

= Bernard Williams =

Bernard Arthur Owen Williams , FBA (21 September 1929 ? 10 June 2003) was an English moral philosopher . His publications include Problems of the Self (1973) , Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (1985) , Shame and Necessity (1993) , and Truth and Truthfulness (2002) . He was knighted in 1999 .

As Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at the University of California , Berkeley , Williams became known for his efforts to reorient the study of moral philosophy to psychology , history , and in particular to the Greeks . Described by Colin McGinn as an " analytical philosopher with the soul of a general humanist , " he was sceptical about attempts to create a foundation for moral philosophy . Martha Nussbaum wrote that he demanded of philosophy that it " come to terms with , and contain , the difficulty and complexity of human life . "

Williams was a strong supporter of women in academia ; according to Nussbaum , he was " as close to being a feminist as a powerful man of his generation could be . " He was also famously sharp in conversation . Gilbert Ryle , one of Williams 's mentors at Oxford , said that he " understands what you 're going to say better than you understand it yourself , and sees all the possible objections to it , and all the possible answers to all the possible objections , before you 've got to the end of your own sentence . "

= = Life = =

= = = Early life and education = = =

Williams was born in Westcliff @-@ on @-@ Sea , a suburb of Southend , Essex , to Hilda Amy Williams , née Day , a personal assistant , and Owen Pasley Denny Williams , chief maintenance surveyor for the Ministry of Works . He was educated at Chigwell School , an independent school , where he first discovered philosophy . Reading D. H. Lawrence led him to ethics and the problems of the self . In his first book , Morality : An Introduction to Ethics (1972) , he quoted with approval Lawrence 's advice to " [f] ind your deepest impulse , and follow that . "

Awarded a scholarship to Oxford , Williams read Greats (Classics and philosophy) at Balliol . Among his influences at Oxford were Elizabeth Anscombe , Eric Dodds , Eduard Fraenkel , David Pears and Gilbert Ryle . He graduated in 1951 with a congratulatory first and a prize fellowship at All Souls .

After Oxford , Williams spent his two @-@ year national service flying Spitfires in Canada for the Royal Air Force . While on leave in New York , he became close to Shirley Brittain Catlin (born 1930) , daughter of the novelist Vera Brittain and the political scientist George Catlin . They had already been friends at Oxford . Catlin had moved to New York to study economics at Columbia University on a Fulbright scholarship .

Williams returned to England to take up his fellowship at All Souls and in 1954 became a fellow at New College , Oxford , a position he held until 1959 . He and Catlin continued seeing each other . She began working for the Daily Mirror and sought election as a Labour MP . Williams , also a member of the Labour Party , helped her with the 1954 by @-@ election in Harwich in which she was an unsuccessful candidate .

= = = First marriage , London = = =

Williams and Catlin were married in London in July 1955 at St James 's , Spanish Place , near Marylebone High Street , followed by a honeymoon in Lesbos , Greece .

The couple moved into a very basic ground @-@ floor apartment in London , on Clarendon Road , Notting Hill . Given how hard it was to find decent housing , they decided instead to share with Helge Rubinstein and her husband , the literary agent Hilary Rubinstein , who at the time was

working for his uncle , Victor Gollancz . In 1955 the four of them bought a four @-@ storey , seven @-@ bedroom house in Phillimore Place , Kensington , for ? 6 @,@ 800 , a home they lived in together for 14 years . Williams described it as one of the happiest periods of his life .

In 1958 Williams spent a term teaching at the University of Ghana in Legon . When he returned to England in 1959 , he was appointed lecturer in philosophy at University College London . In 1961 , after four miscarriages in four years , Shirley Williams gave birth to their daughter , Rebecca .

Williams was a visiting professor at Princeton University in 1963 , and was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Bedford College , London , in 1964 . His wife was elected to parliament that year as the Labour member for Hitchin in Hertfordshire . The Sunday Times described the couple two years later as " the New Left at its most able , most generous , and sometimes most eccentric . " Andy Beckett wrote that they " entertained refugees from eastern Europe and politicians from Africa , and drank sherry in noteworthy quantities . " Shirley Williams became a junior minister and , in 1971 , Shadow Home Secretary . Several newspapers saw her as a future prime minister . She went on to co @-@ found a new centrist party in 1981 , the Social Democratic Party ; Williams left the Labour Party to join the SDP , although he later returned to Labour .

