

Bernard Williams, Essays and Reviews 1959-2002. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, with a Foreword by Michael Wood. Pp. xvii + 435.

Bernard Williams, On Opera (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), with an Introduction by Michael Tanner. Pp. xix + 149.

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Bernard Williams died in June, 2003, at the age of only 73, after a long and sometimes painful struggle with multiple myeloma.¹ I still dream that he is alive – not least while working on this review. He had a quality of vivid aliveness that makes it next to impossible to concede that he is not here any longer. So I shall not concede, but shall continue to use the present tense. Being in Williams’s presence is at times painful because of that intensity of aliveness, which challenges the friend to something or other, and yet it was, and is, not terribly clear to what. To authenticity, I now think: to being and expressing oneself more courageously and clearly than one had done heretofore. Given the tendency of his brilliance to expand, filling the whole space around him, individuality was, nonetheless, and is, one of the most difficult things one could possibly attempt in his presence, and the attempt was, and is, never without struggle.

Williams’s last consecutive book, Truth and Truthfulness, appeared in 2002, before his death. Three posthumous collections of essays have preceded these two books, gathering his major articles on moral philosophy, political philosophy, and the history of philosophy. (Williams was a serious scholar of both ancient Greek literature and philosophy and Descartes’ rationalism.) These two collections, separated from one another by more than a decade, represent the last publications we may expect to see from him, so they seem unusually precious. Both exemplify to an unusually high degree a quality of willingness to put one’s whole intellectual and emotional character on the line

¹ For an overview of his career, see my “Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams Remembered,” The Boston Review 28 (Oct/Nov 2003), 35-9, <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR28.5/nussbaum.html>.

that always characterized his way of doing philosophy. “Writing about moral philosophy should be a hazardous business,” he wrote in the opening sentence of Morality, both because one reveals “the inadequacies of one’s own perceptions” more clearly than in other parts of philosophy and because one runs the risk of “misleading people about matters of importance.” But most writers on the subject, he continued, avoid the second danger by “refusing to write about anything of importance.” Williams never refuses. A fighter pilot for the RAF in the 1950’s [*corrected*], he once said he was unusually happy doing that job, and his pilot’s daring never left him. It was, however, a daring not only of the intellect but also of the heart, and these two volumes show us his deepest concerns and loves even more clearly than the others that preceded them.

Essays and Reviews contains seventy-one pieces, published over the entire span of Williams’s career. (We are told that this is but a selection.) It’s a dazzling intellectual feast. Frankly, I had no idea that most of these pieces existed – largely because I do not read the London Review of Books, his primary outlet. (I was not even aware that Williams had ever reviewed a book by me – until I came up on a longish piece on The Therapy of Desire (1994), number 65 in the volume.) Almost every major work of moral and political philosophy published in this period appears here: the major books of John Rawls, Thomas Nagel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Nozick, Derek Parfit, Charles Taylor, Iris Murdoch, and Richard Rorty; quite a few major books in other areas of philosophy (books, for example, by Hilary Putnam, Gilbert Ryle, Noam Chomsky); books in economics (Thomas Schelling, Amartya Sen); and many books by less famous authors. Along with the reviews the volume collects independent talks or essays on a variety of topics, from abortion to existentialism to the future of the humanities. (One important talk, on Wagner, appears in both volumes, presumably because it is of interest to many who do not otherwise care about opera.)

The reviews are enormously impressive for their penetration and insight. That is hardly surprising. In another way, however, they do surprise, showing little of the quick contemptuousness that sometimes characterized Williams in person, and revealing a great deal of patient labor, with which he is not so usually credited and which he seems to have taken pains to conceal. Conceal it or not, he has evidently worked very hard to read all of these books very carefully indeed, and he has really gotten them right. (That is my dominant impression of his review of my book too, and it is a beastly difficult historically technical book to read, much less to review.) Indeed we see the great importance for him of hard work and getting it right, in his entirely justified criticism of laziness and self-indulgence in Richard Rorty and other less famous authors. When, by contrast, the philosopher is really doing his or her work, Williams displays a surprising capacity for intellectual empathy. Thus one might have been fooled, without this volume, into thinking that he viewed John Rawls's achievement dismissively or without honor. It's far from his own historically immersed and politically realistic way of doing political philosophy, but he powerfully conveys the distinction of the achievement. One sees the same empathy at work in his assessments of Charles Taylor, whose Hegelian historicism was in some ways alien to Williams, and of the early work of Robert Nozick, whose libertarianism was certainly alien to Williams's Labor Party politics. And he has an unerring sense for when a philosopher has stopped doing serious work and is just pontificating: hence the view of Rorty, but also some equally apt criticisms of parts of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and the later Nozick, whose Philosophical Explanations gets a scathing attack, for vacuousness and silliness on the part of someone evidently capable of first-rate work. Because Williams has understood the books so well and worked so hard, almost none of the reviews is dated. In some cases (for example the marvelous piece on Sen's Inequality Reexamined) they can be unhesitatingly recommended as the best introduction to their subject.

