1

Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche

Real or Illusory?

Brian Leiter

Bernard Williams was one of just two prominent figures within the mainstream of Anglophone moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth-century to devote serious attention to Nietzsche. Philippa Foot was the other comparably famous figure to do so, and she, unsurprisingly, shared with Williams skepticism about many orthodoxies of analytic moral philosophy during this time.[1] Derek Parfit, slightly younger but probably more influential (unfortunately) on the shape of the Anglophone profession, also ended up professing to take Nietzsche seriously—or at least giving him a lot of attention—in his final work *On What Matters*. Unlike Williams and Foot, however, it was rather too obvious that Nietzsche was Parfit's enemy to be alternately defanged, defamed, and ultimately disposed.[2] Williams, by contrast, was clearly a friendly and appreciative reader of Nietzsche, even referencing him explicitly on many occasions in his two most important monographs, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* from 1985, and *Shame and Necessity* from 1993.[3] My aim here is to assess the Williams–Nietzsche relationship, the extent to which Williams learned from Nietzsche, and the extent to which he retreated from or ignored Nietzsche's actual views. Williams's reaction to Nietzsche will also tell us something about the distinctive and conservative

[1] Foot was particularly skeptical of the emotivism of Ayer and Stevenson, even though, as Carnap among others noticed, that was a part of Nietzsche's view in many ways (Leiter 2018, 191–196).

[2] See Janaway (2017, 66–95). Parfit sent me a draft of the Nietzsche chapter more than a decade ago, and I gave him detailed comments, pointing out the misquotations, misrepresentations, and mistakes. He wrote back to me assuring me that he really admired Nietzsche. He did not fix most of the mistakes in the published version.

[3] A later work, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Williams 2002) is, despite the subtitle, quite un-Nietzschean in conception and execution by offering a "just so" story meant to *vindicate* the concepts in question. By contrast, genealogy for Nietzsche was *critical*, and it was crucial to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* that a genealogy was true and supported by evidence, not simply feel-good make-believe. See Leiter (2015, 144–146).

Brian Leiter, *Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche* In: *Morality and Agency*. Edited by: András Szigeti and Matthew Talbert, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2022. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197626566.003.0002

nature of Anglophone philosophy over the past century. This deserves some further comment at the start.

Of the various fault lines between Anglophone philosophy of the past century in the "analytic" tradition and the multiple, and often conflicting, traditions in post-Kantian Continental European philosophy, two are especially important in connection with the relation between Williams and Nietzsche. First, in Germany, beginning arguably with Herder in the eighteenth century,[4] there was a strong "historicist" turn in philosophy. Historicism, for our purposes, consists of two theses, one stronger than the other. The first "weak" historicist thesis is that the reference of concepts or terms typically varies by historical context, so much so that the same concept or term can pick out radically different referents at different historical moments, and thus it is a mistake to assimilate them or assume the concepts have the same meaning across historical periods. The second, "strong" historicist thesis holds that these concepts have no "correct" referent that transcends the historical period. The concept "good" may, as Nietzsche argues, pick out "elevated, proud states of the soul" (BGE, 260) and "nobility" (GM, I: 4–5, 11) in antiquity and then, in the Christian world, pick out "the warm heart, patience industriousness, humility, and friendliness," until "the words 'good' and 'stupid' . . . come close together" (BGE, 260). Neither is the correct meaning of "good," although the claim is stronger than one about semantics: it is that "good" *qua* metaphysical fact does not exist but rather is created and projected onto the world by people with very different interests and attitudes. Even Hegel, perhaps the most famous (albeit atypical) historicist, can mostly agree with this characterization of historicism, with the caveat that he thinks historical fluidity comes to an end in which the semantics and the metaphysics coincide on God's intentions for His creation as interpreted by Hegel. But Hegel is an outlier in the historicist tradition, unlike Nietzsche. And Williams, as I will argue, is in an important sense an anti-historicist, unlike Nietzsche, but very much like most analytic philosophers who write as though they are illuminating *the* right and *the* good—or, in Williams's case, "the ethical life."[5]

[4] Forster (2018, 240–242). See also Beiser (2011).

[5] Williams is certainly more sensitive to historical and cultural relativity than most analytic philosophers, but that parochial fact does not change my ultimate assessment.

