
Did Williams Do Ethics?

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BERNARD WILLIAMS came to bury ethics, not to criticize or revise it. He did not, of course, mean by that that there was *nothing* in traditional forms of ethical thinking (or nothing in traditional moral injunctions) that was of any substance or of any use or significance for human life. He did, however, think that the traditional notion of “ethics,” namely as an autonomous, knowledge-based, reflective, discursive doctrine which could give completely general and rationally persuasive answers to the question, “How should one live?” was unsalvageable.

What, then, should replace ethics? Well, first of all, perhaps *nothing* will or should replace it. Instead of a single hegemonic discipline, which gave us answers or the framework for finding answers to the question how one should one live, there will just be a variety of *different* things. Perhaps human life is characterized by a welter of different goods that form no cognizable unity; perhaps the very idea of a single, or a single dominant, notion of “normativity” just is a mistake. After all, the very term “normativity” is a recent invention—it has no entry in the 1933 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and its currency as a technical term in philosophy can scarcely date back to a period earlier than the 1980s. The fact/value or “is”/“ought” distinction is older than that, and the adjective “normative” has sporadic earlier uses, but the idea that there was a single “thing” or phenomenon that could be designated by the single term “normativity” may be thought to represent not a mere verbal quirk, but a not-insignificant step in giving the discussion of substantive issues a particular turn or slant or structure.

Perhaps then, instead of any kind of single overarching “normativity,” all there is are simply different—and possibly changing—human practices with different goals, associated conceptions of excellence, and resultant goods; and human life consists of an art or skill in negotiating a way through, which is partly constituted by these practices, partly a matter of making use of them for other ends. What replaces ethics then is not another intellectual discipline, but forms of action, which may be skillfully or less skillfully performed. The art or skill involved, however, might not—without significant loss—be reducible to anything like the object of a cognitive discipline. Nietzsche in some of his moods seems to take a tack like this, adding that the art or skill in question would have an extremely strong component of a type we would be likely to call “aesthetic,” and that the human emotions of admiration and disgust would play a constitutive role in it.

The basic idea that ethics as a purportedly free-standing philosophical enterprise was a mistake is not in itself novel or unusual. I once heard the president of a large and very well-regarded university, whom I will call “Zmith,” ask the academic members of one of his advisory boards why his university needed departments of philosophy and political science at all. After all, he remarked, the university had a flourishing Law School and a distinguished Department of Economics, and surely they could satisfy any reasonable human cognitive need. Zmith’s remark was, to be sure, part of a micro-politics of bullying, of trying to intimidate the assembled academics and show them who was boss,¹ but it would have had no chance of being effective if there had not been at least the shadow of a suspicion that Zmith might actually *believe* what he was saying and that some other influential people might come to believe it, too. Compare this case with that in which Zmith asked why a philosophy department was needed because his University already had a flourishing archaeology program and a Music School. Actually, the idea that ethics as a sub-discipline of philosophy might simply be replaced by something else, by some part of eco-

nomics or law (or some combination of both), is not in itself completely daft. It would, of course, require some changes in the existing disciplines of law and economics. It would require law to stop being the kind of cognitively disabling enterprise it now is, designed to turn intelligent young people into pliable mouthpieces for corporations; and it would require economics to establish at least some tenuous, non-whimsical cognitive relations with the real world of a kind it has not yet been able to manage, but that might be possible, if the world itself changed. This, of course, is an old idea of Marxism, that if the basic economic structure could be rationally and transparently organized, it would be possible to have a proper *theory* of economics rather than the current hocus-pocus, and that would render a separate ethics as a philosophical discipline otiose. There might be some low-level “ethical principles,” as Trotsky suggests, but they would be common-sense rules-of-thumb about how people best get along together, known clearly to everyone and having the status of banalities, not profound philosophical truths.²

