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Introduction: The Formation of the Moral Point of View—The Legacy of Bernard Williams Twenty Years after His Passing

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The English moral philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) was a leading actor in post-war Anglo-American intellectual circuits. In 1967, at the young age of 38, he was appointed as the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, followed by his appointment as Provost of King's College, Cambridge, at the dawn of Thatcherism in 1979. Amidst severe government cutbacks to universities during the first years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, Williams continued his academic career in the USA, where he served as Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1988. He would keep his chair at Berkeley until his death in 2003. In 1990, the year Thatcher stepped down as Prime Minister, Williams returned to his home country as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, a position previously held by his once tutor, Richard Hare.

Bernard Williams was a counter-current thinker, and his ideas about what philosophy could be—and crucially, could or should be, expressed from the hallowed home of the Anglo-American way of practising the discipline—would likely have been viewed as unusual, if not scandalous, by many of his colleagues. Williams was a staunchly anti-theoretical philosopher who systematically argued that most (not to say, *all*) historical approaches to moral philosophy were misleading and, if followed to the letter, would lead to either personal misery or deep deficits in other spheres of life and thought.

In his first book—*Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, published in 1972[1]—we find an early expression of this idea:

> There cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is, nor […] can there be an ethical theory, in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning. (1972: ix-x)

In many ways, this is the core assumption of Williams's approach to moral philosophy—including the rather controversial notion (at least from within analytic philosophy) that it would be better to separate *morality* and *moral theory* from *ethics*. In this specific passage, Williams is reflecting on the schism between "theory" (whether "ethical theory" or "moral theory") and the specific demands of ethical—or moral—*life*. His view on this schism, of course, is that it is a by-product of philosophical theory itself and that, when taken too far, it either obscures or distorts the importance of the real demands of ethical life in its quest to provide a decision procedure that can do without the complexities of the ethical *situation* in which the agent finds herself. For reasons that are likely due to his double academic background (he read Greats at Oxford, a combination of classics and contemporary philosophy), Williams's conception of our ethical situation always had the broadest of contours—never leaving out the accidental or non-voluntary element of choice and ethical performance—and rejected "one-size-fits-all" requirements as unrealistic and damaging "compulsions" to action.

Many viewed Williams as above all a sceptic about what can be achieved in moral philosophy: about systematic philosophy's ability to capture anything of real importance about ethics; about the possibility of objective knowledge

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[1] See Williams (1972). *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. ix-x.

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in ethics; and about the powers of practical rationality (to which his seminal article on internal and external reasons contributed a great deal). While he clearly outlined the shortcomings of attempts to establish an objective foundation for ethics and of the objective point of view, he did so mainly by arguing that this is neither the vocation nor the purpose of ethics. Rather, the focal point of ethics for Bernard Williams is concrete experiences and situations perceived from a particular point of view. Objectivity is unachievable because ethical considerations stem from individual lives and personal projects. This is simply a consequence of the nature of ethical life, not a built-in "flaw" of ethical thought. All the above suggests that for Bernard Williams what matters most in ethics is of a personal, concrete, non-transmissible, often untranslatable nature. On his view, reasons for acting morally do not form a separate class, nor can they be separated from everything else that gives our lives importance. This idea underlies all of his writings on ethics, especially his insights on how reason and emotions are brought together to form the moral point of view.

This special issue—published on the 20th anniversary of Bernard Williams's death and dedicated to several strands in his thought—is mostly concerned with answering a question that remains dear to Williams's moral philosophy, broadly understood: *Wherein lies the genesis of the moral point of view? Can we even speak of such a thing as "a moral point of view"?* The issue gathers eighteen essays devoted to answering this and other moral and non-moral questions—questions that are grounded in Williams's distinctively sceptical approach to morality *qua* theoretically informed decision-procedure.