There is, however, a second view distinctive of most, but not all, of the post-Kantian traditions in European philosophy,[6] one that should be unsurprising in light of the historicism. These post-Kantian philosophers eschew appeals to "common sense," or "our moral thinking," or current "intuitions" since these are simply historically contingent data points suitable for diagnosis—for example, as artifacts of capitalism or the slave revolt in morals, or the modern era of bio-power, and perhaps all three—but not for understanding the world. These post-Kantian philosophers all embrace the idea that, on the one hand, philosophers should aim to diagnose and assess what is *really* happening in culture and society—politically, psychologically, and sociologically—and, on the other hand, philosophers should help human beings (or *some* human beings) achieve a kind of liberation. Marx, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Foucault are all what we might call "emancipatory realists" in this broad sense—aiming at emancipation by giving a realistic diagnosis of our cultural situation—even though the Marxian idea of emancipation of the individual is rather different from Nietzsche's, needless to say. (Roughly, we might say that Marx thinks individuals are liberated when they can engage in free productive activity unrelated to securing the means of survival, while Nietzsche is only concerned with liberating certain higher human beings from their false consciousness about the dominant morality, which in fact is incompatible with their flourishing.) What these Continental emancipatory realists all share is a rejection of the conservative conception of philosophy well-articulated by Judith Jarvis Thomson, a leading Anglophone analytic philosopher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "[T]he main, central problems [of philosophy] consist in efforts to explain what makes certain pre-philosophical, or non-philosophical, beliefs true . . . [namely] those that we rely on in ordinary life."[7] She associated this conservative approach to philosophy, quite rightly, with G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein, but it is utterly foreign to those who begin with the assumption that "ordinary life" is shot through with falsehood, illusion, and historically contingent commitments. Williams, it turns out, is closer to Thomson than he is to Nietzsche on this score—and closer than he often pretends to be.

I begin my discussion with *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and then turn to *Shame and Necessity*, although I will note certain continuities of

[6] Husserl's phenomenology is the main outlier, although the collapse of the Frankfurt School tradition into Kantian rationalism in the work of Habermas is also an exception to the general tendencies described in the text.

[7] Thomson (2013, 54).

concern between the two and between these monographs and some of Williams's articles.

1.1 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

In an article in *Ethics* more than twenty years ago (Leiter 1997), I proposed a distinction between two kinds of criticisms of morality then common in Anglophone moral philosophy. Revisiting that distinction will be useful here. "Theory Critics" as I named them—including Williams, but also Annette Baier and Charles Taylor, among others—are those who deny that our "particular moral assessments and commonsense moral principles" are apt subjects for a "theory," in some precise and technical sense of the word "theory." "Theories," in this objectionable sense, have two characteristics: first, they try to reduce all value to a single, unitary source (I will call this "Reduction"), and, second, they try to articulate an explicit, mechanical decision procedure for generating answers to ethical questions (or explicit criteria for ethical decision and a decision procedure for their application; I will call this, unsurprisingly, "Mechanical Decision"). The two attributes are closely related (but need not go together): it is precisely Theory's reduction of value to a single source that makes possible Theory's goal of a Mechanical Decision procedure—namely, one that uses the privileged basic value to "churn out" (we might say) moral directives. Against these aims, the Theory Critics argue that value is not unitary (there are, in Taylor's phrase, a "diversity" of goods) and that (partly as a result) Mechanical Decision procedures are simply impossible in the ethical life: ethical decision and action, these critics say, requires practical wisdom, virtues, or sensitivity to the particular context, all things which (allegedly) cannot be captured within the confines of Theory.

A common refrain among Theory Critics, including Williams, is that the rejection of Theory (in the technical sense) does not entail the rejection of ethical reflection. Of course, it would seem that if something is to count as reflecting at all—as opposed, say, simply to emoting—then it must aim for some degree of abstraction, simplification, generality, and coherence, so Theory in the problematic sense must involve something more. My proposal was that this "something more" is captured by the joint aims of Reduction and Mechanical Decision: it is these that mark the line between bad Theory and good ethical reflection.

This aspect of Williams's views in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere obviously has nothing to do with Nietzsche, and I do not take Williams to claim otherwise. Nietzsche thought "practical reflection" was an epiphenomenal illusion and that philosophers invoke "practical reason" precisely when "reason has nothing to do with it" (A, 12).[8] I have defended this view at length in my recent book *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* (Leiter 2019a), and I will return to this issue later in the context of Williams's *Shame and Necessity*.

Those I dubbed Morality Critics, by contrast, are those—like Michael Stocker, Susan Wolf, and, again, Bernard Williams—who criticize moral theory not because of its theoretical ambitions, but because of either the substantive content of the morality endorsed or the weight assigned in practical reasoning to moral demands. Admittedly, the Morality Critics often present themselves as critics of morality itself—in that sense they echo Nietzsche rhetorically—but, on examination, it becomes clear their targets are specific philosophical theories of morality, consequentialist and deontological. The Williams of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is illustrative in this regard. Williams calls "morality" "the peculiar institution" and says this morality "is not an invention of philosophers . . . [but rather] the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us" (1985, 174).[9] He goes on to worry about the "several natural ways in which" this morality's special notion of obligation "can come to dominate a life altogether" (1985, 181–182). In passages like these, Williams seems to be objecting not that the best moral

