



Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (ed.), *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, Oxford University Press, 2012. \$80. Available [here](#).

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Abstract The more than fifty year period that Bernard Williams spent investigating some of the most puzzling problems in contemporary practical philosophy have merited him the reputation of one of the greatest moral philosophers of the twentieth century. At present however, this recognition has not resulted in anything that could be called a comprehensive overview of this ethical ideas, let alone of his general approach to philosophy. With its much more modest ambitions, *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, a collection of essays edited by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, nevertheless gives witness to the lasting relevance of Williams's ethical thought. Tackling his ideas on the role and scope of theorizing in morality, some of the leading philosophers of our time explore and unveil for us the radical way in which the author of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* continues to influence ethical theory.

The latest collection of essays discussing the ethical thought of Bernard Williams contains eleven contributions from scholars long engaged in trying to make sense of his vast, complex, and at times ambiguous legacy in this field. Fruit of the 'Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams' conference organized at the University of Leeds in 2009, it had the luck to appear in print shortly before the tenth anniversary of death of this universally admired, if notoriously controversial, British philosopher. It was therefore an excellent time to reflect on Williams's career and contribution, and who better to take up the task than one of his conversation partners of many years, Joseph Raz, and the former's highly independent and more or less critical disciples, Michael Smith and Susan Wolf? In recent years, scholarly interest in Williams's work appears to have shifted focus from its ethical to its political elements (an example can be found in the present collection, in Gerald Lang's paper backing up his rejection of the notion of speciesism). However, we may also turn to the thinkers in this collection for an idea on the degree to which the appeal of Williams's 'anti-theoretical' ethics survives when its author and his exceptional personality are gone.

The question is important, because it is precisely Williams's personality that, in the eyes of many, made him a seminal figure in the philosophical landscape of the second half of the twentieth century. Those who knew him are often ready with an anecdote about his not always concealed malice when dealing with those whom he thought to be his intellectual equals. For others, especially students, he was supposed to have been kindness itself. The former tend to describe Williams as the wittiest person they ever met and in a way too smart for his own good. Indeed, his ingenious arguments and examples bear the mark of an irony that continues to make him a captivating but at the same time exceptionally challenging author. It is hard to be sure when Williams is, and when he is not being serious, which in many readers results in a sort of exasperation; 'elusive' is without any doubt one of the most frequent characterizations of him.

If only he could be ignored! But the philosopher whose first book was self-assuredly entitled *Morality* (1972), in the years that followed, apart from contributing to the discussions in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and political philosophy, radically influenced research in the domain of ethics, either by reviving and reorienting stagnant debates, or by confronting his fellow thinkers with questions suggesting whole new lines of inquiry. With *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1973), a book co-authored by J. J. C. Smart, Williams offered a harsh critique of the consequentialist approach to ethics, paradoxically rekindling the interest in its theoretical foundations; his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) is still essential reading for ethical anti-theorists of all stripes; his Sather Lectures given in 1989, published subsequently as *Shame and Necessity*, remain an incomparable example of the way a passion for literature can benefit philosophy. Reflecting his wide interests, at the same time sophisticated and deeply personal, Williams's way of doing moral philosophy could hardly be imitated, and in fact, he has had few real followers; neither does there appear to be a distinct school of philosophy formed around his thought. Instead, he left behind a crowd of rather perplexed readers, many of whom apparently share the experience described by David Enoch. The author of *Taking Morality Seriously* begins his paper on so-called moral luck with an 'autobiographical prelude':

For those of us who are hardly ever convinced by Bernard Williams's conclusions, his greatness is evident not so much in the rigour or precision of his arguments as in the force of his insights. For many years now, I have been convinced that Williams's discussion of moral luck is seriously flawed, and that his arguments are unclear and (...) unpersuasive. And yet, contrary to other texts that I find unclear and unpersuasive, throughout these years I have not been able to set these texts aside in my mind. There is, for me, a lingering worry that, the flaws

of his arguments notwithstanding, Williams was on to something, and furthermore something deep, revealing, and important).¹

