

## Bernard Williams: a philosopher of freedom?

'... 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'

- Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Routledge edition, p. 142.

Miranda Fricker's lecture, "A Humanistic Discipline: Williams' Naturalistic Philosophy", presents a detailed, insightful and sympathetic synthesis of three important strands of Bernard Williams's moral philosophy. During the course of the lecture, Fricker establishes the interpretive case for attributing to Williams a systematic and coherent meta-ethical outlook, but one that stops short of the kind of ambitious theoretical edifice that Williams is well known for having rejected throughout his written work. By mutually connecting the three thematic threads of *reasons internalism*, *relativism of distance* and the *necessity of truthfulness*, Fricker presents us with a picture of Williams's moral philosophy, according to which "Williams was in a profound sense a philosopher of ethical freedom" (p. 5); and according to which it is fruitful to read Williams's work as driven by a "primary" (p. 5) or "foundational meta-ethical conviction" (p.18) that "expresses his deepest philosophical instinct about the human condition" (p. 5), namely that "we are, in a far-reaching sense, ethically free" (p. 5).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All page references are to the manuscript of Miranda Fricker, "A Humanistic Discipline: Williams' Naturalistic Philosophy", The YTL Centre Annual Lecture in Politics, Philosophy and Law, delivered at KCL on 06/03/2020.

Much of what Fricker says in her lecture should come as no surprise to readers familiar with Williams's writings. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing, if only momentarily, at Fricker's reading of Williams as fundamentally a philosopher of what she also describes in terms of "the throw-away label" *dialogical freedom* (p. 5). (The precise terms that Fricker chooses to label her interpretation are less important than the question of what we can make of this interpretation on either her, or Williams', behalf.) In what follows, I raise two questions about this interpretation: not because I think they don't have good answers, but because I think it is quite important what those answers are; both for those who are attracted to Williams' moral philosophy and for those who are not.

The first question is to what extent we are supposed to think of the idea of ethical, or dialogical, freedom as a source of *liberation*. If we should think of it as a source of liberation, then we need to know what the idea of ethical, or dialogical, freedom is supposed to liberate us from. The answer to this question can arguably be found quite close to the surface in Fricker's lecture, namely in the thought that the freedom in question is a source of liberation from the false constraints of what Williams calls "the morality system", and from theories of ethical thought that seek to ground its hold on us in constraints of pure rationality, as proposed by paradigmatic forms of Kantian ethics and certain versions of Consequentialism. To the extent that we consider ourselves bound by that system, we shall either be deluded or, if we have been fortunate enough to see the light, be living a form of *bad faith*, in virtue of our refusal to face up to our "freedom to set our own ends" (p. 22-

3). To this extent, what the language of “freedom” delivers on Fricker’s interpretation is a picture of Williams in which his philosophical outlook comes to resemble a cluster of ideas that are more often associated with the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Michel Foucault. (Among these writers, it is arguably Nietzsche who has the greatest claim to have directly influenced Williams’s work, as felicitously reflected in Fricker’s passing reference in the final paragraph of her lecture (p. 23)). Subject to certain caveats, I think this is an interpretation that both Williams and many of his followers would have reasons to find both helpful and congenial.

The second question is to what extent we are supposed to think of the idea of ethical, or dialogical, freedom as *meaningful*, or as a meaningful kind of *freedom*. As Fricker notes, the Humean influence on Williams, perhaps most obvious in the case of his endorsement of *reasons internalism*, delivers a view according to which our reasons for action are psychosocially *contingent*, and *under-determined* or *indeterminate*, with respect to rationality or practical reason. To the extent that we are able to think of the contingency, under-determination or indeterminacy in question as a meaningful source of freedom, therefore, that must be because we are able to think of ourselves as being in a position to do something meaningful with it, such as developing (dialogically or otherwise) a valuable sense of who we are, and how we want the world around us to be. Unfortunately, the *mere absence* of necessity or determinacy (whether rational or otherwise) does not deliver that result on its own. Hence, the complaint (familiar from Kantians and others) that a freedom from rational constraint that is either purely “negative”, or just too

“heteronomous” (in the sense of being arbitrarily hostage to accident or fortune), is not enough. As dialogically reflective beings who are “thrown” into the world without a pre-determined purpose, Williams’s ethical subjects will obviously need to have the resources and opportunities to develop a meaningful sense of who they are, and how they want the world around them to be, in order for the freedom with which they have been attributed to be a *freedom that matters*. Kant famously thought that because of the ubiquitous presence of “heteronomous” factors, including brute luck, the broadly Humean picture of practical reason from which Williams and others like him draw their inspiration is unable, on its own, to deliver the goods. The problem, in a nutshell, is this: for those of us who are either privileged enough, or just extremely lucky, the freedom offered by the opportunity to “construct the ethical values we live by” (p. 15) may genuinely present a rich and attractive picture of ourselves as the mutually empowered architects of a shared ethical reality. For others, less blessed by the requisite kinds of psychosocial fortune, the non-availability of the more demanding kinds of freedom that have historically been theorized by Kantians and others under the heading of *autonomy* might instead be felt as a regrettable form of absence, or loss. From this competing perspective, the absence of the kinds of necessity and determinacy that Williams rejects in the case of ethical thought is more accurately described as the absence of the *presupposition conditions* of ethical freedom rather than (as Fricker’s writes in the case of truthfulness) their “limiting conditions” (p. 20). Of course, if Williams is right, then the “heteronomous” form of freedom that Fricker describes in her lecture is the only kind of ethical freedom we can ever coherently aspire to. For those who

are inclined to follow Williams down that path, the fundamental question is then what we should make of this fact.

The language of “freedom” has historically been stretched to adorn an impressively wide range of philosophical outlooks: from attempts to vindicate the right of God to punish us eternally for our bodily sins in systematic theology; through secular attempts to vindicate the legitimacy of Government to “force us to be free”; to libertarian attempts to justify the consequences of commercial market transactions based on non-coerced, or voluntary, consent. My own sense from reading Williams is that he was generally suspicious of this kind of terminological acrobatics when offered in the service of philosophical theory. I therefore agree with Fricker’s warning towards the end of her lecture that we do well to keep an open mind about what Williams himself would have made of the classification of his meta-ethical outlook as a “philosophy of freedom”. Yet I also think we can be quite confident that he would have had at least some sympathy with certain aspects of this interpretation. As already mentioned, he clearly thought that the constraints of “the morality system” are ones that “we” would mainly be better off without. I also think it is possible to trace, in some of Williams’s later writings on politics (not extensively discussed in Fricker’s lecture) the contours of a cautious, or “fearful”, commitment to some kind of non-perfectionist liberalism. I therefore agree that it can be fruitful to explore the idea of Williams as a philosopher of freedom, so long as we handle the label with caution, and in the spirit in which it is intended.

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