= = = Cambridge , second marriage = = =

In 1967 , at the age of 38 , Williams became the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of King 's College .

According to Jane O 'Grady , Williams was central to the decision by King 's in 1972 to admit women , one of three all @-@ male undergraduate colleges to do so that year . Martha Nussbaum wrote that he was " as close to being a feminist as a powerful man of his generation could be . " In both his first and second marriages , he supported his wives in their careers and helped with the children more than was common for men at the time . In the 1970s , when Nussbaum 's thesis supervisor , G. E. L. Owen , was harassing female students , and she decided nevertheless to support him , Williams told her , during a walk along the backs at Cambridge : " [Y] ou know , there is a price you are paying for this support and encouragement . Your dignity is being held hostage . You really don 't have to put up with this . "

Shirley Williams 's political career (the House of Commons regularly sat until 10 pm) meant that the couple spent a lot of time apart . They bought a house in Furneux Pelham , Hertfordshire , near the border with north Cambridgeshire , while she lived in Phillimore Place during the week to be close to the Houses of Parliament . Sunday was often the only day they were together . The differences in their personal values ? he was an atheist , she a Catholic ? placed a further strain on their relationship . It reached breaking point in 1970 when Williams formed a relationship with Patricia Law Skinner , a commissioning editor for Cambridge University Press and wife of the historian Quentin Skinner . She had approached Williams to write the opposing view of utilitarianism for Utilitarianism : For and Against with J. J. C. Smart (1973) , and they had fallen in love .

Williams and Skinner began living together in 1971 . He obtained a divorce in 1974 (at Shirley William 's request , the marriage was later annulled) . Patricia Williams married him that year , and the couple went on to have two sons , Jacob in 1975 and Jonathan in 1980 . Shirley Williams married the political scientist Richard Neustadt in 1987 .

= = = Berkeley , Oxford = = =

In 1979 Williams was elected Provost of King 's , a position he held until 1987 . He spent a semester in 1986 at the University of California , Berkeley as Mills Visiting Professor and in 1988 left England to become Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy there , announcing to the media that he was leaving as part of the " brain drain " of British academics to America . He was also Sather Professor of Classical Literature at Berkeley in 1989 ; Shame and Necessity (1995) grew out of his six Sather lectures .

Williams returned to England in 1990 as White 's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford and fellow of Corpus Christi . His sons had been " at sea " in California , he said , not knowing what was

expected of them , and he had been unable to help . He regretted having made his departure from England so public ; he had been persuaded to do so to highlight Britain 's relatively low academic salaries . When he retired in 1996 , he took up a fellowship again at All Souls .

= = = Royal commissions , committees = = =

Williams served on several royal commissions and government committees : the Public Schools Commission (1965 ? 1970) , drug abuse (1971) , gambling (1976 ? 1978) , the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship (1979) , and the Commission on Social Justice (1993 ? 1994) . " I did all the major vices , " he said . While on the gambling commission , one of his recommendations , ignored at the time , was for a national lottery . (John Major 's government introduced one in 1994 .)

Mary Warnock described Williams 's report on pornography in 1979 , as chair of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship , as " agreeable , actually compulsive to read . " It relied on a " harm condition " that " no conduct should be suppressed by law unless it can be shown to harm someone , " and concluded that so long as children were protected from pornography , adults should be free to read and watch it as they see fit . The report rejected the view that pornography tends to cause sexual offences . Two cases in particular were highlighted , the Moors Murders and the Cambridge Rapist , where the influence of pornography had been discussed during the trials . The report argued that both cases appeared to be " more consistent with pre @-@ existing traits being reflected both in a choice of reading matter and in the acts committed against others . "

= = = Opera = = =

Williams enjoyed opera from an early age , particularly Mozart and Wagner . Patricia Williams writes that he attended performances of the Carl Rosa Company and Sadler 's Wells as a teenager . In an essay on Wagner , he described having been reduced to a " virtually uncontrollable state " during a performance by Jon Vickers as Tristan at Covent Garden . He served on the board of the English National Opera from 1968 to 1986 , and wrote an entry , " The Nature of Opera , " for The New Grove Dictionary of Opera . A collection of his essays , On Opera , was published posthumously in 2006 , edited by Patricia Williams .