Williams did not take this line, but rather one that arguably had its origin in Aristotle, who begins one of his ethical treatises by describing ethics as a subordinate part of political science.³ What should replace philosophical ethics, in Williams’s view, was politics. This, of course, makes his view completely different from the Marxist view, which is that in a free and developed society, “politics” as we know it would not exist, only administration. That is *not* to say, I take it, that there will be a relatively abstract political philosophy, a fixed theory of a more or less traditionalist kind, and that a subordinate part of this will be devoted to individuals in society; but rather, that ethics will be replaced by “real politics.” Politics has its own dignity, imposes its own demands on action, and both opportunistically consumes and fecundly generates concepts, convictions, theories, and forms of reflection. Some of these will concern individuals, their properties, dispositions, aspirations, and modes of behavior; and these might be called “ethical,” but they have no

standing on their own. When Williams says that politics should replace ethics, he does not, of course, mean by “politics” either a purportedly non-intentional and fully value-free form of human action, nor the object of a value-neutered pure science. Politics clearly is concerned with human agents who have goals, intentions, values, and conceptions of the good, and the study of politics will itself also be informed by forms of evaluation which will not necessarily be the same as those of the agents being studied. Traditional ethics, though, makes the mistake of trying to isolate these goals, intentions, and forms of evaluation, and construe them as the possible subjects of a distinct discipline. In addition, when Williams says that politics should replace ethics, he does not mean “should” in a (strictly) ethical sense. Rather, he thinks that ethics always *has* in fact been a part of politics. Historically, any given ethics has usually been the theoretically-congealed residue of a previous political practice which represents an attempt on the part of that past to stretch its dead hand out over the future. So “should” means that, overall, it is likely to be better for us to recognize this than to continue to pretend it is not the case. This, Williams thought, was the significance of Nietzsche and constituted one of the important reasons for studying the ancient world. Nietzsche had first allowed us to see the politics behind the superficial appearance of autonomy in ethics, and he had seen it most clearly in evidence in his study of the ancients. We cannot go back to ancient conceptions or institutions—Williams was historicist enough to think that this was virtually self-evident—and we wouldn’t want to practice ancient-style *politics* even if *per impossibile* we could do so. But by studying the ancients, we can learn one of the few rather general truths accessible to us in this area, namely, a truth about the primacy of politics. The very fact that Plato struggles with such relentless energy to establish the standing and authority of something—philosophy—that is purportedly prior to politics might actually be taken to reinforce this lesson from the ancient world.

If we cannot go back to ancient politics, what would a modern politics look like? One common way of proceeding is through so-called “democratic theory”: modern politics is democratic politics, and we can explain, understand, and criticize it with reference to the ideals of “democracy.” Of course, if politics is really an art, there may be narrow limits to the kind of positive account one could give here. A monograph-length treatment of modern politics by Williams was never forthcoming; perhaps the book on Nietzsche he seems to have been planning to write at the end of his life would have contained some material about this, but of course, we shall never know—but if there had been a book, I would have expected it to be very historical in its approach, and to have little in common with approaches based on “democratic theory.”

Williams took the central question of ethics to be that of Socrates, which he formulates as “How should one live?” but which one might gloss as “How is it needful to live?” (τίνα τρόπον χρῆ ζῆν; *Politeia* 352d). I merely note *en passant* that there are other possible questions one could take as lying at the heart of the Socratic search. These include: “What is the *good* life?” “What is the ‘happy’ (or successful or flourishing) life?” and “Who am I?”⁴ One rather austere or minimalist way of trying to answer the question, “How is it needful to live?” might be: how it is needful [for me] to live is what needs to happen in order that I live at all. Thus Voltaire complained to the royal censor who proposed to destroy his livelihood by banning the (satirical) publications on which his income depended: “Mais, Monsieur, il faut bien que je vive.” This historically recurrent type of complaint is not, as one might expect, an indefeasible moral argument, but has as its irrefutable response the reply of the censor: “Je n’en vois pas la nécessité.”⁵ This dramatic scenario—which is played and replayed through the centuries between Carthaginians and Romans (“Carthago delenda est”), Louis Capet and Robespierre (“Louis doit mourir parce qu’il faut que la patrie vive”),⁶ Herero tribesmen and German colonial administrators,⁷ the Ukrainian peasantry and Stalin—with

different roles assigned historically to different individual and collective actors, and agents acted upon by others, has a first-person reflexive correlate. One might even say that the formula for any kind of human progress, not just for progressive and revolutionary change, is the thought that “What would be for the best would be if we—and people like us—simply did not exist.” So, before the establishment of the NHS in Britain, one can imagine large swathes of the population thinking that it was necessary for them to live in a certain way, for instance to learn to make hard choices between buying food and buying medical care for the members of their family; but they might also be capable of reflecting that it would be for the best if people of their kind—people who needed to learn what they had to learn and who then had to act accordingly—simply did not exist. Equally, one could imagine slave-holders or bankers or property developers thinking that it would be better for people like themselves not to exist. For that matter, one could imagine a “free man” in a society with slavery thinking that it was no criticism of *him* that he did not live the life of a slave, but that also it would nevertheless be better for his whole class of people not to exist in the sense that it was defined, as the class it was, only by contrast to the enslaved population.

