

Bernard Williams: A Reminiscence

Jeff McMahan

Bernard Williams was my doctoral supervisor at Cambridge from 1979 to 1986. Derek Parfit had supervised my work toward the DPhil at Oxford for two terms, after which my funding there had run out. When I was offered a comparable level of funding at Cambridge, Parfit urged me to accept the position but to continue to spend most of my time in Oxford and to continue to work unofficially with him. He kindly arranged for my wife and me to have the top-floor flat in his parents' house in north Oxford. But Cambridge proved to be surprisingly generous. My college, St. John's, provided us with an entire house ideally located near the town center and, more gratifying still, Williams had agreed to be my supervisor. I divided my first year under his supervision between the flat in the Parfits' house and the house in Cambridge, but after that moved full time to Cambridge.

Although I was Williams's student for seven years, I was never more than that. I attended some of his lectures and classes and saw him occasionally at other events, but I did not know him socially and most of the many hours I spent in conversation with him were devoted to the discussion of ideas and arguments in my doctoral thesis on population ethics. It is one of my great regrets that I saw him again only a few times between my departure from Cambridge in 1986 and his death in 2003. What follows can therefore be no more than a superficial sketch, enlivened, I hope, by a few amusing anecdotes.

Williams was a strikingly handsome man. He had an energetic personality, though the energy was more of the mind than of the body. His movements were often rather languid, his posture somewhat slouching. He always wore a coat and tie, even during supervisions. He was slender and his clothes fit him loosely, so that they tended to hang from him. Among his most attractive features was a frequent smile that accented his dazzlingly brilliant conversation. It was manifest more in a subtle crinkling beside the right eye than in the movement of his sensuous lips. The combined force of his powerful mind, his colorful and witty use of language, and that utterly disarming smile was overwhelming and irresistible.

He exuded self-confidence and intellectual authority, though this was combined with great charm and geniality. He could thus seem simultaneously patrician and egalitarian. Though there was much of which he was disdainful, he never impressed me as arrogant. Arrogance would have been beneath him. His manner was generally one of buoyant gaiety; he delighted in the play of ideas and the bon mot. Yet this demeanor contrasted with the general character of his thought, which was skeptical, disenchanted, and pessimistic. Thus, when a friend of mine once asked him about his attitude to life, he replied that it was nicely articulated in the final stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" – a bleak vision indeed. His observations about philosophy and politics were occasionally tinged with contempt or aversion. He detested Mrs. Thatcher and her cabinet, with their crass and complacent managerial cast of mind.

Williams was, of course, famous for his lacerating remarks not only about ideas he thought false but also about people or acts that displeased him. His genius for the cleverly scathing put-down was irrepressible and would emerge on occasion even during my supervisions with him. I recall, for example, his saying of one prominent philosopher that his “politeness is acquired.” Another he described as “a robot cleverly disguised as a human being,” and I also recall his referring to a rather aggressive ancient philosopher as a “Stagirite gorilla.” I wish I could report that his targets were always well chosen, but some were people I greatly admire. Despite his general liberality, there were a few matters on which his views were surprisingly conventional. He was, for example, shocked by the suggestion that a permissive view about abortion might imply the occasional permissibility of infanticide, and he tended to be dismissive of vegetarianism and other manifestations of moral concern for animals. Philosophers writing on such issues therefore tended to elicit his derision. Many years later, when he was teaching at Berkeley and I gave a talk there on a topic related to these issues, I was not spared, though it was clear that his humor at my expense was intended in a friendly way and I endeavored, unsuccessfully of course, to give as good as I got.

While Williams’s remarks about vegetarians and animal activists were always disparaging, I was always too intimidated by him to challenge them. So while I was his student, I never discovered what his reasons were for thinking that there was nothing seriously wrong in practices involving the harming and killing of animals. But I assumed that they must be good reasons. I had become a vegetarian four years before I began the study of philosophy (and thus seven years before I met Williams). Hence, after I had begun to work in philosophy, I followed the emerging arguments about meat-eating and related practices and eventually came to believe that there were simply no good arguments in the literature for the permissibility of eating meat. This was perhaps the only area of active moral controversy in which it seemed to me that *all* the weight of the argument was on one side. Yet when I would express that view, I would qualify it by noting that Bernard Williams must have good arguments for the opposing view and that I wished I knew what they were. Shortly after he died I found out. For a friend sent me the text of a lecture he had delivered toward the end of his life called “The Human Prejudice,” which appeared a few years later in one of the several posthumously published collections of his essays, some previously unpublished. Though written with characteristic wit and flair, this essay was a profound disappointment (or, perhaps, given my own views, a great relief). In it he argues against vegetarians and other opponents of practices involving the harming and killing of animals by appealing to “thick” ethical concepts such as loyalty to and identity with other members of one’s kind – in this case, one’s species. This was disappointing in two respects: first, there was nothing new in it and, second, these concepts cannot plausibly justify the range of practices that Williams presumably wished to defend. One’s relations to others can indeed ground moral reasons of various sorts – for example, the moral reason I have to benefit my child, or to protect my child from harm, is stronger, and significantly stronger, than the reason I have to benefit or protect a stranger. Similarly, assuming that comembership in the human species is a significant special relation, the reason I have to benefit a radically cognitively impaired human being, or to protect that human being from harm, may be significantly stronger than my reason to benefit or protect an animal with comparable psychological

capacities. But there is an asymmetry here between benefiting and harming. It is absurd to suppose that if the person before me were not my child but a stranger, my reason not to kill him would be substantially weaker. Similarly, if the human being before me has psychological capacities and potentials comparable to those of an animal, my reason not to torment or kill him would not be significantly weaker if he were not in fact a member of my species.

