deliberation is radically first personal and try to spell out what this slogan may mean. Teichman shows that it cannot be really explained in terms of desires, and Cockburn argues that it cannot be explained in terms of self-reference. Catherine Wilson thinks that, as Williams says, reasons really do rest on an agent's motivational set. In her essay she aims to defend Williams against the accusation that this amounts to an apology for exceptionalism, i.e. the claim that morality may be necessary for the masses, but not for the nietzschean *Uebermensch*.

There are two essays related to Williams' thesis about the relativism of distance. Our moral concepts, he claims, cannot be applied if another culture's moral outlook is no real option for us. Geraldine Ng shares the doubts about this thesis if it is understood as a metaethical thesis and presents an interpretation according to which it should be understood as a thesis about the psychological limits of agents: If another culture's moral outlook has no connection to our concerns we cannot apply our own moral concepts to those distant societies. In an essay only loosely related to the relativism of distance, Regina Rini offers a very fascinating line of thoughts about progress and our own poor moral condition. If we think that our future descendants will look at us with the same disgust with which we look at our ancestors because of their moral errors, then we can only choose between rejecting moral progress or moral objectivity – and we should reject the latter, she claims.

Sophie Grace Chappell's essay also offers thoughts inspired by Williams. Her aim is to show how we can rekindle the thought that beauty can be a reason for action. To this end she leads the reader through intriguing considerations about the Greek notion of *to kalon*, conceptual change, our alienation from what we really think and the question if such a way of thinking can be abused. The question how exactly Williams used history to do philosophy is under consideration in Marcel van Ackeren's essay. He shows that in ELP Williams primarily used history to provoke an alienation effect that is a means to help us see in which ways today's philosophical questions "are too narrow, too limited or pointing in the wrong direction" (62). Anthony Price argues in his essay that Williams even could have learnt more from Aristotle if he saw the reasons that speak in favour of the unity-of-the-virtues thesis and acknowledged Aristotle's subtle discussion of the virtue of courage.

One of Williams' most powerful arguments against moral theories is that they alienate us from genuine ethical reflection by giving us an explanation of how we should act from an outside perspective. Nicholas Smyth discusses this view and if it really can be the basis for a critique of moral theories. The problem he sees is that, as Williams describes the hiatus between a reflective mode of thinking and our first-order dispositions, this gap is part of the human condition itself and therefore cannot be used to disqualify moral theory. The chasm between being inside and outside morality also is the starting point for Gerald Lang's discussion of Williams' view on moral luck. Williams famously used the example of Gauguin leaving his family to illustrate his thesis that lucky circumstances rightly influence our judgements about the blameworthiness of persons. But, Lang argues, all interpretations of how to understand this example are burdened with difficulties and therefore it is doubtful if it really can show that we should

excuse Gauguin's behaviour. Last but not least, this collection also offers a dense summary of ELP written by Adrian Moore.

On the whole, this collection offers a good blend of essays that yield a well-balanced critical appraisal of Williams' thoughts and avoids the dangers of unilateral worship. The essays are of great interest to those who want to learn more about Williams' critique of moral theories and the more or less obvious connections between his and Hume's views. But also defenders of moral theories should risk a look into some of these essays because they contain arguments supporting the suspicion that Williams' critique might not be as devastating as many admirers think it is. Insofar as the question of how much we can gain through building moral theories has not been conclusively answered, the essays in this collection should be of the greatest interest for those working in moral philosophy.

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