[8] Nietzsche's notorious hostility to systematic theorizing—evidenced in his quip that, "The will to a system is a lack of integrity" (TI, I: 26)—would seem to make him a natural ally of the Theory Critics. It is true, moreover, that Nietzsche does not offer a normative ethical theory in the way that Kant or Mill or any other representative of the tradition do. Yet Nietzsche's reason for this has nothing to do with the sort of reasons that animate recent Theory Critics. Nietzsche's hostility to normative theorizing grows, instead, out of his naturalism and fatalism, which lead him to be deeply skeptical about the utility of propounding normative theories about what we ought to do. Thus, for example, he declares that "[t]he single human being is a piece of fatum from the front and from the rear, one law more, one necessity more for all that is yet to come and to be" (TI, V: 6). Given that this is Nietzsche's view, it is unsurprising that he should also say: "A man as he ought to be: that sounds to us as insipid as 'a tree as it ought to be'" (WP, 332). Of course, Nietzsche does think that values can play a causal role in a person's actions (cf. GS, 335) or he would not be concerned to undertake a revaluation of values. He thinks, simply, that the causal efficacy of values is always circumscribed by the natural facts that make a person who he or she is. It is the failure of traditional ethical theories to grasp this point that leads him to think they are useless. The philosophical motivation, then, for Nietzsche's opposition to normative theory simply bears no relation to that found in the Theory Critics. See, generally, Leiter (2019a).

[9] Williams's rhetorical posture was always that he was criticizing actual practices and "outlooks" related to morality, but he never adduced any evidence that this was true, and, as I shall argue, it was not. Spending too much time in elite academic institutions talking only to socialized members of a particular class can be rather misleading as to what moral practices and outlooks are really like.

theory requires obligation to dominate life, but rather that once moral obligation is allowed to "structure ethical thought" (1985, 182) it has a "natural" tendency to rule out all other considerations.

Yet appearances here are deceiving. While Williams wants to align himself with Nietzsche as a critic of morality as a genuine cultural phenomenon—hence the rhetoric about "the peculiar institution" (an allusion to slavery, which was obviously a real social institution) and morality not being "an invention of philosophers"—it is far from clear that the notion of moral obligation he discusses is anything other than a philosopher's "invention" or, at best, such a severe systematic reworking of the ordinary notion as to be only a distant relative of the mostly tepid notion of obligation actually at work in our culture.[10] The domain of the demanding notion of obligation appears to be strictly found among those committed to orthodox religions: hardly anyone else in the neoliberal world order of the capitalist countries, after all, thinks anything *must* be done regardless of the costs except, as far as I can tell, some moral philosophers and religious fundamentalists.

Indeed, morality's purportedly threatening notion of "obligation" is, in fact, constructed by Williams entirely from the works of Kant and W. D. Ross, with no gesture at showing what relation their philosophically refined notions of "obligation" bear to those in play in ordinary life. Yet where is the evidence, one might ask, that real people treat "moral obligation[s] [as] inescapable" (Williams 1985, 177) and that they accept the idea that "only an obligation can beat an obligation" (1985, 180)? Surely the evidence is not in the way people actually live, in the way they actually honor—or, more often, breach—their moral obligations, a point Nietzsche well understood. What is the evidence that, in our relativistic and neoliberal culture, individuals think that "moral obligation applies to people even if they do not want it to" (1985, 178)? Even Williams, in motivating the specter of morality dominating life, says that "the thought can gain a footing (*I am not saying that it has to*) that I could be better employed than in doing something I am under no [moral] obligation to do, and, if I could be, then I ought to be" (1985, 181, emphasis added). But surely this "thought" might only gain a footing for Kant or Ross, or some rabid utilitarian philosopher like Shelly Kagan. It is a pure philosopher's fantasy to think that real people in the moral culture at large find themselves overwhelmed by this burdensome sense of moral obligation.

[10] Even some philosophers deny Williams got the philosopher's notion right: see, e.g., Darwall (1987).

Like the other Morality Critics, Williams writes as though he is attacking "morality" when what he is really attacking is "morality" as conceived, systematized, and refined by philosophers. Such a critique may be an interesting academic exercise, but it is quite different from Nietzsche's worry that the various forms of morality we have inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition are "detrimental to the higher men" (BGE, 228), that they "would be to blame if the highest power and splendor possible to the type man was never in fact attained?" *in real life* (GM, Pref: 6). I return to this point shortly.

Can we salvage the supposed alliance between Morality Critics like Williams and Nietzsche? Consider Thomas Nagel's useful way of framing the issue.[11] According to Nagel, there is a potential conflict between the "Good Life" (one which is valuable along nonmoral dimensions) and the "Moral Life" (one in which moral considerations govern)—or between "living well" and "doing right." For philosophers like Williams (think of his discussion of Gauguin) and Wolf (think of her discussion of "moral saints"), the Good Life and the Moral Life can conflict and, for those *unlike* Williams and Wolf who think moral considerations are always overriding, that is so much the worse for the Good Life. Nagel is clear about where he locates Nietzsche in the debate thus framed: "The good life overrides the moral life. This is Nietzsche's position. . . . The view is that if, taking everything into consideration, a moral life will not be a good life for the individual it would be a mistake to lead it" (1986, 196).[12] Thus, like the Morality Critics, Nietzsche is supposed to side with the importance of the Good Life against the encroaching demands of the Moral Life. Even granting that Nietzsche is perhaps more extreme in his rejection of the demands of the Moral Life, he still counts as the first in a line of Morality Critics that includes Williams, Wolf, and others who recognize the conflict between the Good Life and the Moral Life but, at the same time, reject the idea that moral considerations are overriding.

