

Fricker Tanner Lectures 5-7 April 2027

“D’ou venons nous?...”: Origins in the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams

These lectures will explore origins in Williams ethical philosophy, in two related senses of ‘origin’. The first is the sense germane to the interpretive enterprise of tracing a thinker’s personal intellectual trajectory back to starting conceptions which can fruitfully be represented as guiding it throughout. In this regard, the thesis advanced in the first lecture will be that the ethical sensibility to which Williams’ 1993 book, *Shame and Necessity*, is a complex tribute—that of ancient Greek culture—is key to understanding much of the rest of Williams’ work in moral philosophy, both before and after 1993. For this reason, I find his work rewards a non-chronological reading.

The second sense of ‘origin’ to be explored is a distinctively theoretical one—the idea of an origin that is at work in State of Nature methodology. This kind of origin is normally regarded as quite at odds with a historical genealogical method, and yet in his 2002 book *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams combined the two into a single integrated enquiry. The thesis of this second lecture will be that this peculiar combination of methods reflects Williams’ conception of philosophy’s relation to history quite generally. According to that conception, our philosophical thought can, and should, identify origins in minimal yet somewhat determinative necessities of human social life that are discernible from the armchair; but, if it is not to exclude itself from relevance by settling into a permanent sedentary posture, philosophy must soon stand up to ‘mix’ itself with the contingencies of history.

Commentators:

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