One of Bernard Williams's literary executors, *Adrian Moore*, precisely explores the question whether there is such a thing as *the* ethical point of view, according to Williams. His "More on Williams on Ethical Knowledge and Reflection" is a thorough reflection on Williams's contention, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, that "in Ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge"[2] and on how such an idea can relate to the very notion of "*a* moral point of view" or the "formation of *the* moral point of view". Moore's outstanding contribution to this thematic issue (which is devoted precisely to the theme of "the formation of the moral point of view") focuses on Williams's core claim that the *retrospective assessment* of a moral attitude can *block knowledge* that one had from a former point of view (usually a former point in time) but no longer has at one's disposal from the present point of view (or the present moment). For Williams, this kind of retrospective assessment implies reflection, which can destroy (ethical) knowledge. In his paper, Moore elaborates on previously published work to argue for the general validity of Williams's claim. He suggests that the endorsement of a previous (moral) point of view can be done *indirectly*, through the subject's commitment to content that is merely implied by that former point of view. Since in doing so the subject need not assume, first-personally, a previously staked claim while also conveying a new and contradictory claim, Williams's contention that "in Ethics, reflection can destroy knowledge" remains untouched.

Pedro Franco's "Bernard and Alasdair on Authenticity" also addresses the core issue of the constitution of the moral point of view. By drawing a comparison between Williams's conception of "authenticity" as the primary form that individual virtue can assume and Alasdair MacIntyre's thoughts (especially in his later work) on the relevance of communities of relevant others[3], which are crucial to the constitution of practical thought from the third-person perspective, Franco concludes that both views on ethics and virtue are complementary rather than opposed. To the extent that practical reason is inevitably embedded in social practices, shared concepts and common language(s)—including shared narratives—it cannot be dissociated, Franco argues, from the relevant communities in which the moral agent finds herself. This being so, Bernard Williams's famous Laurentian insight—that morality tells you to "find your deepest impulse and follow that"[4]—cannot be dissociated from parallel insights provided by the relevant community of reasoners and moral actors, broadly construed. Even authenticity is a matter of communality of feeling and reasoning in the relevant moral contexts.

The issue of the moral and deliberative relevance of a "personal (moral) point of view" is further developed in *Alan Thomas*'s "Virtue, Authenticity and Irony: Themes from Sartre and Williams". In his essay, Thomas elaborates on the intrinsic problem with the indirect consequentialist's view of virtue, according to which the instrumental value of virtues or character traits is just the production of the most welfare overall, independent of the agent's first-personal (or internal) experience of such character traits. As Williams points out in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, "[…] dispositions are seen as devices for generating certain actions, and those actions are the means by which certain states of affairs, yielding the most welfare, come about. This is what those dispositions look like when seen from outside, from the point of view of the utilitarian consciousness. But it is not what they seem from the inside".[5] According

[2] See Williams (2006/1985), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Routledge, London, p. 148.

[3] See MacIntyre, Alasdair (2016). *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 157–162.

[4] See Williams (1993a). *Morality—An Introduction to Ethics* (Canto Edition.) (1st edition 1972.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 86.

[5] See Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Fontana, London, pp. 107–8.

to Thomas, Williams's view on the virtues and their relation to agency not only holds up under scrutiny but can be better understood when paired with a Sartrean kind of "moral psychology", according to which the objectification of one's character can never take place outside the scope of self-directed forms of irony.

Continuing with a topic that permeates Bernard Williams's criticism of morality as a rule-based system on the basis of which decision-making procedures can be derived, in "Virtue Ethics and the Morality System" *Matthieu Queloz* and *Marcel van Ackeren* raise the question whether the "Morality System", as criticized by Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere, and associated with Kantianism and Utilitarianism, is the only possible *moral* framework on offer in the history of ideas. The authors offer a compelling argument to the effect that, to the extent that they also sought to shelter life from luck, ancient virtue ethical ideas—especially Stoicism—were no more immune to the worst outcomes and features of the Morality System than Kantian deontology and utilitarianism.