Heuer's and Lang's collection of essays does seem like a big step towards discovering what it was – above all because, while being yet another proof of Williams's persistent influence on contemporary moral philosophy, the collection differs significantly in tone from most of what has been written on the subject. The first noteworthy difference is that it does not shy away from indicating, among dozens of problems Williams signalled, discovered (or even created), precisely those few that we are least likely to deal with any time soon: the role of theorizing in morality, the nature of moral reasons, and, indeed, moral luck. Second, hardly any essay in the collection aims at exegesis alone. In quite a few cases the essays in this book are actually chapters from other, larger works with philosophical objectives of their own. Yet, each of the contributions uses this or that question posed by Williams as a point of departure for further, fairly independent, and sometimes quite far-reaching philosophical investigation. This is an obvious sign of the depth and relevance of Williams's thought, but it also shows that they and indeed a larger 'we' – all those deeply involved in his thought – are past being simply amazed or scandalized by his insights. Whether we really understand them or not, they have become a part of our philosophical toolbox and they are not going to be given special treatment for their provenance.

We can see that fact clearly in the texts challenging Williams's criticism of ethical theorizing. For a long time the author of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was best known for his hostility towards the 'morality system' – a conception of moral life as subordinated to utilitarian or deontological concerns and regulated

1 'Being Responsible, Taking Responsibility, and Penumbral Agency', in: Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (ed.), *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 95.

by the notion of duty – and especially for his attacks on crude forms of utilitarianism. Over the years Williams qualified many of the criticisms he had originally formulated as a co-author of *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, but he never changed his mind as to the basically mistaken character of the approach to moral life behind the whole of the consequentialist outlook. However, Philip Pettit argues in his essay that, by his own lights, Williams should have recognized the inescapability of some sort of consequentialist approach to moral thinking. He concedes that act-utilitarianism is ill-suited for the task of guiding us in our everyday moral life, but disagrees with Williams as to the value of less direct forms of consequentialism. He believes the consequentialist approach can and should acknowledge our particular, personal commitments, while it has the advantage of being able to respond to the pressure towards generality inherent to moral thinking. The difference, he claims, between consequentialism and non-consequentialism lies in the fact that the former concentrates on agent-neutral goods, which makes it more naturally impartial than the latter. While in our everyday personal decisions the non-consequentialist approach has perhaps sufficient resources in order to satisfy the basic moral requirement of impartiality, consequentialism clearly gets the better of it in the political sphere, where moral agents appear more straightforwardly as featureless equals. As Pettit puts it, it seems that, as far as political life is concerned, ‘consequentialism is the only game in town’. Given the arguments developed by Williams in the last decade of his life in favour of a form of political realism (as opposed to political moralism), one can imagine he could, up to a point, agree with Pettit. It is doubtful, however, that Williams would support him in advancing the political usefulness of consequentialism as an argument for giving it priority in all spheres of moral thinking.

In much the same spirit, Brad Hooker sets out in his essay to settle a more general dispute – the one between the proponents of theoretical and anti-theoretical approaches to ethics. Assuming that Williams belongs to the latter camp, Hooker questions the coherence of his rejection of ethical theorizing. As he points out,

Williams is himself convinced that if there is any ground for distinguishing moral concerns in the general field of practical thinking, it must be their fundamentally interpersonal character. Interpersonality requires some degree of generality, so theorizing about morality must be, at least in principle, possible. The important question is then, whether that possibility poses in itself a threat to the quality of moral life. Hooker reiterates familiar charges against theory, namely that it is mistaken: a) to prize principles and rationalism, b) to presume or prize foundational unity and ethical codifiability, c) to presume deep-running impartiality of morality and value commensurability, d) to presume to tell agents how to deliberate, and e) to attempt to eliminate ethical dilemmas. He argues systematically that, on the one hand, theorizing does not have to ruin the authenticity of moral life, and on the other, that a moderate amount of theoretical support can only do it good by helping us to sort out our often hazy moral intuitions. There exists, to be sure, a general tendency to seek shelter in moral theories, but this is a psychological problem, and irrelevant to what we should think about their inherent value. As Hooker concludes, 'if moral theorizing is done with an open mind (...) and if it is done at the appropriate time, i.e. during a cool hour, I cannot see how it can be anything other than commendable'.² Assuming that Williams is an anti-theorist (which is, I am inclined to say, far less obvious than the essay suggests), he clearly overreacts.