= = = Honours and death = = =

Williams became a fellow of the British Academy in 1971 and an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1983 . The following year he was made a syndic of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and later the chair . In 1993 he was elected to a fellowship of the Royal Society of Arts , and in 1999 he was knighted . Several universities awarded him honorary doctorates , including Yale and Harvard .

Williams died of heart failure on 10 June 2003 while on holiday in Rome ; he had been diagnosed in 1999 with multiple myeloma , a form of cancer . He was survived by his wife , their two sons , and his daughter from his first marriage . He was cremated in Rome .

= = Writing = =

= = = Approach to ethics = = =

A. W. Moore writes that Williams ' work lies within the analytic tradition , although less typical of it " in its breadth , in its erudition , and above all in its profound humanity " :

Although he was never a vigorous apologist for that tradition , he always maintained the standards of clarity and rigour which it prizes , and his work is a model of all that is best in the tradition . It is brilliant , deep , and imaginative . It is also extraordinarily tight . There cannot be many critics of his

work who have not thought of some objection to what he says , only to find , on looking for a relevant quotation to turn into a target , that Williams carefully presents his views in a way that precisely anticipates the objection .

Williams did not produce any ethical theory or system ; several commentators noted , unfairly in the view of his supporters , that he was largely a critic . Moore writes that Williams was unaffected by this criticism : " He simply refused to allow philosophical system @-@ building to eclipse the subtlety and variety of human ethical experience . " He equated ethical theories with " a tidiness , a systematicity , and an economy of ideas , " writes Moore , that were not up to describing human lives and motives . Williams tried not to lose touch " with the real concerns that animate our ordinary ethical experience , " unlike much of the " arid , ahistorical , second @-@ order " debates about ethics in philosophy departments .

In his first book , *Morality : An Introduction to Ethics* (1972) , Williams wrote that whereas " most moral philosophy at most times has been empty and boring ... [c] ontemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring , which is by not discussing moral issues at all . " He argued that the study of ethics should be vital , compelling and difficult , and he sought an approach that was accountable to psychology and history .

Williams was not an ethical realist ; unlike scientific knowledge , which can approach an " absolute conception of reality , " an ethical judgment rests on a point of view . He argued that the " thick " ethical concepts , such as kindness and cruelty , express a " union of fact and value . " The idea that our values are not " in the world " was liberating : " [A] radical form of freedom may be found in the fact that we cannot be forced by the world to accept one set of values rather than another . "

= = = Critique of Kant = = =

Williams 's work throughout the 1970s and 1980s , in *Morality : An Introduction to Ethics* (1972) , *Problems of the Self* (1973) , *Utilitarianism : For and Against* with J. J. C. Smart (1973) , *Moral Luck* (1981) and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) , outlined his attacks on the twin pillars of ethics : utilitarianism and the moral philosophy of the 18th @-@ century German philosopher Immanuel Kant . Nussbaum wrote that his work " denounced the trivial and evasive way in which moral philosophy was being practised in England under the aegis of those two dominant theories . " Both theories simplified the moral life , she wrote , neglecting emotions and personal attachments and how sheer luck shapes our choices . (Williams said in 1996 : " Roughly , if it isn 't about obligation or consequences , it doesn 't count . ")

Kant 's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785) expounded a moral system based on the categorical imperative , one formulation of which is : " Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law . " Rational agents must act on " principles of pure rational agency , " writes Moore ; that is , principles that regulate all rational agents . But Williams distinguished between thinking and acting . To think rationally is to think in a way compatible with belief in the truth , and " what it takes for one to believe the truth is the same as what it takes for anyone else to believe the truth , " writes Moore . But one can act rationally by satisfying one 's own desires (internal reasons for action) , and what it takes to do that may not be what it takes for anyone else to satisfy theirs . Kant 's approach to treating thinking and acting alike is wrong , according to Williams .

Williams argued that Kant had given the " purest , deepest and most thorough representation of morality , " but that the " honourable instincts of Kantianism to defend the individuality of individuals against the agglomerative indifference of Utilitarianism " may not be effective against the Kantian " abstract character of persons as moral agents . " We should not be expected to act as though we are not who we are in the circumstances in which we find ourselves .