Williams used to say that the USA was the most eighteenth-century country in the world; it was, he thought, politically, socially, and culturally caught in a kind of time-warp, an apparently eternal present which was actually represented by some point in time in the 1790s. Williams never expatiated on what exactly he meant by this statement—I assume that the reason for this was he thought that this was a particular kind of interpretative statement: if you did see the point of it, you required no further elaboration, because it would immediately ring true to certain experiences you had had, putting them in a certain intelligible order; and if you didn’t see the point of it immediately, then no amount of further elaboration on his part would convince you. And then the statement might actually have a more potential long-term effect, if it was simply

dropped so as to shatter on the floor like a huge bit of unwanted crockery and the noise was allowed to reverberate through the room *sans commentaire*. Presumably, part of what he meant, though, was that the country had never been able to move beyond a particularly archaic form of the struggle of the Enlightenment with its enemies. Nothing after Adam Smith and Kant really survived the middle passage to take root on the western side of the Atlantic, so the culture was stuck in a state of trench warfare between a party that identified itself (in some way or another) with Enlightenment Reason (either through commitment to the ideal rationality of “free markets,” to technologically rational solutions to all problems, or to vapid Kantian “norms”) and an obscurantist religious fundamentalism that was all the more dark for defining itself in contrast to reason. The relatively recent formation of a united front between some religious fundamentalists and free-marketeers is a politically significant development, a shift in a local tactical alliance, but it is not yet clear that it has any further significance.

To say that the US is an eighteenth-century country is to give a historical interpretation and perhaps also express an attitude, but it is not, of course, to make a moral judgment in the technical sense in which some have wanted to construe the term “moral judgment.” It is not to say that the population is vicious or the institutions corrupt. It is not the kind of statement one is liable to encounter in a book on “ethics,” but rather the sort of thing someone like Herodotus would have said (if he had had a suitable concept of history and historical framework at his disposal). In his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams tries to develop a theory about the relation between factual data and interpretation which has always struck me as very close to the theory of the “constellation” one finds in Benjamin and Adorno. The stars that compose a constellation are physical objects of a certain kind and each has a set of empirically specifiable properties, a location in the sky, a certain relative magnitude, perhaps a color. A constellation is not a mere collection, but an organi-

zation of a set of stars into a recognizable, and perhaps, significant pattern: a bear, a hunter, a wagon, a set of twins. One cannot, of course, create constellations *ad libitum*, using stars that are not already there, putting together stars that are too far apart from the human eye to see synoptically, or creating patterns that make no sense to us. So we—and what we are, as the historically-located creatures we happen to be—partly determine what constellations there can be (for us) by virtue of setting out the limits of what can make sense to us. “What can make sense to us” is neither completely pre-given, nor fully indeterminate, and to the extent to which we can change it, this can be done only over time, and probably only collectively. The sheerly physical data about the distribution of stars does not *require* us to group them into *this* set of constellations rather than some other, and in fact does not require us to group them into any constellations whatever. We don’t invent or create stars by organizing them into constellations. Still—and this is the claim Adorno and Benjamin make, at any rate—in the realm of collective human action, culture, and politics, we are guided by constellations, not by the analogues of raw or theoretically-manipulated astrophysical data, and there is no real alternative to that. It just is not possible to do without something like constellations. Similarly, Williams thought that there were facts that had the hard, unmalleable character we usually attribute to them, and which could be discovered by “empirical” means (whatever they turn out to be). The US Constitution had x-number of articles and article z was passed on such-and-such a day. On the other hand, the “positivist” dream that one could dispense with any interpretation and simply let the facts speak for themselves, was just that—a dream. Similarly, no set of “facts” requires one to adopt a particular interpretation, but no interpretation that anyone would take seriously simply floats unconnectedly above the data or connects them in merely arbitrary ways.

