

**SYLLABUS for *Bernard Williams' Ethical Philosophy* (59222), Room 7395**  
Miranda Fricker Spring 2019; Tuesday 2.00-4.00 Room 7395

Office hours: I'm generally free after class, and/or please do email me to fix a time.

**Requirements and Assessment:**

(i) Come to class having read at least the two asterisked readings and having made notes on them so that you can participate actively in class.

(ii) Please bring these readings to class with your notes so we can refer to the texts by page numbers in our discussions.

(iii) Each student taking the course for credit must be ready to do a 10-minute presentation on a reading.

(iv) For credit:

Write a 1-2 page plan (mainly bullet points) for your term paper, including bibliography, and email it to me **DEADLINE midnight Monday 15<sup>th</sup> April** so we can fix a brief one-to-one discussion of it to help ensure you have a good basis and argumentative structure for your term paper, due nearly four weeks later.

(v) For credit:

Write a **Term paper 5500-6000 max words** (incl. any notes, but excl. bibliography, which should be (Name, Date) style with the complete list of references at the end). Please keep footnotes to an absolute minimum. Do NOT exceed the word limit or you may be marked down. **DEADLINE**: email the finished paper to me before **midnight Friday May 10<sup>th</sup>** (i.e. the end of the week before our last seminar). If you are ready earlier, so much the better!

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the course students will have a good understanding of the main themes in the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams, one of the leading moral philosophers of his generation. These themes range across normative ethics and meta-ethics, including: the nature of practical reasons and their relation to motivation; critique of utilitarianism; critique of Kantianism; the method of genealogical explanation in ethics; ethical cognitivism; relativism; moral luck; and the meaning of life in the context of mortality.

All students will give at least one 10-minute presentation to class, with handout, and through their participation in discussions they will develop their skills of constructive contribution to philosophical conversation.

Some key books [in dropbox]:

--1972 *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

-- 1973 *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) with J. C. C. Smart ('For') and Williams ('Against')

- 1973 *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- 1981 *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- 1985 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press)
- 1993 *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- 1995 *Making Sense of Humanity and other philosophical papers 1982-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- 2002 *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press)
- 2005 *In The Beginning Was The Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press)
- 2006 *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press)

**Week 1 (Jan 29th): Practical reasons** [readings circulated by email]

- \* Bernard Williams ‘Internal and External Reasons’ in *Moral Luck*
- \* John McDowell ‘Might there be external reasons?’ in *World, Mind and Ethics* (and see Williams’ ‘Reply’)
- Kate Manne ‘Internalism About Reasons: Sad But True?’ *Philosophical Studies* 167: 89-117 (2014)
- Isaiah Berlin ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ [re historical pluralism of value]

**Week 2 (Feb 5<sup>th</sup>): Internal reasons, proleptic blame, and ‘steadying the mind’**

- \* Bernard Williams ‘Internal reasons and the obscurity of blame’ in *Making Sense of Humanity*
- \* Bernard Williams ch. 8 *Truth and Truthfulness* esp. sections 3-4 on ‘steadying the mind’
- Bernard Williams ‘Values, Reasons and the Theory of Persuasion’ in *Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline*
- Benjamin Bagley ‘Properly Proleptic Blame’ (2017) *Ethics* 127: 852-82

More on prolepsis for those interested:

Miranda Fricker (2014) 'What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation' *Noûs* 50 (1): 165-183

Agnes Callard (2016) 'Proleptic Reasons', *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* II, ed. Schafer-Landau; version of ch. 2 of her book *Aspiration—The agency of becoming*

Feb 12th – NO CLASSES

### **Week 3 (Feb 19<sup>th</sup>): The 'Relativism of Distance'**

\* Bernard Williams 'The truth in relativism' in *Moral Luck*

\* Bernard Williams 'Relativism and Reflection' ch. 9 *Ethics and The Limits of Philosophy*

Miranda Fricker 'The Relativism of Blame and Williams's Relativism of Distance', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*

Bernard Williams 'Human Rights and Relativism' in *In the Beginning Was the Deed*

### **Week 4 (Feb 26<sup>th</sup>): Critique of Utilitarianism**

\* Bernard Williams 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-indulgence' in *Moral Luck*

\* Peter Railton 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13.2 (1984): 134-171

Daniel Markovits 'The Architecture of Integrity' in *Reading Bernard Williams* ed. Daniel Callcut

Bernard Williams Sections 1-5 in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*

Martin Hollis 'The Shape of a Life' in Altham & Harrison eds. *World, Mind, and Ethics* and see Williams Reply at the back, 'Integrity' (pp. 210-16), also the next, 'Style' is relevant.