Bernard Williams's critique of the Morality System is also at the heart of *Allyn Fives*'s "Moral Obligation as a Conclusive Reason: On Bernard Williams' Critique of the 'Morality System'". One of Williams's main criticisms is related to the conception of voluntariness entailed by the Morality System: (i) the idea that there is no such thing as a real, genuine, moral conflict, even among obligations (insofar as a defeated reason cannot be binding), and (ii) the idea that a moral obligation can never be defeated by a non-moral consideration (a category that includes those commitments that are peculiar to us and dear to us, those reasons for action that are neither universal nor impartial and are expressed in the vocabulary of "thick concepts"). As Fives demonstrates, that thin moral concepts take precedence over thick moral concepts and that moral obligations therefore have priority over other reasons are notions that Williams repudiates at various points throughout his work. Rather than arguing that such obligations play no role in our moral lives, however, Williams seeks to give "an account of what obligations are when they are rightly seen as merely one kind of ethical consideration among others"[6]. Fives argues that Williams cannot fully sustain his point, however. Williams wants to show that a moral obligation (a thin concept) can never be absolutely conclusive and decisive and can be defeated by all kinds of non-impartial/moral considerations linked to our particular ways of life. As Fives argues, however, Williams cannot do this without begging the question (for instance, according to Williams, a moral obligation can never be an external reason; however, it can be regarded as an internal reason—and it is only as an internal reason, as an integral part of the agent's motivational set, that it becomes conclusive). Williams seeks to show why a thin concept like a moral obligation can never be a conclusive reason to act, but all he can show is that a conclusive reason can only be constituted by thick concepts (and that already assumes what was intended to be proven).

Another important point within the Morality System is the idea that, because "moral obligations […] cannot conflict, ultimately, really, or at the end of the line"[7], moral conflicts are not genuine but only apparent. As such, when one fails to act on a defeated reason, even if one has brought about some wrong, one should not feel shame or regret for having acted as one ought. The next two articles are specifically about the emotions of *shame* and *regret*. In "There Are Many Senses to an Emotion: Loss of Power, Diminishment and the Internalised Other", *Daniel Peixoto Murata* revisits Williams's nuanced account of shame, put forth in *Shame and Necessity*, which characterizes shame as "a thick moral emotion". Murata starts from a distinction between "basic shame" and "complex shame", arguing that whereas the former is merely concerned with "loss of power" in relation to others (whether real or imaginary others), "complex shame" is about the feeling of self-diminishment one can experience toward the internalized other. Murata furthermore suggests that the second type of shame can accommodate the so-called "challenge of unrespected judgments", to the effect that one can feel shame even without endorsing the values of those responsible for one's feeling of shame. All that is required for the second type of shame is a sense of self-diminishment caused by a perception of loss of power.

Julian Bacharach's "Agent-Regret, Finitude, and the Irrevocability of the Past" focuses on the difficult theme of agent-regret, first worked out by Bernard Williams in his essay "Moral Luck". Bacharach makes the important point that for Williams, the relevance of a retrospective moral attitude like regret pertains not so much to improving one's decision-making in similar moral situations in the future but rather to marking the irrevocability of the past and the finitude of the life story in which regretting certain episodes in one's moral life makes sense. As a first-personal moral attitude, agent-regret singularizes one's life and the way one has led and leads it, including voluntary and involuntary aspects of it.

In the article "Assertion, Lying and the Norm of Truth", *Roger Teichmann* focuses on Bernard Williams's treatment of the notion of assertion in Chap. 4 of his *Truth and Truthfulness*.[8] Essentially, Teichmann opposes Williams's psychological characterization of assertion as a speech act

[6] See Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Fontana, London, p. 182.

[7] See Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Fontana, London, p. 176.

[8] Williams (2002). *Truth and truthfulness*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