In addition to these riches, there is also a group of more general essays that focus on the role of philosophy in human life. Williams had a famously adversarial relationship toward some leading philosophical movements of the modern era, particularly Utilitarianism and Kantianism. In Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, though focusing on those two targets, he doubts more generally the value of systematic abstract philosophical theorizing in ethics. One might then expect this volume to contain yet more debunking of the pretensions of philosophy to improve our lives. What a fascinating, and to me welcome, surprise to discover here (in essays produced very late in his life, in the era of Truth and Truthfulness) the same large and charitable view that is revealed, as well, in many of his reviews. Charity comes with a stiff price: for philosophy, he makes plain, is a worthwhile endeavor only if it accepts some tough challenges, which are usually not faced. Nonetheless, worthwhile it can be.

In a meditative piece revealingly called “On Hating and Despising Philosophy” (1996, number 68 in the volume), Williams says that philosophers have typically been motivated by two things: curiosity, and the desire to be helpful. He unhesitatingly gives priority to the former motive, saying that “the road to something helpful is not only hard, but unpredictable, and the motives that keep people moving down it don’t necessarily have to do with the desire to help. They include that other motive of philosophy, curiosity. In fact, the two motives cannot really be taken apart; the philosophy that is concerned to be helpful cannot be separated from philosophy that aims to help us understand.”

Above all, philosophy offers reflective analysis of our concepts, and, through these and a study of their history, insight into who “we” are. If philosophy is to contribute anything distinctive, however, all this must be carried out with clarity and rigor, and the aim of “getting it right” must “be in place.” (Here he offers a devastating critique of Richard Rorty’s model of philosophy as a “conversation.”) But he then cautions that

there is more than one way of embodying clarity and precision: philosophy must not be fooled into supposing that the only form in which these virtues can be delivered is that of natural science. In natural science, it may well be that style is merely decorative. (He tells here of a pseudo-scientific analytic philosopher who said to his co-author, “Let’s get it right first and you can put the style in afterwards.”) In good philosophy, by contrast, the imaginative and expressive elements are not just trimming. A moral philosopher, in particular, owes people a picture of life, and society, and the individual, and this picture must be “integrated with what he or she cares about. If a philosophical writer...does not even face the problem of how to express those concerns adequately, he or she will have failed to carry reflection far enough.” Imagination and expressive power are thus important philosophical virtues. (A related essay, reviewing Paul Berman’s book Intellectuals, develops this point further, arguing that the authority of intellectuals in society, insofar as they have any, derives from the ability of some people to connect the ideas involved in politics to other ideas, and to “bring those ideas imaginatively into the thoughts of those who are going to live under that politics.”)

While insisting on imagination and expression, Williams repudiates a certain sort of philosophical melodrama that links philosophy in an immediate way to the Holocaust or other big events of recent times. A style that is truthful about human beings will probably not be melodramatic in this way, he urges, since melodrama makes connections that are too obvious, and too little work is being done at a deeper level. Melodramatic philosophers have probably made the fatal error of putting helpfulness first, and getting it right second. On account of that fatal error, “nothing...will be helpful or enlightening.” He concludes with a sentence that should give pause to Williams’s more facile admirers, who, inspired, perhaps, by his more Nietzschean moments, see him as a devastating critic of analytic philosophy:

If there could be what serious philosophers dream of, a philosophy at once thoroughly truthful and honestly helpful, it would still be hard, unaccommodating and unobvious. For those reasons, it would doubtless be disliked by those who dislike philosophy as it is.