### **Week 5 (Mar 5<sup>th</sup>): Critique of the 'morality system'**

\* Bernard Williams 'Morality, the Peculiar Institution' ch.10 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

\* Charles Taylor ‘A Most Peculiar Institution’ in *World, Mind, and Ethics* eds. Altham & Harrison

Robert B. Loudon ‘The Critique of the Morality System’ in Alan Thomas ed. *Bernard Williams*

Bernard Williams ‘Foundations: Practical Reason’ ch. 4 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

### **Week 6 (Mar 12<sup>th</sup>): Moral Luck and ‘agent-regret’**

\* Bernard Williams ‘Moral Luck’ in *Moral Luck* **and** ‘Moral Luck: A Postscript’ essay 21 in *Making sense of humanity*

\* Susan Wolf ‘The Moral of Moral Luck’ *Philosophic Exchange* 31/1 (2013)

David Enoch ‘Being Responsible, Taking responsibility, and Penumbral Agency’ in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* eds. Ulrike Heuer & Gerald Lang

David Sussman ‘Is Agent-regret Rational?’ *Ethics* 128 (July 2018); 788-808

Jake Wojtowicz ‘Bernard Williams on Regarding One’s Own Action Purely Externally’ *Journal of the APA* (2018)

Thomas Nagel ‘Moral Luck’ in his *Mortal Questions* [originally a reply to Williams’ paper]

Bernard Williams ‘Recognizing Responsibility’ ch. 3 in *Shame and Necessity* [esp re Oedipus]

### **Week 7 (Mar 19<sup>th</sup>): ‘Ought’ and Practical necessity**

\* Bernard Williams ‘Practical Necessity’ in *Moral Luck*

\* David Velleman ‘The Voice of Conscience’ in *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (2006)

Bernard Williams ‘Moral Incapacity’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 93/1 (1993); 59-70

John Broome ‘Williams on *Ought*’ in Heuer and Lang eds. *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*

For general background (and a classic paper everyone should know):

Elizabeth Anscombe ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’

**Week 8 (Mar 26<sup>th</sup>): ‘One thought too many’?—and Williams’ Anti-theory**

\* Bernard Williams 'Persons, Character and Morality' in *Moral Luck*

\* Susan Wolf "'One Thought Too Many": Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment' in Heuer and Lang eds. *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*

Brad Hooker 'Theory versus Anti-theory in Ethics' in Heuer and Lang eds. op.cit.

Timothy Chappell [Sophie Grace Chappell] 'Ethics Beyond Moral Theory', *Philosophical Investigations* 32.3 (2009): 206-43

### **Week 9 (Apr 2<sup>nd</sup>): Shame and Guilt**

\* Bernard Williams 'Shame and Autonomy', ch. 4 in *Shame and Necessity*

\* Michael Stocker 'Shame, Guilt, and Pathological Guilt' in Thomas ed.

Raimond Gaita 'Remorse and Its Lessons' ch. 4 *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (1991)

David Velleman 'Don't worry, feel guilty' in *Self to Self: Selected Essays* (2006)

An early precedent to this literature:

Gabrielle Taylor *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (1987)

### **Week 10 (Apr 9<sup>th</sup>): Ethical Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge and the 'Absolute Conception'**

\* Bernard Williams 'Knowledge, Science, Convergence' ch. 8 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

\* Nick Jardine 'Science, Ethics and Objectivity' in *World, Mind, and Ethics*

Adrian Moore 'Realism and the Absolute Conception' in Alan Thomas ed. *Bernard Williams*

Bernard Williams 'Ethics and the Fabric of the World' in *Making Sense of Humanity*

For background:

J. L. Mackie 'The Subjectivity of Values' ch. 1 of *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*

**N.B. DEADLINE for term paper plans: midnight Monday 15<sup>th</sup> April**

**Week 11 (Apr 16<sup>th</sup>): Ethical Truths (cognitivism), ‘Thick Concepts’, and ‘ethical confidence’**

\* Bernard Williams ‘Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?’ essay 17 in *Making Sense of Humanity*

\* Sophie Grace Chappell (2013) ‘There are no thin concepts’, in S. Kirchin ed. *Thick Concepts*. [Formerly published as Tim Chappell.]