But even this reframing significantly understates the differences. As Richard Miller aptly observes,

> Nietzsche often seems to recommend that the constraints of morality be ignored, but it would be a misreading of his intentions to infer that morality ought to be ignored by someone of middling abilities, or a primary

[11] Nagel (1986, 193 ff).

[12] Nietzsche himself does not issue prescriptions of the form, "All things considered, do X," but we may ignore that for now.

> interest in family life, or by someone whose characteristic striving is a successful leveraged buy-out. In contrast, the troubling recommendations at the center of current disputes are very broadly addressed. In particular, Bernard Williams' influential warnings about morality are addressed, primarily, to people with normal attachments and their own projects, projects which may be of ordinary sorts.[13]

Consider: the academic Morality Critics speak of the Moral Life conflicting with, for example, "love, friendship, affection, fellow feeling, and community" (Stocker 1976, 461); with "a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed" life which might include "reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving [one's] backhand" (Wolf 1982, 421); with "the importance of individual character and personal relations" (Williams 1976, 201). They worry, in short, about the incompatibility between morality and the kind of pleasant bourgeois life these philosophers enjoyed.[14] These worries strike a somewhat different note from Nietzsche, who speaks of morality posing a threat, for example, to "the highest power and splendor actually possible to the type man" (GM, Pref: 6); to "the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a strong civilization" (D, 163); to "all that is rare, strange, privileged . . . the higher soul, the higher duty, the higher responsibility, and the abundance of creative power and masterfulness" (BGE, 212); to the "men of great creativity, the really great men according to my understanding" (WP, 957). Here the objection is not merely that the Moral Life will interfere with various mundane personal goods important to the self-absorbed bourgeoisie, but rather that it is incompatible with the highest forms of human excellence: the Moral Life, for Nietzsche, is not a threat to the Good Life but, we might say, to the "Extraordinary Life."

Nietzsche, it bears emphasizing, was fundamentally worried whether our culture was making it impossible *as a matter of empirical fact* for anyone to live an Extraordinary Life anymore. It is one of the few themes that animated all Nietzsche's writings from start to finish. In an early essay of the mid-1870's, "Schopenhauer as Educator" (U, III), Nietzsche speaks of "the goal of culture" as "the production of genius" (U, III: 6), though there he worries not primarily about the deleterious effect of morality on culture but about "the crudest and most evil forces, the egoism of the money-makers

[13] Miller (1992, 309).

[14] The further irony, of course, is that morality as actually practiced has never posed an obstacle to any of these ordinary, bourgeois ambitions.

and the military despots" (U, III: 4), as well as "the greed of the state" (U, III: 6). His major work of the early 1880's, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, begins with Zarathustra's image of a world in which all human excellence and creativity is gone, in which all that will remain is the "last man."

> Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man.
>
> "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" thus asks the last man, and he blinks.
>
> The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. . . .
>
> "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth. . . .
>
> No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.
>
> "Formerly, all the world was mad," say the most refined, and they blink.
>
> One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so, there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled—else it might spoil the digestion. (Z, Prologue: 5)

In his last productive year of 1888, Nietzsche speaks of Christian morality as having "waged war unto death . . . against the presupposition of every elevation, of every growth of culture" (A, 43), and he claims that acting in accord with what "has been called morality . . . would deprive existence of its great character" (EH, IV:4). The distinctively Nietzschean worry is that our moral culture—not our best moral theory—is ushering in the reign of the last man, of complete mediocrity and banality. This approach to critique places Nietzsche not in the company of Anglo-American morality critics, but rather in that European tradition of modernist discontent with bourgeois Christian culture that runs, we might say, from Baudelaire to Freud, with echoes audible in the critical theories of Adorno and Marcuse.

Nietzsche's explanation of how modern moral culture threatens "the highest power and splendor . . . possible to the type man" (GM, Pref: 6) depends on a speculative psychology about how a culture suffused with morality will affect the flourishing of higher human beings. Here I will give just one example. Consider Nietzsche's objection to the utilitarian emphasis on eliminating suffering and promoting "happiness": "Are we not, with this

tremendous objective of obliterating all the sharp edges of life, well on the way to turning mankind into sand? Sand! Small, soft, round, unending sand! Is that your ideal, you heralds of the sympathetic affections?" (D, 174). In a later work, Nietzsche says—referring to hedonists and utilitarians—that, "Well-being as you understand it—that is no goal, that seems to us an end, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible" (BGE, 225). By the hedonistic doctrine of well-being, Nietzsche takes the utilitarians to have in mind "English happiness," namely, "comfort and fashion" (BGE, 228)—a construal which, if unfair to some utilitarians, may do justice to our ordinary aspirations. In a similar vein, Nietzsche has Zarathustra dismiss "wretched contentment" as an ideal (Z Pref: 3) while also revealing that it was precisely "the last men"—the "most despicable men"—who "invented happiness" in the first place (Z, Pref: 5). His underlying idea is clear: suffering is a spur to creativity, at least in higher human beings, and a culture that treats suffering as an evil and happiness as the most important end, will divert higher human beings from their potential as they pursue pleasure and the cessation of suffering. An allegedly too-demanding notion of "obligation" plays no role for Nietzsche.[15] His attack, unlike Williams's, is vulnerable to the empirical evidence about how a culture suffused with morality really affects individual geniuses, but the entire debate between Anglophone moral philosophers, in which Williams is such an important figure, is irrelevant to Nietzsche's concerns. This same mismatch in concerns plays a role in Nietzsche's and Williams's different approach to the Greeks, to which I now turn.