Williams must have known that in asserting that the USA was an eighteenth-century country he was doing something

that was very close to committing a modern American analogue of the *crimen maiestatis* by violating a central taboo of the state-religion that holds the country together. This requires one always to assume that the US, at least in some idealized form, is the very model for modernity, progress, rationality, etc.—not something itself to be evaluated. Of course, one can criticize individual performances of the government or even subordinate institutions, but only as a form of internal criticism, that is, only relative to the absolute assumption that the performance or the institution is a momentary falling short of the ideals the US itself proclaims and fundamentally instantiates. I recall Williams' making this claim in a series of lectures at Princeton in the 1980s—and the audible intake of breath among the members of the audience. I suppose that he was not being gratuitously offensive, but was trying to make a constructive political intervention aimed at warning those of them who were susceptible to using their theoretical imagination at all that the exceptional conjunction of geography and history which had permitted the unparalleled prosperity particularly of the period between 1945 and 1975 would provide only a brief respite from history. Presumably, Williams saw that, by the mid-1980s, the layers of insulation were wearing sufficiently thin for him to propose to his audience that it might be advisable to prepare for the changes that were inevitably coming, even if this required them to think what was for them almost unthinkable.

Perhaps political and historical interpretations like this are a part of “moral and ethical thinking” in the wider sense which Williams tacitly accepts, and which he contrasts with the traditional academic study of “philosophical ethics.” Williams, of course, as the last part of his comment on Christine Korsgaard's Tanner Lectures indicates,⁸ does seem to have considerable sympathy for historicist ways of thinking, that is for parallelization of “individual rational reflection and historical development”; and he had himself taken account of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least to the extent of being a serious student of Nietzsche, for whom

the meaning of the individual human life is a central concern; but it is not obvious that he ever really gave Hegel a proper look in, and figures like Heidegger or Adorno—not to mention Deleuze and Guatarri—were effectively outside his ken, meaning not, of course, that he didn't in some sense "know" who they were, but that they were not sufficiently close to him in temperament and traditional intellectual formation for him to have interacted with them in a philosophically productive way. To be sure, in 2002 he agreed, after a certain amount of coaxing, to come and give a paper at the Frankfurt Conference on Adorno, which was to take place in 2003, but his final illness and death brought that possible line of development to a close. The argument which finally convinced Williams to come to Frankfurt was not the one for which I had had the highest hopes, namely, that he would find in Adorno, if he looked closely, a philosopher who was as interested as he was in taking up a position equidistant from the self-serving "liberalism" of the Anglo-American political world and the brutal practices of "really-existing socialism." This line of thought had no purchase, because I had completely misunderstood Williams. I took his adoption of some of the vocabulary and the motifs of liberalism to be a bit of intellectual *Realpolitik* or perhaps protective coloration, but this was a complete misconception, based no doubt on an incorrect, wishful projection of my own attitudes onto a philosopher whose work I admired. Even to the end of his life, Williams showed flashes of what are now called "Old Labour" attitudes—"profits" for him were always inherently suspect and the fact that a particular legal, administrative, or economic reform would result in large profits for a corporation or a private individual was *prima facie* a good reason to oppose it. However, it was also the case that actually he felt as naturally comfortable paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J. S. Mill, and Isaiah Berlin as he did in most other places. In general, he was a man who was remarkably comfortable in his own skin, and who fitted in easily with the existing

world of politics and academic society, despite his high skepticism about many of the purported theoretical pillars of that world. This, in fact, was perhaps one of the basic ways in which he was different from Adorno, who notoriously lived a life of great, not to say extreme, self-indulgence, but made a point of not feeling comfortable in it. Adorno, in fact, insisted that it was a sign of minimal human decency “not to be at home” in the world of late capitalism.⁹

What did finally move Williams to think it might be a good idea to come to Frankfurt was the prospect of discussions of Adorno’s views on Wagner and on the philosophy of music. Williams had a keen interest in music, particularly in opera, and was steeped in the music of Wagner. One of my most vivid recollections of him is of discussing with him the concept of “pornography” while he hummed “The Ride of the Valkyries” and spun his two hands around, imitating an old-style propeller-plane about to take off. The last lecture I heard him deliver was on Wagner’s *Ring* in the Cambridge Music Faculty.¹⁰ He had placed behind him the full University Orchestra—about a hundred players—who sat silent and immobile on stage during his lecture. After he finished speaking, Williams withdrew to a large high-backed chair with thick green upholstery and cushions, to the right of the players, and sat listening intently as the orchestra played Siegfried’s Funeral Music. The chair was so large and Williams in his elder years had shrunk physically so much that he seemed like a kind of Bloomsbury Mime—Mime, the proper name of the dwarf in *Siegfried*, not the English word for a kind of silent actor—squatting on a throne in the afterlife, while looking down and listening in order to discover what had finally become of his nemesis Siegfried.