Williams also fails to take account of the fact that the degree of partiality that may be licensed by a special relation varies with the objective moral significance of the relation. Thus, for example, while my reason to benefit or protect my child is significantly stronger than my reason to benefit or protect a stranger, my reason as an individual to benefit or protect a stranger who is a citizen of my state is not significantly stronger than my reason to provide a comparable benefit or protection for a stranger who is a citizen of a different state. Williams never asks where along the spectrum of special relations comembership in the human species lies, but it clearly belongs, along with comembership in the same race, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the parent-child relation. This is a second reason for thinking that Williams's arguments in "The Human Prejudice" are largely irrelevant to the permissibility of meat-eating and other practices that inflict great suffering on animals or deprive them of their lives. Hence, on the assumption that the arguments in this essay are the best Williams could do on behalf of those practices, I no longer feel compelled to qualify my claim that there are no plausible moral arguments that favor the permissibility of our current practice of eating animals.

Vegetarians had no special claim to Williams's satirical attentions. He was quite catholic in his distastes. Among philosophers, his particular *bête noir* was Richard Hare. Since Hare deployed arguments reminiscent of Kant to arrive at utilitarian conclusions, it is hardly surprising that he earned Williams's disdain – a disdain that was reciprocated, though not so emphatically. But the animus went deeper than the theoretical. Williams once remarked that his relation to Hare was Oedipal. Hare, who was notorious for giving no quarter to his philosophical adversaries, even if they were undergraduates, had been one of Williams's undergraduate tutors at Oxford. (At Oxford and Cambridge, the principal form of instruction at both the graduate and undergraduate levels is the one-on-one tutorial – or supervision, as it is called in Cambridge.) Doubtless his early exposure in tutorials to Hare's intransigent defense of views that Williams sought throughout his career to demolish was at times frustrating and even galling, but it also provided Williams and a few of his contemporaries with some good sport. On days when Hare was scheduled to teach a series of tutorials, these students would implement a scheme in which the first would go in prepared to challenge Hare's position on some issue and then, after the tutorial was over, report to the next what Hare's response had been. The second student would then go in prepared to attack that response, and this procedure was repeated until they ran out of participants in the rota.

Hare's unyielding certitude about the correctness of his own views made him a particular provocation to someone of Williams's skeptical temperament. On one occasion, when a graduate student sought to find a charitable explanation of Hare's stubborn immovability

in the suffering he had endured as a Japanese prisoner of war, Williams snapped back that “he was just the same before the war: that’s why the Japs couldn’t break him.”

Williams’s Oedipal tendencies persisted even beyond Hare’s death. Hare had chosen Peter Singer to deliver the eulogy at his funeral and had asked him to devote a bit of time to an exposition of the main elements of his philosophy. This Singer dutifully did, afterwards apologizing to those present who had no knowledge of philosophy for having done so. Williams, who had been one of Hare’s successors to the White’s Chair in Moral Philosophy at Oxford, was in attendance at the funeral. He leaned toward the person sitting next to him and commented, sotto voce, “It’s not those who *don’t* know about philosophy to whom he should apologize.”

I do not wish to give the impression that Williams was an ungenerous man. He was, on the contrary, extraordinarily kind and generous in many ways. Despite the great demands on his time as the Provost of King’s College, he met with me quite frequently for supervisions – a couple of hours every few weeks during term for seven years – for which I was the envy of the other philosophy graduates in Cambridge, most of whom were able to see their supervisors only at lengthy intervals and sometimes only after much pleading. This was quite important, as meetings with one’s supervisor constituted the only formal instruction for the doctorate. There were neither course requirements nor even courses for doctoral candidates. (It is perhaps worth emphasizing how extraordinarily fortunate I was in my graduate work. Not only was I able to meet with Williams whenever I had new work to show him but also I was able to continue to work closely, though informally, with Parfit, who urged me to continue to work with him after I left Oxford just as if he were my supervisor. I recall insisting that I pay him whatever he had been paid by Oxford when he had been my official supervisor. That turned out, to my astonishment, to be a mere £20 per term. Parfit was, if anything, even more generous with his time than Williams. Although I met with him less frequently than I did with Williams, our meetings would often continue for many hours. I particularly remember one occasion on which I met with him in Princeton when he was a visiting professor there. The supervision began at 11:00 am and continued without interruption – we ordered in pizza for dinner, which we ate while continuing to talk – until 1:00 am.)