1.2 *Shame and Necessity*

In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams explicitly defends one anti-historicist thesis, namely, that the folk psychology of action and motivation in the Homeric world—as well as certain allied notions that are part of our "ethical outlook" (as he calls it), such as responsibility and shame—are not really

[15] Clark (2001) gives an account more sympathetic to Williams, but more foreign to Nietzsche in my view: *contra* Clark (2001, 107), I do not see that Williams's account of the difference between "ordinary" and "moral" obligation parallels anything in Nietzsche's account in GM II (which does not even discuss obligation but does discuss the capacity to promise); her own treatment of GM II (2001, 115–117) runs together *debt* and *guilt* (both *Schuld* in German) in ways not warranted by the logic of the text; and I see no connection at all between Williams's idea that the morality system "expresses an ideal, the ideal that human existence can be ultimately just" (Clark 2001, 119) and Nietzsche's notion of the ascetic ideal, which has nothing to do with the ultimate justness of existence or with insulating moral blame from luck.

different in kind from ours. His particular target is scholars like Bruno Snell who took the Homeric Greeks to be morally inferior on most of these counts. Nietzsche would certainly disagree with Snell, but it is less clear how much he would agree with Williams: there are points on which Williams seems convincing, probably even by Nietzschean lights, but there are respects in which Williams systematically downplays the radical differences between us and the Greeks that were so important to Nietzsche. Williams, himself, is no doubt aware of the tension. He describes Nietzsche as a thinker "with whom my inquiry has relations that are very close and necessarily ambiguous" (1993, 9). But when Williams claims that "if we can come to understand the ethical concepts of the Greeks, we shall recognize them in ourselves. What we recognize is an identity in content" (1993, 10), he is affirming something that Nietzsche often denies. As Nietzsche puts it in an early essay on "Homer's Contest": "What a gulf of ethical judgment lies between us and him" (HC) (i.e., Homer). But for Nietzsche this observation has nothing to do with Snell's moralizing condescension: Nietzsche takes the normative content of ethical thought in the Homeric world to be dramatically different from ours and largely superior. Because this assessment is so unfamiliar, even in Williams's treatment, it requires some further attention at the start.

Nietzsche's understanding of the Greeks was profoundly influenced by that of his University of Basel colleague Jacob Burckhardt, probably the most important historian of the Italian Renaissance and classical Greece that nineteenth-century Europe produced.[16] Burckhardt's vision of both historical epochs was distinctive: the cultural excellence of the fifth century BC in Greece and then the Italian Renaissance was due to the extraordinary competitiveness of the different city-states, not just politically but also in the intellectual and artistic realms. In our neoliberal era, it bears emphasizing that the *agonistic* spirit of the Greeks and Renaissance Italians was not about success in the capitalist marketplace (which did not exist) but about excellence in the domain of cultural achievement as adjudged by elites. Nietzsche, in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, from 1872, had already emphasized the central place of Greek tragedy in the *competitive* Dionysian cult festivals that were the central public event of the year in the life of the Greek polis. This competitive atmosphere produced Sophocles and Aeschylus, just as that of the

[16] Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* appeared in 1860; his later *History of Greek Culture* appeared in 1898–1902, but was based on lectures in the early 1870s and was read by Nietzsche around 1875.

Italian Renaissance produced its own geniuses, da Vinci and Michelangelo being only the two best-known. And both Burckhardt and Nietzsche took this culturally fertile competitive environment to be inseparable from its political competition: *competition* in pursuit of excellence and dominance was essential to both epochs.

This productively competitive ethos reflects the radically different values of the Homeric world and much of subsequent classical Greece and Rome until the Socratic, Platonic, and Stoic reactions with which we are all now familiar. Homeric ethics valorized honor, power, wealth, the ability to exact revenge, martial prowess, bodily pleasures, and facility with lying and deception, and these were all values that Christianity inverted, as my colleague Michael Forster has documented at great length[17] and as Nietzsche himself famously argued in the First Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*: Christianity values honesty, humility, chastity, and "turning the other cheek"; it condemns wealth, revenge, and sexual pleasure.