whereby the speaker intends to express their belief. According to this characterization, "the rule 'Assert what you believe to be true' has a certain priority over the rule 'Assert what is true'" (this priority, Teichmann adds, is related to how Williams conceives of the value of truthfulness, as opposed to the value of truth). What justifies this priority, in Williams's view, is the fact that we cannot always criticize someone for asserting something that is false, as there are many circumstances in which doing so is unobjectionable: someone may assert something that is recognizably false in good faith, believing it to be true, etc. What this shows, according to Williams, is that assertion is not constitutively governed by a truth norm. In this article, Teichmann argues against this step of the argument and its conclusion: the fact that a false assertion is sometimes permitted or accepted (because the subject was acting in good faith, for example) does not entail that, in a constitutive sense, a false assertion is not always criticizable. This is precisely because, according to Teichmann, the norm of truth is internal to (and constitutive of) the practice of assertion, and therefore whenever the normative connection between assertion and truth is broken, there is something to object to. To prove his point, Teichmann draws a parallel with the domain of action: if I did something wrong, it is normal and expected (and right) for me to regret it (even if I did what I *believed* to be right). Similarly, if I today discover that what I said yesterday was false, I should also regret that it happened, regardless of whether I said what I *believed* to be true. What makes something an assertion is this (constitutive) commitment to truth, not the fact that it is the expression of someone's belief. As a final point, Teichmann draws a connection between this theme and Williams's famous conviction that only internal reasons exist. Teichmann argues that this latter idea, according to which the only reasons a person can have for doing something depend on the elements that are part of their motivational set (composed of desires, commitments, and personal projects), is closely linked to the idea that the value of truthfulness is independent of the value of truth as a constitutive norm of the practice of assertion.

Of course, no special issue dedicated to the work of Bernard Williams would be complete without a discussion of internal versus external reasons and Williams's impact on this topic since 1979. At least two articles deal with this issue directly. *Michael Vincent*'s "Psychology, Equality, and the Forgetting of Motivations" proposes a renewed approach to Williams's thesis on the contrast between internal and external reasons. Vincent argues for the need to maintain Williams's contrast while acknowledging the feasibility, or even the *necessity*, of including external reasons in philosophical discourse in general, as well as in theoretical systems that offer guides for action, such as egalitarianism. Taking his lead from T.M. Scanlon, Vincent defends the need to keep so-called "external reasons" alive in moral debate and persuasion when, at the level of moral disagreement, for instance, it proves indispensable to convincing others of the validity of *reasons* (and not sheer motives) to act.

Luke Elson's "No Point of View Except Ours?" also takes as its central point of departure Williams's internalism about reasons, which he dubs "Austere Internalism". More specifically, Elson seeks to understand the consequences of dropping an absolute or objective view of morality and thus to explore the emotional implications of metaethical nihilism, or the view that there are no objective, categorical normative reasons. His main questions are: (i) should the disavowal of an objective view of morality lead us, or does it necessarily lead us, to nihilistic despair? (ii) Is nihilistic despair incoherent? Contra Williams, his conclusions are that our lives will have meaning only if we have categorical reasons for action (there is a connection between importance, meaning, and reasons) and that nihilistic despair is not self-contradictory. What makes nihilism depressing, according to Elson, is the idea that nothing matters from an objective point of view. But given that this very idea is an illusion—as Williams puts it, "the idea of absolute importance in the scheme of things is an illusion, a relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted"[9]—despairing over it makes no sense. Elson suggests that this argument only makes sense if one shows that there is a clear conflict between "the attitude of despairing at nihilism and that of accepting nihilism". By disentangling the cognitive and emotional elements at stake here, he argues that the supposed conflict does not necessarily follow. In the end, Elson not only argues that one should in fact despair about nihilism (especially if some kind of Plausible Moral Realism is available) but also concludes that, contrary to what one might think, in some respects Williams's austere internalism may be even more depressing than absolute nihilism, in the sense that Williams doesn't deny that normative reasons exist, but only that in order for them to exist they must somehow be related to the agent's motivational set. So, although there is "genuine normativity in the world", as human beings we fail to be categorically important to one another.

Vincent's and Elson's articles both argue for the need for external reasons in moral philosophical discourse, and the latter in particular attempts to demonstrate that only the existence of external reasons can ultimately imbue our lives with meaning. For Williams, by contrast, value is not handed to us at the outset, and our only available option is to craft a life that is valuable to us—although this value will always be linked to what is partial, personal, and non-transferable:

[9] See Williams (2006). "The Human Prejudice." In B. Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. A. Moore (ed.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 137.

to what makes sense for the particular person I am. The importance of this personal dimension of morality is also of central relevance to the articles to follow.