In a companion piece entitled, “Why Philosophy Needs History” (2002, number 71 in the volume), he fleshes out this picture of a truly helpful philosophy. Philosophy begins from the fact that we do not understand ourselves well enough. Its methods involve reflecting on our concepts, and in doing that we must begin from where we are. But then we must also ask who “we” are, and what aspects of our concepts are shaped by a specific cultural history. Sometimes other cultures have related ideas, and we can arrive at a common core, differently shaped by different cultures. And sometimes this common core can be shown to have value for life. Using Nietzsche’s idea of genealogy, but in a more positive spirit than Nietzsche’s, Williams says that we may find, after such an inquiry, that our concepts have a “vindicatory genealogy”: meaning that there is a set of purposes, valuable in human life, that they will be shown to advance. But in order to find out whether such a vindicatory genealogy is available, the philosopher must do not simply the history of philosophy, but also real history.

At this point, Williams again mentions the lure of pseudo-science. One way to think one is doing history is to turn to the comforting theories of evolutionary psychology, which reduce human social complexities to what can be explained by natural selection. As he points out, this reductive technique will take us only so far: it might show us why music became a part of human life, for example, but it won’t tell us much about any particular work of music: why, for example, Beethoven’s string quartets were produced and why they matter. Only history and anthropology will tell us, that, and in general only these disciplines will reveal how much in culture is explained by natural selection.

In a brief essay, Williams does not make this critique of evolutionary psychology altogether clear. It is really (as he elsewhere shows more clearly) two distinct criticisms. First, evolutionary psychology is a pseudo-science because it is not good

science, not based on the careful sifting of real evidence that science demands (and Williams's Descartes book makes clear his enormous admiration for real scientific rigor). Second, this impoverished and unearned view of human history then claims to displace and make otiose the rich accounts of history, literature, and humanistic psychology. I think, with Williams, that even good science cannot displace the human sciences, because our lives are intelligible at several distinct levels, and even the best physics and biology do not tell us much about the concrete ethical and political choices we face; but it is important to observe that his critique has these two distinct prongs, each of which deserves more elaboration than either gets here.

Williams views pseudo-science as a real danger: "Deconstructionist deniers may not always read books very well, but at least they may encourage people to read books, and to understand the history from which those books came." Reductive science, by contrast, "does not encourage anyone to understand history at all." The loss of historical understanding, he repeatedly makes clear, would be devastating for our lives with one another, and for politics.

This same love for serious history animates his splendid defense of the humanities in higher education, "What Hope for the Humanities?" (1987, number 54 in the volume). Here Williams broadens his defense of philosophy to include the other humanistic disciplines, though philosophy still has a distinctive place. Although he speaks to a British audience, and Britain has (except in Scotland) no university liberal arts tradition, Williams (like John Stuart Mill in his Rector's Address in St. Andrews in 1867), makes a case for the serious university study of the humanities as crucial for anyone who is going to be a citizen. His case is above all based upon the contribution of history, when sifted and made intelligible by historically sensitive philosophy. Our political ideas, he says, and the way they work in actual politics, have historical roots. History, Literature, and Philosophy enable us to ask who we are and where we come

from, to reflect on that understanding, question it, and try to change things if we so judge. If an elite were going to run society and everyone else was going to follow the dictates of that elite, then only an elite would need that knowledge. But if we reject that top-down model of society, “then the conclusion is not only that it is vital that the Humanities should be pursued as on-going subjects but that access to them, and some kind of knowledge of them, are things that should be as widely spread as they can be.” Williams’s death, just at the time when the Humanities were getting the cold shoulder from both left and right in Britain, was a large loss for British public culture.

Williams was an intense opera lover, and opera was an important part of his life. He was often asked to write on the subject, even by the musicologist’s bible, the New Grove Dictionary, for which he wrote the lead entry on the genre. On Opera includes that magisterial offering, but also many more specific pieces on composers ranging from Mozart to Debussy. Williams is musically learned, but he has, above all, a deep emotional relationship with opera (is there any other reason to be an opera lover?). His friendships were often mediated by shared opera talk – hence a particularly fascinating essay about different ways of being opera lover, written in honor of his friend Isaiah Berlin. His widow Patricia disarmingly reports in her Preface that early in their acquaintance he invited her to go with him to a performance of Tristan -- and only later did she realize that it had been a kind of “test of our very new friendship.” In his philosophical work, Williams often speaks highly of the value of the emotions in life, but he is ultimately highly reticent about them, with a kind of British skittishness. So On Opera, in addition to giving us some of the best opera criticism around, also gives unique insight into Williams’s emotions and his views about the emotions. This is no accident, for he makes it plain that opera requires a particularly honest emotional engagement from its lover, and is, indeed, a challenging test of one’s emotional personality. The question what sort of

opera lover one is, supposing one is in fact an opera lover, is, as he says, indeed a taxing test of one's human perceptions. The essays repeatedly challenge readers to take stock of their own experiences, comparing them to his, and to reveal themselves as he reveals his own responses.