We comfortable bourgeois academics of the current era, understandably, find such claims difficult to assess. The correlations between intense and localized political and military conflict and cultural achievement in both ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance are striking, and they certainly impressed Burckhardt and his junior colleague Nietzsche. But how should we think about this kind of evidence in the twenty-first century? At the present historical moment, when until recently the monster-child Donald Trump ruled the United States, it bears emphasizing that, just as Nietzsche and Burckhardt hated Bismarck, they would have certainly been gripped by paroxysms of contempt and bafflement by the comical Trump. Consider that Trump undoubtedly valorized, in some sense, most of the things Homer does, but he was unable to achieve any of them. He is, for example, a transparent liar who fools no one and whom no one believes other than the "rabble," as Nietzsche would say, and his lies serve no purpose other than satisfying his vanity, "the selfishness of the sick" (Z, I:22) as Nietzsche's Zarathustra puts it. Contrast Odysseus, who lies his way out of the grips of the Cyclops and lies his way into his former home in order to surprise and slaughter the suitors of his wife Penelope and thus exact his just revenge. Trump has no martial prowess and no honor, and he could not even wield political power effectively due to his narcissism and stupidity. Even in the domain of bodily pleasure, Trump is basically a consumer of prostitution, both short- and long-term. Trump aspires

[17] Forster (forthcoming).

to the simulacra of the Homeric values that the actual Homeric heroes realize. The relevant contrast, for understanding Nietzsche, is with Napoleon, one of those in the standard nineteenth-century pantheon of "geniuses," as he was for Nietzsche, along with Goethe and Beethoven. Napoleon himself cultivated the myth of his own genius, but it is also true that Napoleon really did have martial prowess, that he was honored and renowned, that he wielded extraordinarily effective power (modern Europe still bears the imprint of his vision of the state's bureaucracy, in part due to Napoleon's own competence and focus on detail), and that he was in so many respects a Homeric hero, complete with his disregard for human life.

We have now explored Nietzsche's reasons for disagreeing with Snell's moralizing condescension toward the *agonistic* ethos of the Greeks. Bernard Williams's disagreements with Snell are more modest, and they are our real topic. Williams finds the "ethical outlook" of the Greeks more appealing because they lack "the accretions of misleading philosophy" (1993, 21), such as Kantian ideas of freedom, responsibility, and obligation (1993, 41; cf. 1993, 159, objecting to "a rationalistic metaphysics of morality"), "a dualistic distinction between soul and body" (1993, 23), and the idea of "the will" (1993, 29). In each case, it is clear that Williams thinks much of our *current* "ethical outlook" can be reconstructed quite adequately without the "accretions of misleading philosophy," an ambition obviously foreign to Nietzsche even if he shares Williams's allergy to Kant. As Williams puts it, the differences between us and the Greeks "cannot best be understood in terms of a shift in basic ethical conceptions of agency, responsibility, shame, or freedom. Rather, by better grasping these conceptions themselves and the extent to which we share them with antiquity, we may be helped to recognize some illusions about the modern world" (1993, 7). This obviously stands Nietzsche's project on its head, even if on its own terms, Williams is sometimes right: the Greeks, for example, may have enough of the conceptual framework for talk of voluntary action (i.e., actions brought about by people who took themselves to intend that action), but this completely ignores the radically different content of matters of normative concern for the Greeks.

Even with respect to the philosophical psychology, however, it seems clear Nietzsche would dissent from Williams's picture. Williams acknowledges that the Greeks lack the idea of "the will" (1993, 29) and that they have no word for "intention" (1993, 33), yet he claims that none of this separates the Greeks fundamentally from us. Homer, says Williams, recognizes "the capacities to deliberate, to conclude, to act, to exert oneself, to make oneself

do things, to endure" (1993, 40); the addition of a "will" is an "invention of bad philosophy" he says (1993, 36). So, too, with intentional action according to Williams: "People's deliberations, their thoughts about what to do, issued in their actions. . . . [T]hese truths are obvious" (1993, 66). And although Williams goes on to claim that "there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened" (1993, 68), he ends up endorsing a familiar philosophical response to the problem of free will, namely, compatibilism:[18] "human beings are not 'free' in the further sense demanded by some metaphysics, of being free from the laws of nature: this freedom they do not need. . . . Human beings are metaphysically free in the negative sense that there is nothing in the structure of the universe that denies their power to intend, to decide, to act, indeed to take and receive responsibility in the fundamental and intelligible sense that we found, in an earlier chapter, already in Homer" (1993, 142).

Nietzsche, however, repudiates this entire philosophical psychology, although it is beyond my competence to determine whether he would deny Williams's claim that this philosophical psychology is really to be found in the early Greeks.[19] This is a large topic that I have treated at length in my recent *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* (Leiter 2019a), so I will just say a few words here. According to Nietzsche, "Consciousness *is* a surface [*Oberfläche*]" (EH, II: 9), and it is a surface that conceals what is actually causally efficacious in our actions, namely, our unconscious mental states, especially our drives (i.e., our dispositions to have certain affective responses, such as sexual arousal). When we talk of the "will" or of the "motive" that precedes an action we are referring to "error[s]" and "phantoms, . . . merely a surface phenomenon of consciousness—something alongside the deed that is more likely to cover up the antecedents of the deed than to represent them" (TI, VI: 3). Only our "ridiculous overestimation and misunderstanding of consciousness" (GS, 11) leads us to fail to recognize that "the greatest part of our spirit's activity . . . remains unconscious and unfelt" (GS, 333), that "everything of which we become conscious . . . causes nothing" (WP, 478). I elide

[18] Williams denies he is a compatibilist because he denies that the notion of the voluntary he is interested in is part of the "morality system" (i.e., the Kant-inspired system that requires a blameworthy will that stands outside the causal order and thus beyond luck). From Nietzsche's perspective, this seems to be the narcissism of small differences since Williams is still interested in preserving both blame and responsibility and doing so on the basis of a philosophical psychology that Nietzsche rejects. See, generally, Leiter (2019c).