What interested Williams was the relation between political and moral success and failure in Wagner’s *Ring*, and aesthetic success (or failure). Clearly, if Siegfried is intended to be a model, or even a specimen, of the Young Hegelian emancipated human being, free from the world of conventional morality and commercial “contracts” (*Verträge*)—i.e.,

if one will, from Adam Smith and Kant—which still cripples Wotan, he is not a very convincing advertisement for the future. He is brutal, uncouth, empty-headed, and often simply nasty, and his life is a series of violent episodes which ends in nothing much. Much of what he does, he does out of pig-ignorance or because he is being manipulated by others for their own ends. Few of his actions have the long-term or even medium-term results he intends, and few of them end pleasantly for him. Presumably, he enjoys sleeping with Brünnhilde (when he finally takes off her breast-plate and discovers she is a woman like his mother and not a man); this interlude, however seems to be very short-lived indeed—although, given that it takes place, as it were, “off-stage” between the end of *Siegfried* and the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, one cannot actually be sure; but the composer of *Tristan* (Act 2) would certainly have had at his disposal the artistic means to indicate a lengthy period of happy dalliance, had he so wished. Instead of that, before you know it, Siegfried is off down the Rhine “zu neuen Taten,” as Brünnhilde sings, (*und neuen Katastrophen*, as we may add). This is the rather gloomy interpretation which Williams propounded. The question for him, then, was why the funeral music for such a “gescheiterte Existenz” was still so profoundly moving, despite the fact that it celebrated a “hero” whose heroism was of a particularly empty kind. This sense of the impressive, combined with the not-really-fully-substantial, recurs in discussions of Wagner’s work. The musicologist John Deathridge describes the music for the entry of the gods into Valhalla at the end of *Rheingold* as “triumphant, but decidedly hollow.”¹¹ Many listeners have this experience of it, and, in fact, it is possible that this effect was *intended* by Wagner. Despite his own megalomaniac tendencies and the desire for total domination of the audience, Wagner was perfectly capable of producing calculated effects of distancing within the overall aesthetic experience. After all, the “intellectual” in *Rheingold*, Loge, interrupts the relatively smooth-flowing waves of D-flat major to remark that the gods are so

deluded and so self-destructive that he is almost embarrassed to associate with them (“Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu, / die so stark im Bestehen sich wännen. / Fast schäme ich mich, / mit ihnen zu schaffen”; *Rheingold*, bars 3807–12.)¹²

Siegfried’s life and death are not, of course, meaningless in the sense that they have no important *effects* in the world. After all, *Götterdämmerung* ends with the image of Valhalla—that is, the capitalist world in which we all still live—in flames. That is one good result of what Siegfried has done, although it is not anything he intended. Wagner reports in his autobiography that, as he stood with his friend Bakunin on the barricade in Dresden during the revolution of 1848, Bakunin explained to him at great length and in detail why the joy in destruction was also a creative joy.¹³ Williams, of course, had studied Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* very carefully and had a keen appreciation of ancient tragedy, but the Dionysian pleasure of the child on the beach who enjoys smashing up the sand-castle he has just built¹⁴ seemed to play no role in his writings on politics, which generally still breathe the air of the usual liberal platitudes. Williams’ cheerful disposition and his successful life in the more comfortable regions of the Anglo-American establishment put him at some distance from a visceral sympathy with Bakunin. In this, too, he differed significantly from Adorno, who was much less impressed with Wagner’s music as *music* than Williams was, and was therefore less puzzled than Williams by the (apparent) discrepancy between the failed and empty “heroism” of Siegfried and the quality of Wagner’s musical treatment of it.¹⁵

There is, of course, also another obvious way to read Siegfried’s character and fate, which is different from the one Williams favors. Williams’s interpretation depends on hearing the music as basically celebratory, rather than merely elegiac, and so it was perfectly appropriate that his lecture ended with a performance of the passage. If one takes it as something closer to a threnody than a eulogy, it is possible to connect it not with Wagner’s failure to present a fully con-