The essays offer many insights into specific operas and composers. Williams is wonderful on the brilliantly sadistic manipulateness of Puccini, the fatalism of Berg. He has huge admiration for Verdi's art and for his politics, but there's a sense in which he can't quite figure out what more to say: Verdi is somehow somewhat naively all there in his music, lacking self-conscious reflexiveness, and this leaves Williams, despite his admiration, feeling just a little distant.

Mozart is one of his great loves, and the essays on Figaro and Così fan tutte are superb, though in the latter case with limitations that I shall soon note. The essay on Don Giovanni is an odd piece. Williams sees keenly how crude, violent, and ultimately hollow Mozart's Don is; he notes that Mozart gives him no real aria, so he lacks all inner life. So Williams can't quite fall prey to the simplistic Romantic praise that has trailed that unworthy villain ever since the time of Kierkegaard, and that certain has little to do with Mozart's intentions, whatever Da Ponte may have been up to.² Still, he can't help feeling that the Don supplies an energy and vitality by comparison to which everything around him is pale. This is a very personal reaction (though many male critics have it), and one that tells us more about Williams's own longing for RAF adventure than about Mozart's nuanced attention to his three fascinating heroines. However, the reaction is of a piece with a type of existentialist romanticism that one encounters, as well, in some of the philosophical work.

² See my "Rape, Revenge, Love: The Don Giovanni Puzzle," program of the Lyric Opera of Chicago for Don Giovanni, fall 2014, pp. 34-37.

Above all, however, the test is Wagner. Williams tells us of his own overwhelming and oceanic emotional experiences as a lover of Wagner's operas, and especially of Tristan. His admiration for that work has an aesthetic dimension – he discusses valuably its odd use of temporality – but the connection is, above all, emotional. He speaks of audiences' "feelings of being drowned, ecstatic or immeasurably elated," and shortly thereafter concludes: "It has often been said that no-one but Wagner, at least among opera composers, can cause such extreme responses. In my own experience, it is certainly true."

Because he knows how divisive Wagner is, he grants that one can be a real opera lover without loving Wagner, but if he's to be a friend of any such person he needs to understand the reasons for that reaction or lack of reaction. Thus in the essay for Isaiah Berlin, who evidently adored Verdi and was lukewarm about Wagner, he meditates about the different types of opera lover. He clearly can't feel close to anyone who simply hates Wagner, whether for political or musical reasons. But Berlin was a close friend, and Bernard conjectures that Berlin's reasons for non-Wagnerism were not of this crude sort. Instead, he conjectures that Berlin reacted with a version of Stravinsky's reaction, distrusting Wagner out of a severe aesthetic demand for clarity of form and a mistrust of boundlessness. (He notes that Berlin, probably for related reasons, loved a lot of French opera that Williams himself was not so keen on.)

Thus Isaiah survives with friendship intact. But there is always a question to be answered, clearly, if one is a friend of Williams, loves opera, and yet would not pass what one might call the Tristan test. I never discussed this topic with him, fearing it would prove divisive. But I am forced to ask now: what sort of opera lover can I possibly be, given that, while I am a great opera lover, and while I do admire the Ring, which seems to me to rise into a realm of rich and full humanity not attained in Wagner's other operas, I find Tristan not wonderful at all, but tedious and adolescent?

My reasons are not Stravinsky's, plainly. They are not about form, but about human perceptions. The unavoidable fact is that for me, the vision of love and sexuality on offer in Tristan, the vision that inundates and delights Williams, seems hollow, narcissistic and childish, all waves of ineffable feeling and no real people with their quirks and wonderful idiosyncrasies. Certainly there are no real bodies, and (a related phenomenon) certainly there is no humor. The opera seems to me the performance of a genius adolescent, and I find that boring. But there can be no doubt: Williams loves such Titanic narcissism. In his writings in general one finds an intense fascination with heroes who just surge ahead to meet their fate, without thinking a great deal about other particular people: thus the fascination with the persona of Don Giovanni, and, in the book Moral Luck, with the career of Paul Gauguin, who abandoned his family, without an inner struggle, to pursue his artistic calling. Williams has at least some ambivalence about the Don; yet he remains all too fascinated. I feel no such ambivalence. Indeed, I think (and have argued) that the emotional center of the opera is not the Don at all, but the three women, each much more interesting than that sociopathic cipher, and each of whom displays, as the Don does not, genuine insight into love. Perhaps because Williams was himself such an emotionally controlled and morally refined person, he found Faustian figures energizing. I, by contrast, find them tedious – unless, as in Don Giovanni, they are occasions for revealing the depth of perception of others.

