

This thesis seeks to present Bernard Williams' multi-faceted contribution to moral philosophy as an integrated whole, showing in particular its positive and constructive character, and thus defending Williams against the common charge that his work in ethics is primarily negative or merely critical in significance. This is a laudable aim as Williams is notoriously obscure in expressing the ethical viewpoint he himself recommends, and much more well-known for his thorough-going critique of traditional moral theories, such as Aristotelianism, Kantianism and utilitarianism, and indeed of morality itself as an 'institution'. Nevertheless, the aim of a definitive and comprehensive treatment of Williams' moral philosophy does have obvious dangers because of the scale of its ambition. It requires extensive discussion of a wide range of difficult primary texts from different periods in Williams' development, as well as of the specific and often highly contextualised debates in the secondary literature that these different texts both addressed and provoked. To give an adequate account of Bernard Williams moral philosophy 'in its entirety' (p. 4) sounds more like a task for a book-length treatment. When conducted in the confines of a diploma thesis it will be practically impossible to cover the 'entirety'.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the scale of the task, I do believe that the author has produced a diploma thesis of impressive quality. The work is robustly structured, with the three main parts dealing first with Williams' early theory of internalist motivation stemming from a Humean root; then with his middle period, which centres on the critique of traditional moral theory and charges ethical reflection itself with undermining value; and, finally, the third part dealing with Williams' later more constructive ethical thought, primarily as it is expressed in the books *Shame and Necessity* (1993) and *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). The author achieves his aim of showing how the famous critique of moral theory, and particularly of the 'legalistic' approach to ethics, prepares the ground for the more constructive phase in which the different aspects of truthfulness and authenticity become of central importance. In all these discussions the author shows a deep and detailed knowledge of Williams' thought, as well as of its relation to a range of different contemporary positions. The use of the literature is exemplary and the technical side of the work, including references and citations is always very satisfactory. Incidentally, I found the author's translation of the crucial concept of 'luck' as '*náhoda*' most appropriate, and vastly preferable to '*šěstí*' which we often meet with in discussions of Williams in Czech. But, most importantly, throughout this diploma thesis the author demonstrates an insightful grasp of the subtlety and significance of Williams' thinking, and, I think, gives us a just measure of Williams' philosophical legacy.

The aforementioned aim of covering Williams' moral philosophy 'in its entirety' invites the opponent to look for topics that have been left out. One might have expected a section expounding his crucial distinction between concepts of ethics and morality. One might have also expected the author to have something to say about his nuanced version of relativism: the 'relativism of distance'. This relativism in the ethical sphere is an important corollary of Williams' rejection of objectivist approaches to ethics. One might have expected, in addition, that there be an explicit treatment of his conception of 'ground projects' (expounded in the first two essays in *Moral Luck*), which lend distinctive meaning to a person's life, without being strictly speaking selfish. These projects are essential to Williams' understanding of personal *integrity*—a virtue that the abstract approaches of Kantianism and utilitarianism cannot comprehend. Indeed, the idea of a concrete project being central to value is an important reason why the philosophical ideals of

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<sup>1</sup> I should note in this regard that the author's work does exceed the official maximum length for a diploma thesis. It is, on my calculation, 128 normal pages (*normostrany*): the maximum is 120.

‘impartiality’ and ‘neutrality’ are so corrosive to moral motivation and can, for Williams, engender skepticism and ethical nihilism.

In some parts of the thesis it was not clear to me what was exegesis of Williams and what was the viewpoint of the author himself. This was especially true of the third part where, to take one example, the author speaks of the spirit of the age (*‘moderní vědomí’*) (p. 63), which is characterized as being dismissive of progress and of the ‘Enlightenment project’ in the wake of the Holocaust. Is this observation to be attributed to Williams or to the author? Also, is it not a controversial statement given the still vigorous pursuit of human rights, liberal values and democratization in the modern world? Or are these not part of ‘the Enlightenment project’?

I found the section on the asymmetry between ethics and science a particularly successful part of the work. The author is not afraid to defend Williams’ unfashionable realist view of scientific inquiry as pursuing an absolute conception against the relativist and quasi-relativist conceptions of scientific understanding of Hilary Putnam and others. It is shown that Williams never claims that we can have access to an unconceptualized reality, but is instead concerned with the degree to which theoretical scientific concepts are guided by the world, rather than by our local perspective (*‘míra perspektivní podmíněnosti’*) (p. 40). This high degree of world-guidedness is something that is reflected in the convergence of scientific discourse across cultures, as well as in the potential for their being shared by other rational organisms, if such were to exist. The author also nicely shows that Williams is not reawakening the old positivist view that only scientific statements are really fact-stating and that ethical claims have no genuine truth values. No, the important point is that in science ‘what explains also justifies’, whereas in ethical thought this principle does not hold (p. 45-46). All this is, to me, convincing. What I find less satisfactory, however, is author’s claim that the absolute conception is somehow grounded in the theoretical perspective of the later Wittgenstein (p. 40). As far as I can see, the absolute conception, with its validation of the primary-secondary quality distinction, and its affirmation of the objectivist and realist claims of theoretical science is hardly compatible with Wittgenstein’s relativistic language-games. Rather, science is, for Williams, the area in which our cognitive powers can—at least to a certain degree—transcend our (human) form of life and grasp concepts that can in principle be shared with creatures of very different life-forms. It should not be forgotten that the absolute conception was first developed by Williams in his study of René Descartes, and is derived from the ambitions implicitly contained in the concept of knowledge itself as Descartes understands it (see Williams’ *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, pp. 64-66, a text that would have been helpful to cite in this context).

I would also note, in this connection, that I do not read Williams’ last original work, *Truth and Truthfulness*, as admitting that the absolute conception is problematic or possibly incoherent (p. 40). In the passage in question, Williams diplomatically acknowledges that the absolute conception is controversial, but that is just to make a factual statement about the degree of acceptance in the philosophical community, not to express doubt about the doctrine itself.

These few critical observations cannot detract from the excellence and maturity of this treatment of Williams’ moral philosophy. I recommend the top grade (*v ýborně*).