[19] Free will in something like the modern sense of an "ability to do otherwise" entered with the Stoics: the later Stoics, according to Michael Frede (2011, 100, 177), earlier according to Myles Burnyeat (1996).

many details here regarding different *kinds* of conscious mental states, but the crucial claim for Nietzsche is that conscious deliberation is an epiphenomenon and that talk of our "reasons" for acting is a post hoc just-so story. Thus, Nietzsche rejects compatibilist as well as incompatibilist views of free will and responsibility: our will does not stand outside the causal order, but what we *take to be our reasons for acting* are also causally unconnected to what we do. What Williams deems "obvious" truths about action—for example, that deliberation issues in action—Nietzsche deems falsehoods.[20]

Unsurprisingly, given the preceding, Nietzsche rejects the idea that we are ever responsible for what we do. In an early work, *Daybreak*, he writes,

> Do I have to add that the wise Oedipus was right that we really are not responsible for our dreams—but just as little for our waking life, and that the doctrine of freedom of will has human pride and feeling of power for its father and mother? (D, 128)

We may have other motives for thinking ourselves free, but we are as little responsible for what we do in real life as what we do in our dreams. The same themes are sounded in one of his very last works, *The Antichrist*.

> Formerly man was given a "free will" as his dowry from a higher order: today we have taken his will away altogether, in the sense that we no longer admit the will as a faculty. The old word "will" now serves only to denote a resultant, a kind of individual reaction, which follows necessarily upon a number of partly contradictory, partly harmonious stimuli: the will no longer "acts" [*wirkt*] or "moves" [*bewegt*]. (A, 14)

Since the faculty of the will "no longer 'acts' or 'moves'" (A, 14)—that is, it is no longer causal—then there remains no conceptual space for the

[20] Williams (1994) again misses the extent to which Nietzsche rejects the causal efficacy of conscious thoughts (Williams 1994, 242) and the actual import of his attack on the will and willing (cf. Leiter 2007). Williams (1994) would make a nice sociological case study of university life in the way an extremely slight essay can attract considerable academic attention because of the "reputation" of the author based on other work. Quite apart from the superficiality of Williams's interpretive claims about Nietzsche, his confusions about "naturalism" (Williams 1994, 239–240) are astonishing (cf. Leiter 2019a, 2–11). Williams's oft-quoted claim (1994, 238) that Nietzsche's texts are "booby trapped . . . against recovering theory from it" tells us much more about how little time Williams spent reading Nietzsche carefully, but his supposed "authority" on this count has repeatedly been invoked by other lazy readers of Nietzsche. (Paul Russell tells me that he thinks Williams only became seriously engaged with Nietzsche after reading Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* [1981] and that in his later work, he preferred being associated with Nietzsche than Hume.)

compatibilist idea that the right kind of causal determination of the will is compatible with responsibility for our actions. If, as Zarathustra puts it, "thought is one thing, the deed is another, and the image of the deed still another: the wheel of causality does not roll between them" (Z, I: 6), then there is no room for moral responsibility: I may well identify with my "thoughts" or my will, but if they do not *cause* my actions, how could that make me responsible for them? Unlike Williams, compatibilism about free will is not an option for Nietzsche.

Williams acknowledges, throughout *Shame and Necessity*, that there are "differences we must approve, between ourselves and the Greeks" (1993, 7) because there has been "progress" (1993, 6–7), meaning moral progress. He points particularly to our ideas about women and slaves but says this is not a matter of "some new structural conception called 'morality' " (1993, 8). Here the word "structural" is doing a lot of work: for it was plainly a radically new conception of morality that viewed all human beings as moral equals in virtue of being human, a view with which Nietzsche, the only serious inegalitarian of modernity, had no sympathy.[21] Williams's efforts to dismiss this difference as not being "structural" is indicative of how deep the anti-historicist impulse runs in *Shame and Necessity*, but perhaps also how little Williams veers from Judith Jarvis Thomson's conception of philosophy as vindicating "what makes certain pre-philosophical, or non-philosophical beliefs true . . . [namely] those that we rely on in ordinary life" (2013, 54).[22]

My conclusion, then, is that Bernard Williams's debt to Nietzsche is superficial although not illusory.[23] Yet it marks such a dramatic departure from the creditor's main ideas and claims as to make the suggested affinity more misleading than illuminating. This need not strike one as an objection to Williams, of course. As a political theorist, reviewing Williams's *Shame and Necessity* at the time of its publication, put the point nicely,

[21] Leiter (2019b).

[22] Consider, too, Williams's bizarre criticism of Nietzsche as not having "offered a coherent politics" (1993, 10) and his observation that "liberalism demands . . . that those concepts [so important to the Greeks], necessity and luck, should not take the place of considerations of justice" (1993, 128). Williams is certainly correct that Nietzsche had no liberal theory of justice for modern politics, but Williams's felt need for one is a testament to the powerful grip of Thomson's vision for philosophy in the Anglophone world.