Williams made every effort to enter into the spirit of my project and to be constructive in his comments, despite his antipathy to the goals and methods of my work. Indeed, the period in which I wrote my dissertation on population ethics, which was an exercise in systematic moral theory, coincided quite closely with the writing of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, his extended and formidable attack on the ambitions of systematic moral theory.

Some years later Williams came to the University of Illinois, where I was teaching, to give our annual philosophy public lecture. In my introduction to his lecture, I referred in passing to his generosity in giving so much of his time as my supervisor to the advancement a project of which he fundamentally disapproved. In the audience was a heckler who I later learned had been an aspiring academic but had become unhinged as a result of being unable to secure a teaching position. Although this man’s comments

during the question-and-answer period are inaudible on the tape I retain of the lecture, I recall that the gist of his harangue was that because the lecture contained no insights, the only explanation of Williams's having been invited to give it was that I was paying off a debt to the person who, despite my lack of merit, had managed to get me a degree and a job – that is, that Williams and I were engaged in a conspiracy to promote each other's careers. The tape does, however, contain Williams's response:

I don't wish to accept in an overly flattered manner all the nice things Jeff said about me, but one of the things he said was certainly true, which is that his conception of how to do the subject on which I was supervising his dissertation and mine are very different from one another. And a great deal of our time together consisted of his challenging my way of doing it and my challenging his way of doing it. So here's at least one example in which a graduate supervisor and a graduate pupil can in fact conduct human relations of an intellectual kind in a way that does not involve either of them making obeisance to the other. And the assumption therefore that the mere fact that he was courteous enough to introduce me this evening represents some corruption in the fabric of this university's polity seems to me mildly insulting to me, extremely insulting to him, very insulting to the institution, and totally untrue.

The tale of Williams's visit to Illinois does not, alas, end here. Later in the evening there was a party in his honor at which he and I got backed into a corner by a drunken professor from another department who regaled us with interminable rehearsals of Monty Python skits, performed with what was no doubt intended to be a British accent. I waited with alternating compassion and vindictiveness for the annihilating comment that would silence this sodden buffoon who was causing me to writhe in humiliation. But the axe never fell. Williams patiently feigned amusement, or at least a lack of revulsion, until the ordeal abated. He was, after all, a guest.

Williams did me another great kindness when he was my supervisor that I will always remember with gratitude. My move to Cambridge coincided roughly with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency of the United States. I, along with millions of others in Europe, became alarmed about the increasing threat of nuclear war and in 1980 I wrote a short book advocating unilateral nuclear disarmament by Britain. The publishers suggested that it would enhance the book's credibility to have an endorsement by Williams, who was a well known public figure in Britain at the time. Rather than writing only a blurb, he wrote a short preface. He surely knew that this was risky, as it involved giving his imprimatur to a book that not only was written by a mere second-year graduate student but also advocated a rather radical position. And indeed, as the reviews began to appear, he was predictably assailed by figures more supportive of the status quo. The most prominent and ill-tempered rapping on the knuckles was administered by Sir Michael Howard, then the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, in a long review in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In a review of 28 paragraphs covering five books on nuclear issues, Howard devoted the first ten paragraphs to a patronizing and polemical rebuttal of the first three

sentences of Williams's two-page preface. His opening comment, after quoting those sentences, was that "the interesting thing about the above three statements, the first inherently unprovable, the second a controversial half-truth, and the third simply false, is that they have not been made by some itinerant CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] hedge-preacher, but by one of our most eminent philosophers, Professor Bernard Williams." My recollection is that Williams was more amused than irritated.

Indeed, he was sufficiently unchastened by this experience that he later performed the same service for David Rodin's book, *War and Self-Defense*, which comes close to advocating a pacifist position on war. Before this Williams had also rescued Rodin's career in philosophy by agreeing to supervise him when his previous graduate supervisor at Oxford proved unwilling to pass him to the next stage of his graduate work. Rodin currently holds a position at Oxford and is a highly respected and productive philosopher, yet his career would have been aborted before it began had it not been for Williams's kindly intervention.

I will mention one final recollection and then be done. Williams moved in exalted circles. When his friend, Lord Victor Rothschild, was commissioned by the Thatcher government to report on the future of the Social Science Research Council, he consulted Williams for a recommendation of someone who could check the logic of the arguments and the soundness of the grammar in his report. Williams's recommendation of me for the job led to a number of meetings with Rothschild in his magnificent house in Cambridge, to which I was invariably summoned by a handwritten note delivered to my door by his liveried chauffeur. There I was served fine wine and treated to conversation almost as exhilarating as Williams's own. While I was helping Rothschild to revise his report, there was much speculation in the British press about what his recommendations would be, which added a touch of *frisson* to the otherwise insular life of a graduate student, since I possessed that knowledge. I recall Rothschild's telling me that, although the Thatcher government both wanted and expected him to recommend the abolition of the SSRC, he was of course going to do nothing of the sort. For this the Tories never forgave him.

Those were heady days for a bumpkin like me who had only recently emerged from a youth spent in the rural South. I will always be deeply grateful to Williams for his great kindness to me, for the model he provided of philosophical depth and integrity, and for the glimpse he gave me into the higher world – intellectual, political, and social – that he inhabited.