Apparently, 'a cool hour' has come for studying Williams's thought as well, and from now on we refuse to be daunted by its putative anti-theoretical zeal. Instead, we turn against it an argument of a type favoured by the author of *Truth and Truthfulness* himself, that to blame theory for everything that can go wrong in moral life is a sure sign of a strong belief in its power. Both the problem and the solution must be more subtle than that, and a good example of how complicated ethical argumentation must sometimes get is at hand in yet another commentary by Michael Smith on Williams's 'Internal and External Reasons'.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

It is possible that the never-ending discussion provoked by that essay has begun to look hopeless to you; the present contribution can restore some of your faith in the sense of going on with it, for it has indeed borne fruit. If nothing more, it proves that the decades long dispute between 'Humeans' and 'anti-Humeans' was not futile, as it helped to identify the core problem as standards of rationality in moral thinking. Continuing his use of the 'direction of fit' distinction between the operations of belief and desire (while belief 'tracks the truth', desire calls for a modification of the actual state of affairs in a way that would ensure its satisfaction), Smith defends Williams's claim that as far as it necessarily serves some already existing motivation, moral thinking fails to be always governed by the norm of truth, and so the reasons it can come to recognize are at least subjective, if not relative. Williams famously qualifies that conclusion by ascribing a special role to imagination, which is supposed to enable us to recognize reasons for action not supported by any of our previous desires. However, Smith points out that unless Williams wants to switch camps, he has to offer an account of imagination that will differ from the realists' idea of a power to anticipate the calling of objectively existing moral reasons. His own proposition links imagination to the affective aspect of desires; by imagining what it would be like to take a given course of action and how it would feel to suffer the consequences, we can acquire new motivation, and thus new reasons for action. Construed that way, imagination can at the same time meet one of the crucial challenges issued by anti-Humeans and offer an internalist basis for distinguishing between desires that are worth or not worth realizing.

It is hard not to read Smith's essay as a commentary on the reasons-centred discussion between Williams and John McDowell, but the name of the latter does not appear in the text. It emerges in the paper by Jonathan Dancy who addresses Williams's interpretation of McDowell's self-professedly dispositional view of values. Williams rejects it as a form of intuitionism. Dancy concedes to Williams that McDowell is in fact a proponent of an objectivist, non-dispositional account of values, but argues that his approach

does not have the disadvantages denounced by Williams. He believes that an objectivist, cognitivist approach to moral reasons and values that McDowell proposes (and he himself, in his version of particularism, develops), can very well be at the same time pluralist, agent-relative and world-guided – three things Williams has always most cared about.

Albeit indirectly, Dancy's defence of 'good new McDowellian intuitionism' comes as an argument against Williams's idea of 'taming' subjectivism and rendering it compatible with the full-blown normativity of morality. Dancy doubts that anything short of a fully objectivist and realist account of morality could guarantee that its concerns will have proper authority over moral agents, and so, it seems, do John Broome and Ulrike Heuer.

Broome criticizes what he sees as Williams's attempt, undertaken in "Ought' and Moral Obligation", to distinguish between practical conclusions and moral obligations. In that essay Williams argued that while practical 'oughts', anchored in contingent motivations, express a relation between an agent and an action, the moral 'ought' always denotes a propositional operator and is not indexed to persons, is not 'owned' by anyone. Williams's conclusion is that it is possible for a person to be under moral obligation to do something he or she has no reason to do (all reasons being, as we have been told, internal), which creates theoretical space for the proleptic mechanisms of social interaction that he thinks crucial for the quasi-objective character of our moral experience. However, Broome argues that while 'ought' can always denote a propositional operator, this is just a logical point, irrelevant to the concerns of ethics. There, as long as we want 'oughts' to be agent-relative, we cannot avoid ascribing them to persons in a way that will make possible both moral conflicts and relativity between persons.

Ulrike Heuer explores in her turn the relation between the idea of the internal character of reasons for action and the so called 'thick concepts'. The role played in moral life by ideas like bravery, charity, cruelty or treachery, which have a special characteristic of

being both 'world-guided' and 'action-guiding', is often seen as a confirmation of the intuitions behind internalism about reasons. Using 'thick concepts' is supposed to be a sign of belonging to an ethical community based on having similar elementary motivations and, as a result, similar values, in a way that enables the agent to overstep the fact/value distinction and treat facts from the world as objective moral reasons. Heuer questions this assumption by pointing out a logical mistake it involves. As she argues, it is incoherent to both accept internalism and claim that some otherwise non-evaluative facts provide reasons to people who are disposed to be guided by them; either they provide reasons for everyone, or for nobody, except in the way that any fact from the world can in a certain situation become a reason for action. In other words, Heuer believes internalism about reasons is incompatible with any robust form of moral universalism.