Peter Goldie ‘Thick concepts and emotion’ in *Reading Bernard Williams* ed. Daniel Callcut

Miranda Fricker (2000) ‘Confidence and Irony’ in E. Harcourt ed. *Morality Reflection and Ideology*

More background re ethical concepts having robust standards of correctness (Foot) and cognitivism more generally (Wiggins), and ‘thick’ concepts generally (Kirchin):

Philippa Foot (1958) ‘Moral Arguments’ *MIND* 67: 502-13;  
useful extracted reprint in Mary Warnock ed. (1996) *Women Philosophers* pp. 225-37

David Wiggins ‘Moral Cognitivism, Moral Relativism, and Motivating Moral Beliefs’  
*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 91; 61-85

Simon Kirchin Introduction to *Thick Concepts* ed. Kirchin (2013)

[Spring Break]

**Week 12 (Apr 30<sup>th</sup>): State of Nature Genealogy--Truthfulness**

\* Bernard Williams chs. 1—3 of *Truth and Truthfulness*

\* Matthieu Queloz ‘Williams’s Pragmatic Genealogy and Self-effacing Functionality’,  
*Philosophers’ Imprint* (forthcoming)

Edward Craig ‘Genealogies and the State of Nature’, essay 7 in Alan Thomas ed. *Bernard Williams*

Martin Kusch and Robin McKenna ‘The Genealogical Method in Epistemology’ forthcoming  
*Synthese*

### **Week 13 (May 7<sup>th</sup>): Philosophy as a Humanity**

\* Bernard Williams 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' essay 16 in *Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline*

\* John McDowell 'Two Sorts of Naturalism' in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (2001)

Bernard Williams 'What Might Philosophy Become?' essay 17 (posthumously published) op.cit.

Bernard Williams Postscript from *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

**N. B. DEADLINE for term papers: midnight Friday May 10th**

### **Week 14 (May 14<sup>th</sup>): Meaningful mortal life**

\* Bernard Williams 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the tedium of immortality' essay 6 in *Problems of the Self* (1973)

\* Adrian Moore 'Williams, Nietzsche, and the Meaninglessness of Immortality', *Mind* 115 (2006): 311-330

Lisa Bortolotti and Yujin Nagasawa 'Immortality without Boredom', *Ratio* XXII.3 (2009): 261-277

Sophie Grace Chappell [formerly published as 'Tim Chappell'] 'Infinity Goes up on Trial: Must Eternal Life be Boring?' *The European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2009): 30-44

Thomas Nagel 'Death' in *The View From Nowhere* (1986)

For your interest -- some notable short pieces:

John McDowell's Critical Notice of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* for *Mind* 95 (1986); 377-386

Thomas Nagel's review of *Truth and Truthfulness* for *The New Republic*, 21<sup>st</sup> Oct 2002: 37-39

You might also enjoy this recent piece by Paul Russell in the *Times Literary Supplement* (with thanks to Elli Fetterolf for sending!) <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/bernard-williams-ethics-human-point-view/>

And here is reflection piece from 2007 (Williams died in 2003) written by Simon Blackburn in *The New Republic*

<https://newrepublic.com/article/64787/no-easy-answers>

also here <http://www2.phil.cam.ac.uk/~swb24/reviews/Williams.htm>

And this web page compiling many readings and resources, managed by Paul Russell:

<https://sites.google.com/view/bernardwilliamslifeworks/home>

A lecture critique-ing Utilitarianism which he recorded for the Open University (1986)

<https://www.open.ac.uk/library/digital-archive/program/video:FOUA228W>

Lastly, here were three important topics in Williams' thinking that I couldn't find space for:

### **Critique of Human Nature as a Foundation for Ethics**

Bernard Williams 'Foundations: Well-being' ch. 3 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*  
Martha Nussbaum 'Aristotle on human nature and the foundations of ethics' in Altham & Harrison eds. *World, Mind, and Ethics*

### **The voluntary—an 'essentially superficial' idea**

Bernard Williams 'Voluntary acts and responsible agents' in *Making Sense of Humanity*  
Bernard Williams 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology' in *Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline*  
Bernard Williams 'Recognizing Responsibility' ch. 3 in *Shame and Necessity*

### **Sincerity and Accuracy combined in history as a virtue of truthfulness**

Bernard Williams chapters 4—6 of *Truth and Truthfulness*  
Bernard Williams 'Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception' essay 13 in *In the Beginning Was the Deed*

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