Williams's marvelous essay on Mozart's Così fan tutte shows our difference as opera lovers especially keenly. His general analysis is fully convincing: the discomfort the opera elicits from its listeners derives not from its apparent cynicism about love, but, instead, from the real feeling that the lovers express in the second act -- and then the necessary confinement of those real feelings by tidy convention at the end. After we see what love can be for these people with a truly chosen partner, it is painful to see them return to the tidy arranged world. What the work's "cynicism consists in is...the

idea that emotions are indeed deep, indeed based in reality, but the world will go on as though they were not, and the social order, which looks to things other than those emotional forces, will win out.” Yes.

At this point, however, Williams and I part company, and I show how badly I fail the Tristan test. For the moment in all opera that most unfailingly makes me weep for sheer joy at the precariousness and lovability of the world is Dorabella and Guglielmo’s Act II duet “Il core vi dono.” He gives her, and she accepts, a heart-shaped locket as a token of love, and they then joke that the heart that was in one breast is now beating in the other’s: his heart (the locket) is now on her breast, and (she says) hers has now gone over there and is beating in his. The music first expresses tender playful alternation, and then, with the delicate staccatos of the line “E batti così,” (“And beats just so”), they are suddenly together. That’s where I cry, even if I’m driving 70 mph on some desolate Midwestern highway. “O cambio felice,” “O happy exchange.” Dorabella has already said that she chooses Guglielmo because he seems more playful – and one is painfully aware that Ferrando, her original fiancé, was therefore utterly wrong for her, since he is all lofty sentiment and no play. And now, with Guglielmo, she suddenly finds what she wanted all along: in the intimacy of joking and play she finds love’s reality, as the hearts change places and then somehow beat in harmony, though from the opposite place.

That’s about as far from Tristan as one can travel in the opera world, and I find it almost unbearably wonderful. Williams, however, speaks dismissively of these two lovers, thinking them pretty low-level; for him, the real emotion lies with Fiordiligi’s soaring love for Ferrando. Now I have no objection to “Fra gli amplessi,” which is really very fine, although I am not utterly entranced by it. But it’s not hard to trace a path from that aria to Tristan’s world of surging desire without loving particularity -- while it

is my pair who are heading in a totally different and, to me, much more interesting direction.

So I am an opera lover who just has a very different sense of what love and sexuality are about, and there is nothing one can say but that.

Perhaps one can in fact say one more thing. Williams correctly locates Wagner's anti-Semitism not in this or that character, but in the dire Titanic repudiation of normal politics and, really, of mundane life, that he finds in much of Wagner's music. I think this is right, and that one can find in my happy pair exactly what Wagner so loathed in the Jews: earthiness, joking about sublime matters, a repudiation of the whole idea of the heroic, in favor of a love of the earth and the human body. And because this bodily love is depicted not with cynicism, as it might be by Rossini, and not with manipulative sadism, as it might be by Puccini, but with the greatest tenderness and depth, these Mozartean passages challenge Wagner at the deepest level of the human heart – on behalf, I want to say, of the Jews, although I'm sure Mozart would have been astonished by the comparison. In this respect, Williams's relation to Wagner is, for a Jew by choice like me, a little too close for comfort.

The great puzzle for me is that the Williams who wrote these two books, like the Williams I knew as a friend, is not Wagnerian at all, but much more Mozartean. Like these books, he is full of quick delight, and what makes him fascinating as a man is his combination of utter aliveness with joy, fun, and keenness of perception. (He often remarked with real pride that Isaiah Berlin had pronounced him an "honorary Jew," and I actually think he meant by this a lot of the same things that I would mean by it.) And yet he keeps running after lesser men – the Don, Gauguin, Tristan -- as if he wants to be that sort of Titanic hero. Which would be much less than what he was, and what, in these books and in his most remarkable life and work, he is.