The essays commenting on Williams's theory of reasons offer a fine review of different ways of approaching the questions generated by his thought, but we can best see the scale of philosophical mobilization it sometimes provokes in the three papers dedicated to moral luck. David Enoch, Joseph Raz and R. Jay Wallace each make an attempt to solve the puzzle that Williams created by introducing the idea that he himself thought rather scandalous. In 1995 he admitted that he expected 'moral luck' to suggest an oxymoron.³ Their essays deserve to be seen as the heart of the whole collection, for a number of reasons, but above all because of the exemplary way their authors, who are deeply critical of Williams's conclusions, make nonetheless excellent philosophical use of his insights.

The idea of moral luck challenges the established notion of moral responsibility as depending, jointly and exclusively, on the agent's antecedent intentions and the quality of his or her deliberation.

3 'Moral luck: a postscript', in: *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge UP, 1995, p. 241.

Pointing to the existence of a special kind of regret for our own unintentional acts, Williams argues that, not limited to what we do intentionally, moral responsibility can in principle stretch to anything we have caused to happen, introducing into the very heart of practical deliberation an element of, so to say, moral risk. For many this is a disturbing conclusion, and unacceptable for a number of critics who suggest that Williams reached it because of having misunderstood the nature of responsibility and its relation to regret.

David Enoch concedes that agent-regret is more than just a morally irrelevant psychological reaction – there are situations in which it is appropriate, in a way ‘called for’. He sees two possible explanations of this fact: either there is such a thing as moral luck (something he is not ready to accept) or there is an obligation to take, by an act of will, responsibility for some things for which we are not straightforwardly responsible. To determine which those are, we need a clearer idea about our agency in the world. Enoch suggests that besides the things we simply do or cause to happen there are things which are in the penumbra of our agency, events we did not cause, but which are related to us closely enough for us to be obligated to take responsibility for them. They may be things as different as tragic accidents, which Williams writes about, and the deeds of our children – what they have in common is that we are somehow morally involved in them. Williams got that much right, but he was wrong to think about it in terms of moral luck. Enoch believes that, of all the things for which we are not responsible, some are such that we are obligated actively to take responsibility, and we are required to experience, and morally justified in acting on, a form of agent-regret. He is, however, not entirely clear on which those are (‘good moral engineering’ being a notion in need of further clarification), and one cannot but wonder if that in itself could not at times be a question of luck.

Joseph Raz takes his inquiry into ‘phenomenology of agency’ in a different direction. He concentrates on the very notion of responsibility and distinguishes between being actually responsible for some act and having the capacity to be in that way responsible.

He believes that distinction necessary to explain the fact that, as he is ready to admit, neither the relevant intention nor the guidance of reason are necessary conditions of moral responsibility. It turns instead on what Raz calls the 'Rational Functioning Principle', according to which we are responsible for what happens as a result of the functioning, successful or not, of our powers of rational agency. It may be so, because it is our actions and their success or failure that drive the process of our becoming who we are, in a constant interaction with the world. Learning from the unintended results of our actions is part of that process, and that explains why they matter for us – and why they matter morally. But our interaction with the world does not only change us, it also reveals who we are, and that in turn explains the phenomenon of essentially self-referential agent-regret, justified, according to Raz, in every situation in which what we do and what happens as a result is not what we would expect of the people we take ourselves to be. Raz agrees then with Williams that agent-regret tells us a lot about what acting really means, but he suggests that the author of *Morality* is mistaken about its precise role; experiencing agent-regret is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of being morally responsible.

R. Jay Wallace goes even further and radically questions the suitability of agent-regret as a means of tracking down moral justification. Williams's famous 'Gauguin' example aimed at convincing us that in the case of a painter abandoning his family in order to pursue his artistic vocation the moral evaluation of his deed, connected with his experiencing agent-regret or not, may effectively depend on his eventual success or failure as an artist. In his essay Wallace challenges this example with an imaginary case of a young teenager thinking about conceiving and giving birth to a child. He argues that if she goes through with it and ends up cherishing her daughter and enjoying their life together, her inability to regret the decision taken years before will not amount to its retrospective justification. The reason for this is precisely the special character of the 'all-in' regret or affirmation we have in mind here; once one of them is there, it effectively blocks access to the reasons we had before it appeared. However, it does not cancel

them. As Wallace puts it, it does not undermine the moral objections to conceiving a child when you are still a young teenager. What it does, instead, is introduce emotional ambivalence which could very well be not only impossible to eliminate from moral life, but also in a way called for – like in the case of the ‘bourgeois predicament’ that we all, according to Wallace, find ourselves in as participants in the privileged Western culture, unable fully to regret the atrocities that made it possible, yet not entirely (un)justified in benefiting from them.