vincing New Man, but as a melancholy comment not on Siegfried in particular, but on the whole world of the *Ring*. That Siegfried and his life are so unsatisfactory can be seen not as a form of failure on Wagner's part—failure to create a plausible artistic image of the new and emancipated individual—but rather as a success in representing what Wagner *intended* to represent. Perhaps Wagner's intention is precisely to dramatize the *necessary* failure of individual heroism and of manipulative projects of individual emancipation like those Wotan seeks to realize. Perhaps individual emancipation will never in our historical period and our economic system be able to develop into anything but the radically defective version of “empty heroism” we find in Siegfried. One might, that is, take the *Ring* to instantiate one of Adorno's more spectacular claims, namely “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.”¹⁶ “There is no ‘right life’ in the false life” (i.e., there is no way for any individual to lead a “right/good life” in a social formation which is itself repressive, duplicitous, and alienated). Adorno's uses “false” in a non-propositional way, as the Rhine-maidens do when they describe the whole world of the gods as “falsch und feig”: “Traulich und treu / ist's nur in der Tiefe; / falsch und feig / ist, was da oben sich freut!” (*Rheingold*, bars 3858–68). “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” is Adorno's version of the old maxim that one cannot be communist man in a capitalist society. This, then, is part of the reason it would be a mistake to try to think about the case of Williams, or that of Adorno, through the lens of the moral category of “hypocrisy” in any straightforward way. The moral category designates an individual failing of some kind, which makes some sense primarily in contrast, for instance, to possible sincerity, but what is at issue here is a structural feature of society—if in fact Adorno is right—which makes a fully satisfactory life of complete consistency and sincerity impossible. One can analyze the different ways in which individuals deal with this impossible situation, and even have a more or a less sympathetic reaction to their predicament and to their per-

haps different ways of responding to it. If Adorno is right, *their* predicament is also *our* predicament, and, more pointedly—for me—*my* predicament. Analyzing this situation and discussing attempts to deal with it—all of which are, Adorno believes, failures—seems a very different matter from merely diagnosing “hypocrisy.” Had he been able to come to Frankfurt, it seems unlikely that Williams would have been able to avoid taking *some* explicit position on this.

At the beginning of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams writes that his position differs from that of most others in that he is more skeptical about the powers of philosophy and about ethical thought as a whole than most of his contemporaries are (3). At the end, however, after holding below the waterline views that depend on too robust a theory of human nature or of rationality, Williams finds himself left with three sparks of optimism: optimism about truth, optimism about truthfulness, and optimism about “the meaning of individual life” (198). To lead a life in which a commitment to truth and truthfulness (of one kind or another) plays an important role (to one degree or other) is, of course, a less-rigorous demand than living the Stoic or Kantian “life of reason.” Even if we are capable of truth and capable of truthfulness, and even if these are important human goals, they are not the only human goals, or possibly even the most important ones. As Nietzsche pointed out, the pursuit of truth for its own sake as a value in itself above all others requires a very peculiar configuration of the human soul, and one that is not in all its incarnations irresistibly attractive.

Adorno shared Williams’ high regard for Nietzsche, remarking in the 1930s that there was “more truth in the *Genealogy of Morality* than in [Bukharin’s] *ABC of Communism*.”¹⁷ However, one of the points of *Minima Moralia* is that a Nietzschean focus on the individual life as an independent unit of meaningfulness is inappropriate in the social world in which we live, so Williams’ relative optimism about the meaningfulness of such a life is not something that should be taken for granted.

Williams took an extremely dim view of the powers of reason to persuade. He once told me he had only once in his life seen a case of a person convinced to give up a deeply held belief by the force of rational argumentation. This was when he was the chairman of the Royal Commission on Pornography, one of whose members was a former military man who was completely uninterested in any restrictions on sexual relations between humans or the depiction of such relations, but was deeply anxious about bestiality. Men and women could do what they wanted with each other, as far as he was concerned, but what about pictures of men with sheep or cows; surely that could not be allowed. He was finally convinced in a lengthy, emotion-filled session that various arguments that he himself had presented implied that there should be no legal regulation of representations of bestiality, either. This man's conversion by the sheer power of reason was so unique in Williams's experience that he never forgot it. Nevertheless, I had high hopes for Williams' own motivational sensitivity to argument and thought that when confronted with Adorno's views in a form in which he could recognize them, he would himself gradually move closer to a more fully socially contextual and less individualist view of meaning and significance in human life.

This leaves us with no answers and a number of open questions, a result which should not in itself be lethally discouraging if Socrates rather than Kant or Bentham is one's guiding star. Socrates' enquiry is still pre-dogmatic, and although it can be seen as in some sense the origin of "ethics" as a discipline, it still stands outside the closed circle which ethics becomes. "How should one live?" is amenable to a collective response and the quest for such a response is potentially open-ended.