[23] One point Nietzsche and Williams agree on strongly and that I have neglected is the contrast between moralizing readers of history like Plato, Kant, Hegel et al. who think it all makes sense, indeed, moral sense, and those like Nietzsche, Thucydides, and Sophocles who view the world as "only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations" (1993, 164). I take this issue up in Leiter forthcoming.

> [O]ne pervasive feature of the book is the way the carefully modulated sentences of Williams the analytic philosopher seem to resist the heroic and romantic project he takes over from Nietzsche. . . . [T]he Nietzschean Williams resists the smugness and trivializing fastidiousness of most philosophical analysis, while the Analytic Williams keeps any inclinations to wretched excess of the Nietzschean . . . sort well under control.[24]

Comfortable professors, in comfortable liberal democracies, have good prudential reasons to be wary of "wretched excess"—unless of course it has no consequences for our actual lives, as with Derrida or Žižek, or other excrescences of bourgeois academic life. Certainly, Williams avoids Nietzsche's perhaps more consequential excesses. Let us not forget, however, William Blake's quip more than three hundred years ago that, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." On the chance that Blake is right, we might do well, then, to keep both Williams and the very different Nietzsche in view.[25]

References

References to Nietzsche's texts are by part (Roman numeral) and section (Arabic numeral), not pages. I use the standard English-language acronyms: "Homer's Contest" (HC), *Daybreak* (D), *The Gay Science* (GS), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z), *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM), *Twilight of the Idols* (TI), *The Antichrist* (A), *The Will to Power* (WP). I have consulted a variety of translations, though in some cases have modified them or supplied my own; for that purpose, I rely on the Colli and Montinari standard edition of the *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden* (KSA).

Beiser, Frederick. 2011. *The German Historicist Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burnyeat, Myles. 1996. "Ancient Freedoms" (Berkley Graduate Lecture). https://gradlectures.berkeley.edu/lecture/ancient-freedoms/

Clark, Maudemarie. 2001. "On the Rejection of Morality: Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche." In *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, edited by Richard Schacht, 100–122. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Darwall, Stephen L. 1987. "Abolishing morality." *Synthese* 72 (1): 71–89.

[24] Salkever (1993).

[25] An earlier version of this essay benefitted from discussion at the Lund conference on Bernard Williams in June 2019, as well as from the presentations of other participants. I should acknowledge especially Sophie-Grace Chappell, Miranda Fricker, Geraldine Ng, Matthieu Queloz, and Paul Russell, all of whom are absolved for my skeptical heresies about Williams. I also learned a lot from co-teaching a seminar with Michael Forster on Nietzsche and the Greeks. Finally, thanks to Joshua Fox for excellent research assistance and the editors of this volume for feedback on the penultimate draft.

Forster, Michael N. 2018. *Herder's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Forster, Michael N. forthcoming. "Nietzsche: Three Genealogies of Christianity." "Nietzsche's View from Afar," the 22nd International Conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society and 27th International Conference of the Nietzsche-Gesellschaft and the Friedrich Nietzsche Stiftung.
Frede, Michael. 2011. *A Free Will: Origins of the Idea in Ancient Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Janaway, Christopher. 2017. "Attitudes to suffering: Parfit and Nietzsche." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 60 (1–2): 66–95.
Leiter, Brian. 1997. "Nietzsche and the morality critics." *Ethics* 107 (2): 250–285.
Leiter, Brian. 2007. "Nietzsche's theory of the will." *Philosophers' Imprint* 7: 1–15.
Leiter, Brian. 2015. *Nietzsche on Morality*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
Leiter, Brian. 2018. "The History of Philosophy Reveals that 'Great' Philosophy is Disguised Moral Advocacy: A Nietzschean Case against the Socratic Canon in Philosophy." In *Proceedings of the British Academy 214: Philosophy and the Historical Perspective*, edited by Marcel van Ackeren, 185–199. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Leiter, Brian. 2019a. *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Leiter, Brian. 2019b. "The death of God and the death of morality." *The Monist* 102 (3): 386–402.
Leiter, Brian. 2019c. "The innocence of becoming: Nietzsche against guilt." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1): 70–92.
Leiter, Brian. forthcoming. *From a Realist Point of View*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
Miller, Richard. 1992. *Moral Differences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Nagel, Thomas. 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Salkever, Steven. 1993. "Review of *Shame and Necessity* by Bernard Williams." *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 4.
Stocker, Michael. 1976. "The schizophrenia of modern ethical theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (14): 453–466.
Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 2013. "How It Was." In *Portraits of American Philosophy*, edited by Steven Cahn, 47–62. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
Williams, Bernard. 1976. "Persons, Character, and Morality." In *The Identities of Persons*, edited by Amelie Rorty, 197–216. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Williams, Bernard. 1993. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Williams, Bernard. 1994. "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology." In *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, edited by Richard Schacht, 237–247. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Williams, Bernard. 2002. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Wolf, Susan. 1982. "Moral saints." *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (8): 419–439.