The three papers on moral luck attack the problem in different ways (Enoch’s makes a move towards a voluntaristic conception of responsibility, Raz’s proposes to re-examine its relation to rationality, and Wallace’s mobilizes the resources of a pluralistic version of moral realism in order to defend reason-statements’ objectivity over time), but they have one thing in common: they deny there being a straightforward relation between the feelings of a person and the moral value of her actions. Now, it is true that Williams presents his understanding of moral luck as a problem for, in the first place, theorists of action, and not for moral philosophers. As he explains, he believes that the phenomenon of agent-regret calls for a revision in our ideas about the role of deliberation, and suggests that it can only be explained if we abandon the notion of acting as simply changing the situation in a way that promotes the fulfilment of our goals. What he proposes instead, as I understand it, is to think of acting in the world as part of a process of self-actualisation in which, motivated ultimately by some unconditional commitment or commitments, we try to ‘keep on being who we are’, while pursuing whatever aims we might have beyond that. What the possibility of agent-regret should make us realize is that acting is not so much influencing the reality as interacting with it, and that at times the results of our actions can effectively undermine the very basis of our practical engagements which is our self-identity. But *that* problem could not, of course, be consistently separated from our moral concerns whose very existence depends on our involvement in the world – and that should, Williams suggests, make us do nothing less than re-think

the absolute priority that we tend to ascribe to morality in practical thinking.

Whether we agree with him on that point makes little difference to the fact that, after Williams, meta-ethics is simply not what it used to be. Quite a number of essays in this collection amount to admitting, in different words, that the difficulties he identified will not be removed by means of any small adjustment to our ethical views. Critical voices, rejecting his arguments along with their basic and apparently obvious premises, are very clear about it, but so are the rare contributions that fully endorse them, like Susan Wolf's comment on the notorious 'one thought too many' point. Hers is by far the most 'Williamsian' text in the whole collection and, incidentally, it would seem to support my interpretation of the moral luck problem.

Here again, Williams introduces his idea with an example: imagine there is a shipwreck and the captain is confronted with a choice whether to save a stranger or his own wife. Williams suggests that if he were to decide to save his wife, other people, and especially his wife, would have a reason to see it as in a way inappropriate if he did it because it is morally permissible to save your wife rather than a stranger. He should do it because it is his wife – looking for moral reasons would be having 'one thought too many'. Why is that? Wolf reminds us of the most common interpretation of the example, according to which what is condemnable here is thinking about the considerations of morality in a situation calling for an immediate reaction. If that is all Williams has in mind, it is hardly a revolutionary point – both consequentialist and deontological theories have the means to explain why this should not be done. However, as Wolf points out, there is nothing in Williams's way of presenting his example that would suggest he is concerned with the *moment* in which we consult morality. At the same time, there is nothing to suggest that he has or ascribes to us an intuition according to which a decent agent should always act out of passion, without any regard for other concerns.

That is why Wolf proposes another interpretation of Williams's insight. She believes what is contested here is not *thinking* too much about morality, but unconditional commitment to morality as such. As she explains, Williams does not propose yet another modification to the way morality orders our personal commitments; rather, he questions its primacy over them altogether. Just as in his elaborate critique of the 'morality system', he tries to break the spell that makes us wonder about the moral value of our personal commitments, and see impartiality and love as values which can effectively compete in giving meaning to our life.

If, however, Wolf's interpretation is right, then Williams's critique is indeed very radical and very demanding on his readers, who naturally expect rock-solid arguments before they can be asked to re-consider the place of morality in their lives. Most contributions in the present collection express their authors' shared conviction that Williams was rarely fully successful in providing them. But they also show the mesmerizing effect his thoughts have had on contemporary moral philosophers, somehow unable to shake off the doubt he sowed in their minds. The seed sprouts with new philosophical ideas in Heuer and Lang's rich and compelling collection, which will be of great value for Williams scholars, and an instructive, if challenging, read for all those interested in contemporary ethics.