Among the open issues is the Hegelian/Marxist question about the very possibility of a cognitively significant study of the meaningfulness of a mere individual life, if that is undertaken without reference to the wider social context. On at least one reading of the main thrust of this tradition, the question of the meaningfulness of individual life is by no means a universal one, but rather arises only under specific

social conditions; and what answers, if any, are available to it also depend on historical circumstances. For Marx, in particular—if the question even arises as a “real” question, that is, one that grips people—that in turn means that society is deficient. If society was fundamentally in order, the question of meaningfulness would not even arise: either it would be truly incomprehensible or it would be experienced by those living in the society as a merely peculiar oddity, or a form of mental disease, not as something with an existential grip on them. From the fact that in the Soviet era this thought was misused to incarcerate political dissidents in mental institutions, it does not follow that *no* version of the underlying thought is at all sensible. That the question of the meaningfulness of life does not arise, of course, would not mean that human life in such a society would be a bowl of cherries, for there is presumably a difference—all the difference in the world, some might think—between being sad and being existentially gripped by the meaninglessness of it all.

So the short, and perhaps all too obvious, answer to the question posed at the start of this paper is “yes” and “no”: at least during his mature period, which started in the 1980s, Williams was not doing “ethics,” if one means by that trying to provide a fully general, rationally-based doctrine (a *Lehre*) which would answer the question, “How should one live?” Certainly there could be no general doctrine of the good life or of how to live that was based on either of the two traditional central concepts: human nature (as the Aristotelian tradition would have it) or “rationality” (in the modern world, perhaps most closely associated with one or another form of Kantianism).

“How should one live?” might itself be more ambiguous than traditionally thought, and in any one of its incarnations might be only one of a variety of different practical questions we might sensibly ask, not the hegemonic one dominating all others. All of these questions will have a distinct political dimension, and if one were to insist that part of the point of “How should one live?” is that the answer to it

would have to give us a general orientation in life that in some sense trumps others, the way to discuss that question would be through a study of history and politics, and the only “answer” to this would not be a doctrine, but a form of political engagement. “Universal Reason” or *abstract* rationality, to the extent to which it was meaningful at all, was too thin and anodyne to be of any substantial help here. So the forms of traditional ethics Williams is furthest away from are Kantianism, Divine Command versions of Christianity, and utilitarianism; and the form that is closest to him would be some form of Aristotle, or of that modern extended version of Aristotle that Hegel developed. What would, however, finally constitute a barrier between Aristotle and Williams would be the recognition of the role of history. Aristotle had a notion of teleological development, to be sure, but no notion of history and certainly nothing even remotely like the modern idea of a “historical consciousness.” This meant that there were very strict limits to an Aristotelian’s ability to be fully and appropriately aware of his or her own location in the world, and to his or her ability to take a non-dogmatic view. Hegel in one sense did know about history, but also assumed it was closed, and connected it with an implausibly powerful and determinate notion of Reason. Ethics, or rather *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, play an appropriately subordinate role in Hegel’s system, and one might argue that Hegel’s achievement lay precisely in showing that a construct like “the System” in all its glory was the price one would have to pay for retaining a determinate “philosophical ethics” of any kind in the modern world. Suppose now we decided to abandon the narrow limitations imposed on us by traditional ideas of what a “philosophical ethics” could (and must) be. Then one could imagine ways of orienting ourselves in the world which went beyond the sorts of things envisaged and discussed in traditional forms of ethics. So general discussions about ourselves, our world, and our place in that world might come to encompass not just the usual tired discussions about what is rational, what has util-

ity, or what is right, but also such things as what is an “eighteenth century” social and cultural system, and whether the US still essentially instantiated such a system, whether Siegfried’s funeral music was celebratory, elegiac, or something else, and what that might tell us about certain conceptions of individualism. These discussions could be perfectly legitimate successors to the original Socratic enquiry, without being forms of thought that could sensibly be pursued within the confines of philosophical ethics.

It is Plato’s *claim* that there can be no secure discrimination between good and bad without something like a philosophical ethics, and most philosophers for two thousand years accepted this claim. As Williams points out, though, there seems to be reason to have—to put it mildly—strong reservations about this claim. In the *Ion* (537a–b), Plato’s Socrates discusses the passage in Homer’s *Iliad* (23.335–40) in which Nestor gives Antilochus advice about chariot racing: When you come to the turning post, lean over to the left of the horses, and be sure not to graze the posts with your wheel. Socrates gets the rhapsode Ion to admit that a charioteer would know better than a poet whether this is good advice or not, but the next step in Plato’s argument, about which he is very coy at the end of *Ion*, but which comes out very clearly in other dialogues, is that a philosopher who *ex officio* is an expert in ethical theorizing would know *even better* than a charioteer whether this is good advice. This further step in no way follows and is inherently highly implausible.