The articles by *Etye Steinberg* and *Nikhil Venkatesh* focus on a topic for which Williams's work is widely known, even outside the most obvious debates: the idea of *personal integrity*. For Williams, personal identity is based on the personal projects and commitments that give meaning to our lives, those projects and commitments with which we deeply identify in a self-constitutive sense. Since these projects are the foundations of our (moral) lives, they are inalienable, in the sense that abandoning them would be equivalent to relinquishing our personal integrity and (moral) identity. It is partly the fact that certain moral theories (like utilitarianism) prove incompatible with this idea of integrity, because they are unable to respect it, that leads Williams to argue that they utterly fail to account for the moral lives of individuals. Indeed, Williams argues that "utilitarianism makes integrity as a value more or less unintelligible. […] The reason why utilitarianism cannot understand integrity is that it cannot coherently describe the relations between a man's projects and his actions"[10]. In his article "Williams's Integrity Objection as a Psychological Problem", *Nikhil Venkatesh* explicitly deals with the psychological problem that the so-called integrity objection raises for utilitarianism, which he articulates as follows: "if we accept utilitarianism then we regard our projects in a way (impartially and as dispensable) that is impossible for us insofar as we are committed to them"—in other words, those who accept utilitarianism cannot be committed to their projects. Venkatesh explores the various facets of this problem. In what he considers its normative aspect, Venkatesh rebuts Williams's argument by asserting that respect for personal commitments can be accommodated by utilitarian theory. He rejects the idea that utilitarianism is unable to recognize how the commitments we make to ourselves alter our "normative landscape". For instance, just as making a promise places me under an obligation, the fact that I have a particular commitment also affects the strength of my reasons, and in this sense the costs of abandoning a commitment can (and should) also factor into utilitarian calculation. Regarding the psychological problem itself, Venkatesh suggests that it would not be a devastating result if utilitarianism were to imply that we should not be committed to our projects in the way Williams suggests. Given the social nature of human beings, if at times I come to view a project of my own as dispensable for the sake of others' well-being, this is not something that should be considered morally reprehensible—quite the opposite.

Etye Steinberg's article—"Integrity as Incentive-Insensitivity: Moral Incapacity Means One Can't Be Bought"—focuses on a concept that is closely connected with personal integrity as well. Williams argues that personal integrity gives rise to what he calls *moral incapacity*: the fact that certain projects and commitments are so dear to us makes certain actions—those that could jeopardize these projects—impossible for us, to the extent that we resist any incentives to perform them. In other words, the totality of the projects and commitments with which we identify not only shapes our particular deliberative standpoint but also imposes strong limits and constraints on it: there are actions that we simply cannot conceive of performing because doing so would mean acting against our integrity, acting against ourselves. As Steinberg astutely observes, these are deliberative restrictions and limits—about what we are capable of doing—that we impose on ourselves, and two important consequences result from this: (i) the relocation of the moral standpoint "from a universal point that is external to the agent to a particular, even personal point of view that is internal to oneself", and consequently, (ii) the idea that "what makes an action fail to be integral to an agent's identity […] is not the nature of the action, but the nature of the very agent as a person with an identity comprising certain projects and commitments".

In this article, Steinberg aims to explore Williams's conception of integrity and moral incapacity and to show how they should be understood, going beyond Williams's proposal. Williams asserts that moral incapacities are meant to be proof against rewards[11], and Steinberg explores the senses in which this happens. How should we understand the deliberative stability given to us by the projects and commitments with which we identify on a very deep level? Steinberg argues that moral incapacity is not only proof against acting in ways that undermine one's projects (as Williams argues) but also against reconsidering those very commitments: if someone is truly committed to a project, they must be incapable not only of acting in ways that jeopardize it but of questioning the extent to which they are committed to it. This argument is the basis for conceiving of personal integrity as "incentive-insensitive". As Steinberg himself acknowledges, his article is greatly inspired by Williams's work in moral psychology, but its aim is to develop an original idea that goes beyond Williams (and even Williams's purposes), correcting him on certain points—and in this sense, we might add, it is another way to pay tribute to him.

The issues of practical identity and the formation of the moral point of view and character are further analysed in *Alessandra Fussi* and *Margherita Giannoni*'s "Necessary

[10] See Williams (1973). A critique of Utilitarianism. In: Smart JJC, Williams B (eds) *Utilitarianism: for and against*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 99–100.