= = = Critique of utilitarianism = = =

Williams set out the case against utilitarianism ? a consequentialist position the simplest version of which is that actions are right only insofar as they promote the greatest happiness of the greatest

number ? in Utilitarianism : For and Against (1973) with J. J. C. Smart . One of the book 's thought experiments involves Jim , a botanist doing research in a South American country led by a brutal dictator . Jim finds himself in a small town facing 20 captured Indian rebels . The captain who has arrested them says that if Jim will kill one , the others will be released in honour of Jim 's status as a guest , but if he does not , they will all be killed . Simple act utilitarianism would favour Jim killing one of the men .

Williams argued that there is a crucial distinction between a person being killed by Jim , and being killed by the captain because of an act or omission of Jim 's . The captain , if he chooses to kill , is not simply the medium of an effect Jim is having on the world . He is the moral actor , the person with the intentions and projects . The utilitarian loses that distinction , turning us into empty vessels by means of which consequences occur . Williams argued that moral decisions must preserve our psychological identity and integrity . We should reject any system that reduces moral decisions to a few algorithms .

= = = Reasons for action = = =

Williams argued that there are only internal reasons for action : " A has a reason to ? iff A has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his ? @-@ ing . " An external reason would be " A has reason to ? , " even if nothing in A 's " subjective motivational set " would be furthered by her ? @-@ ing . Williams argued that it is meaningless to say that there are external reasons ; reason alone does not move people to action .

Sophie Grace Chappell argues that , without external reasons for action , it becomes impossible to maintain that the same set of moral reasons applies to all agents equally . In cases where someone has no internal reason to do what others see as the right thing , they cannot be blamed for failing to do it , because internal reasons are the only reasons , and blame , Williams wrote , " involves treating the person who is blamed like someone who had a reason to do the right thing but did not do it . "

= = = Truth = = =

In his final completed book , Truth and Truthfulness : An Essay in Genealogy (2002) , Williams identifies the two basic values of truth as accuracy and sincerity , and tries to address the gulf between the demand for truth and the doubt that any such thing exists . Jane O 'Grady wrote in a Guardian obituary of Williams that the book is an examination of those who " sneer at any purported truth as ludicrously naive because it is , inevitably , distorted by power , class bias and ideology . "

The debt to Nietzsche is clear , most obviously in the adoption of a genealogical method as a tool of explanation and critique . Although part of Williams 's intention was to attack those he felt denied the value of truth , the book cautions that , to understand it simply in that sense , would be to miss part of its purpose ; rather , as Kenneth Baker wrote , it is " Williams ' reflection on the moral cost of the intellectual vogue for dispensing with the concept of truth . "

= = Legacy = =

Williams did not propose any systematic philosophical theory ; indeed , he was suspicious of any such attempt . He became known for his dialectical powers , although he was suspicious of them too . Alan Code wrote that Williams had never been " impressed by the display of mere dialectical cleverness , least of all in moral philosophy " :

On the contrary , one of the most notable features of his philosophical outlook was an unwavering insistence on a series of points that may seem obvious but which are nevertheless all @-@ too @-@ frequently neglected : that moral or ethical thought is part of human life ; that in writing about it , philosophers are writing about something of genuine importance ; that it is not easy to say anything worth saying about the subject ; that what moral philosophers write is answerable to the realities of human history , psychology , and social affairs ; and that mere cleverness is indeed not the relevant

measure of value . "

In 1996 Martin Hollis said that Williams had " a good claim to be the leading British philosopher of his day , " but that , although he had a " lovely eye for the central questions , " he had none of the answers . Alan Thomas identified Williams 's contribution to ethics as an overarching scepticism about attempts to create a foundation for moral philosophy , explicitly articulated in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) and *Shame and Necessity* (1993) , in which he argued that moral theories can never reflect the complexities of life , particularly given the radical pluralism of modern societies .

Learning to be yourself , to be authentic and to act with integrity , rather than conforming to any external moral system , is arguably the fundamental motif of Williams 's work , according to Sophie Grace Chappell . " If there 's one theme in all my work it 's about authenticity and self @-@ expression , " Williams said in 2002 . " It 's the idea that some things are in some real sense really you , or express what you and others aren 't ... The whole thing has been about spelling out the notion of inner necessity . " He moved moral philosophy away from the Kantian question , " What is my duty ? " , and back to the issue that mattered to the Greeks : " How should we live ? "

= = Publications = =

Selected papers