“Ethics” in the sense he finds objectionable is defined by Williams as motivated by a tacit affirmative answer to the question: “[Is there] beyond some things that human beings have themselves shaped . . . anything at all that is intrinsically shaped to human interests, in particular to human beings’ ethical interests?” (*Shame and Necessity*, 163). Western “ethics” holds that

the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life

and human aspirations. Sophocles and Thucydides, by contrast, are alike in leaving us with no such sense. Each of them represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself not well adjusted to ethical aspirations.

The assumption on which “ethics” rests, that “at some level of the world’s constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns” (*Shame and Necessity*, 164), is illusory.

On the other hand, the demise of ethics as a philosophical discipline will still leave much of our usual evaluative discourse unaffected. Achilles will still be able to berate Agamemnon as a dog-eyed bundle of shamelessness, ever-greedy for gain (*Iliad* 1.148–71), Solon, feigning madness, will still call upon the Athenians to fight for Salamis (*Fragment* 2), Pindar will still proclaim the respective virtues of water and gold (*Olympian* 1), and Thucydides will still be able to discuss the merits of the grand strategy of Perikles during the war with the Peloponnesians (2.59–65) and the character of Nikias (7.86).

Williams was very taken with Goethe’s translation of the beginning of the gospel of St. John, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος as “*Im Anfang war die Tat*,” but that is only half the story. The other half is given by Marx in the “Theses on Feuerbach”: “Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*, es kommt darauf an, sie zu *verändern*” (11). We are not, of course, now in a situation in which it is realistically possible for us to envisage any fundamental change in our world which we could ourselves bring about by our own efforts. That perhaps is part of the reason so much of contemporary philosophy seems merely scholastic. Since I also suppose that the operation of various long-term processes will soon make most of the people in the world significantly worse off than they now are, this situation of enforced immobility is extremely unlikely to last long. There is, to be sure, no guarantee that, in the future, constructive change, whatever that will turn out to mean, will in any way be open to us.

NOTES

I am grateful to Damian Freeman, Istvan Hont, and Tom Stern and especially to Robert Pippin for discussions and comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. Zmith somewhat spoiled the effect by drinking diet Coke during the meeting. It turns out that it is very hard to feel intimidated by someone who drinks Diet Coke. One thinks of Cicero's remark about Julius Caesar: "Sometimes I think he is a serious danger to the Republic, but then I observe the way he curls his sparse forelock around his finger and I think, 'Can such a man be a danger?'"
2. Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, et al., *Their Morals and Ours* (New York 1973).
3. *Ethica Nicomachea*, 1094–95. I am greatly indebted to Istvan Hont for invaluable assistance, particularly for discussion of the material in this paragraph. See Williams, "In the beginning was the deed," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, G. Hawthorn, ed. (Princeton, NJ 2005), 18–29.
4. See *Apology*.
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile; ou De l'éducation*, F. and P. Richard, eds. (Paris 1964), 223. See also Hegel, *Grundlinien zur Rechtsphilosophie*, § 126 Z.
6. Speech at the Convention, 3 December 1792.
7. Sven Lindqvist, "Exterminate all the Brutes!" (Granta 1996), 149.
8. Christine Korsgaard, et al., *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge and New York 1996), 217–18.
9. Theodor W. Adorno, *Mimima Moralia* (Frankfurt am Main 1951), §18.
10. Some of the material from this lecture later appeared in "Wagner and the transcendence of politics," in Williams, *On Opera* (New Haven and London 2006), 70–89.
11. John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley 2008), 52. The use of the term "hollow" with reference to this particular passage is so frequent in the literature as to be almost a cliché. See also Michael Tanner, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner* (London 2010), 154 ("stunningly grand and hollow"); also Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's "Ring"* (London and New York 1979): "this 'triumphant' ending is a temporary and hollow one" (238).
12. Warren Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold"* (Oxford and New York 1993), 208–14.
13. Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, vol. 2.
14. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, §24.
15. T. W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Frankfurt am Main 1974, c. 1952).

16. T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (note 9), §18.

17. *Briefwechsel, 1928–1940: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin*, Henri Lonitz, ed. (Frankfurt am Main 1994), 370.