[11] See Williams (1993b). Moral Incapacity. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 93, p. 69.

Identities: From Bernard Williams to Feminist Critique" and *James Martin*'s "Williams and Cusk on Technologies of the Self". In both articles, feminist criticism is on the horizon. Fussi and Giannoni explore the concept of a necessary identity, as presented by Williams in *Shame and Necessity*[12], using it as a conceptual tool to explain some of the mechanisms that make certain socially imposed identities inescapable—the case in point being gender identity, based on the feminist critique carried out by Margaret Urban Walker.[13] As mentioned above, Williams conceives of practical identities not as fixed, abstract, empty, rationally definable points but as composed of our projects, personal experiences, intentions, and commitments—elements to which are added social and cultural factors, such as shared values, and other structural aspects that we do not choose but that define us, such as belonging to a certain gender or a certain social environment. Fussi and Giannoni argue that this conceptual framework provides an understanding of gender as a category shaped by historical structures and power relations. They illustrate this potentiality (and actuality) of Williams's thought by appealing to how Urban Walker uses this conceptual apparatus, refining it, correcting it, and problematizing the concept of a necessary identity from a feminist perspective.

At the core of James Martin's article lies the notion of the moral self and the problem that lies at the centre of this special issue: the formation of the moral point of view. Like Fussi and Giannoni, Martin describes and analyses Williams's objection to the idea of a *characterless* moral self, free of the contingencies, characteristics, and personal inclinations that prevent one from freely pondering the aseptic question of *how one should live*. For Williams, this neutral and universal viewpoint, a view from nowhere from which answers about how one should act can emerge, is a mere chimera. We can only start from the material we are made of, from our experiences, from the torrent of desires and commitments that give flesh, density, and sustenance to our lives. Still, some questions remain, for instance *How is the moral point of view formed from this assemblage of materials*? *How idiosyncratic can a* properly *moral viewpoint be? Is there a kind of moral core that all individuals with moral concerns share?* Martin focuses here on the particular way Williams responds to these questions in *Truth and Truthfulness*, where he begins by rejecting Rousseau's assumption that we have transparent access to our intentions and desires and that, by turning to ourselves and observing them carefully, we can discover a coherent and constant self. Considering this view naive and unrealistic, Williams instead adopts a view inspired by Diderot's model, according to which the formation and development of the self involves a mixture of self-discovery and self-creation, that is, a constant process of stabilizing the different inclinations we discover in ourselves as we attempt to create a minimally coherent core. Martin argues that this model can be further expanded, refined, and in some cases corrected through a careful reading of Rachel Cusk's literary work, in a type of exercise—i.e. the use of literature to illuminate what can be said about our moral lives—that was very dear to Williams himself.

Two articles in this special issue discuss Nietzsche's influence on Williams's thought, and in both cases the focus is Williams's view on the nature of our ethical thinking. While the first article raises issues related to objectivity and relativism, the second focuses on issues of philosophical style. *Sofia Miguens*'s contribution—"Williams's Relativism and the Moral Point of View: A Challenge by Cora Diamond"—is prompted by an article by Sophie-Grace Chappell (who is also a contributor to this special issue) entitled "Being Somebody Else: Imaginative Identification in Ethics and Literature"[14], in which she traces the similarities between Bernard Williams and Cora Diamond, as moral philosophers. While Miguens acknowledges these similarities, she argues that there is more that separates them than unites them and that at the basis of this divergence lies their foundational philosophical influences: Diamond's Wittgensteinian and Williams's Nietzschean roots. Williams's Nietzschean background led him to adopt a sophisticated relativism, centred on the idea that people can think different things about the same situation (for example, some may view setting fire to a cat as cruel, while others may find it amusing). This is because there are no "universally shared thick concepts"; even within the same society, people do not use concepts such as "cruelty" in a uniform way, and there is no escaping this plurality. Diamond, on the contrary—Miguens argues—believes that it is possible to escape this view of ethics (and objectivity in ethics) if we do not think of ethics as a separate, isolated, and compartmentalized domain of thought (as if it were possible to separate thick concepts from all other concepts). Of course, there can be disagreements about the use of thick moral concepts (for example, disagreements about whether a particular thick concept, such as the concept of cruelty, applies to a particular case), and Williams's ethical relativism, however sophisticated, ties into this given the plurality and contingency of forms of life. But what there is to say about the ethical point of view does not end there, i.e. in how we apply

[12] Williams (1993a). *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.

[13] Urban Walker (2007). *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[14] Chappel, S-G. (2022). "Being somebody else: imaginative identification in ethics and literature". In: Andrew Gleeson, Craig Taylor (eds.), *Morality in a Realistic Spirit—Essays for Cora Diamond*. Routledge, London.

the thick concepts we know and for which we may have different uses. In the example presented by Diamond[15] and analysed here, that of slavery, Diamond seeks to show that what explains the disagreement between slaveholders and abolitionists is not a disagreement about the use of thick concepts such as the concept of cruelty. People who advocated for slavery did so for (what they took to be) reasons, and they also possessed concepts of justice, and cruelty. Diamond's point is that we cannot understand what the proponents of slavery thought if we view their position as simply one moral position among others—a particular way of using the concept of justice or cruelty. This is because what distinguishes defenders of slavery from abolitionists is not just a way of manipulating certain moral concepts but an entire worldview, a way of thinking about everything that surrounds us, including human nature and humanity, rationality, and property. Therefore, when it comes to the formation of the moral point of view, the concepts of cruelty and brutality, as well as the concepts of property and humanity, are to be included. According to Miguens, it is in this sense that Diamond, the Wittgensteinian, distances herself from Williams, the Nietzschean. Ethics should not be understood as a particularly problematic domain of thought due to the plurality of uses of thick concepts; ethical problems appear in the midst of everything else we can think about, and much of what separates us may not be "properly" ethical in this strict sense. Many of our disagreements do not have anything properly ethical about them and instead involve views about life, thought (what it is possible to think in a meaningful way), and language.

In "'Ethics, a Matter of Style?': Bernard Williams and the Nietzschean Legacy", *Paolo Babbiotti* offers a close reading of and commentary on central passages from Bernard Williams's famous introduction to the French edition of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, called "L'éthique, question de style?". Babbiotti aims to demonstrate the sense in which, for Williams, ethics is a matter of style, while simultaneously identifying those aspects of Nietzsche's philosophical style that Williams admired, to the point of presenting Nietzsche as a "model philosophical writer".

Williams believed that there are genuine differences between different philosophical styles, but the French introduction to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* makes clear that he also believed that these differences are not captured by the common distinction between analytic and continental philosophy. Williams refers here to a certain (philosophical) French style: one that combines the interpretation of ethical and political phenomena through extremely abstract metaphysical categories with the "vivid invocation of the concrete". Williams's own philosophical style also defies all categorization, an interpretation with which Babbiotti agrees to the extent that he presents Williams as a highly *sui generis* analytic philosopher: while distancing himself, as analytic philosophers do, from abstract categorizations, he is mindful not to lose the "vivid invocation of the concrete" that is typical of the French style. In this article, Babbiotti argues that this particular style has implications for how Williams views ethics and explains his choice of Nietzsche as a philosophical role model. The anti-systematic vocation of Williams's thought draws on the anti-theoretical character that Williams discerns in Nietzsche's reflections, combined with his genealogical concerns about the origin of concepts and practices. Babbiotti thus shows that Nietzsche's influence was fundamental to defining Williams's thought, as two of his essential traits can be found in Nietzsche: i) the idea that philosophy cannot be captured in an ethical theory or system of universal or eternal truths, and ii) the idea that, this being so, philosophy actually involves "historical philosophizing"—attending to real moral experiences in detail, without losing the "vivid invocation of the concrete", and reflecting on the origin and development of these practices. Moral philosophy cannot provide us with precepts for life—it cannot tell us how to live—but it can gather materials from history, literature, and psychology, delving into the origins of our concepts and practices and thereby helping us to think. This is its vocation, that is, its style.

Finally, given that an important part of Williams's work is built around an intense dialogue with Greek antiquity, this special issue also considers this aspect of his writing, a task that is fulfilled by the articles by *Sophie-Grace Chappell* and *Silvia Bento*. The underlying theme of Chappell's article, "Agamemnon at Aulis: On the Right and Wrong Sorts of Imaginative Identification", is the power of imaginative identification, the ability to envision ourselves as someone else, to occupy another particular point of view—to respond to the question "What is it like to be someone else?". Bernard Williams demonstrated at various points in his work that this is a question and a skill with deep moral resonances and implications. However, he also argued that literature more easily opens us up to this dimension of morality than moral philosophy itself, fundamentally due to three main flaws he identified in moral philosophy as an attempt to systematize and encapsulate moral thought: its rationalism, impersonality, and moralism. Consider, for example, moralism: while literature often allows us to identify with morally flawed fictional characters, a similar experience is rarely found in moral philosophy. (One of Chappell's primary examples is Shakespeare, who not only shows us what it's like to be a moral monster but also manages to evoke pity for such people.)

If moral philosophy has consistently failed to recognize imaginative identification as a central aspect of moral

[15] See Diamond (2019). *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going on to Ethics*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

thinking due to its rationalism, impersonality, and moralism, and if Williams consistently drew attention to this failure, Chappell here argues that, ironically, Williams himself falls into the same error in his interpretation of the example of Agamemnon at Aulis (from the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus). Williams analyses the example of Agamemnon as if it were a paradigmatic case of tragedy: a situation where there is no right choice possible, where the hero faces two irreconcilable ethical imperatives and must inevitably act. Chappell's point is that Williams's exercise of imaginative identification in this analysis also falls into the moralism he criticizes in moral philosophy, as it requires (indeed, it is only possible by) seeing Agamemnon as an innocent tragic hero facing circumstances rather than what he is — a "warlord and agent of destruction" who chooses to kill his own daughter (thus distorting what actually happens in the play).

At the core of *Sílvia Bento*'s article – "Beyond the Ancient and the Modern: Thinking the Tragic with Williams and Kitto"—also lies the notion of the tragic. According to Bento, Williams offers a reading of the ancient Greek world in which he attempts to distance himself from two (modern) misconceptions: the idea that harmony and unity prevail in Greek antiquity, and the idea of a profound and abrupt metaphysical divide between the world of the ancients and that of modernity (to the exact extent that the modern world is structured around dichotomies that were not present in the ancient Greek worldview). In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams precisely seeks to look beyond these dichotomies by analysing the tragic element of our existence and ethical lives. In a certain way, Bento aims in this article to continue what she calls Williams's "cultural methodology"—the effort to analyse the similarities between the modern and the ancient world by identifying common narrative and poetic aspects. She does this by drawing a parallel between Williams's analysis of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* in Chap. 3 of *Shame and Necessity* and the Classicist H.D.F. Kitto's comparative analysis of that same play and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this analysis, the concept of *miasma*, or pollution—the stain that falls upon someone who has committed a crime, whether intentionally or not—occupies a central place. Bento shows how this concept from ancient Greek thought—which has ethical, religious, and metaphysical resonances—connects Williams's and Kitto's analyses. Despite the temporal distance between both plays, Kitto aims to show that something akin to the notion of miasma is present in both "the most perfect of ancient tragedies" and the "supposedly most modern of all tragedies", thus emphasizing the continuity between antiquity and modernity. This same goal guides Williams in his analysis of the tragedy of Oedipus. Oedipus is considered responsible for the crimes he has committed and must be punished, even if he did not do them intentionally. We can understand the horror that assails Oedipus upon discovering what he has done (even if unintentionally) precisely because our ideas about moral responsibility do not diverge so much from those of the ancient Greeks: "we understand it because we know that in the story of one's life, there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done"[16]—because we know that we are not immune to luck as moral agents. What distinguishes antiquity from modernity is not the fact that the moderns have notions of moral responsibility or intentionality that the Greeks lacked: what changed was the invention of the Morality System and the prerogative attributed to these components within that system, as if all that mattered were the motives and intentions of "characterless" moral agents.

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[16] See Williams (1993a). *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 69.