***Free Will & the Tragic Predicament:***

***Making Sense of Williams***

*When the ancients speak. They do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us. …. They can tell us not just who we are, but who we are not: they can denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves. I believe that they can do this for our ideas of human agency, responsibility, regret, and necessity, among others.*

Bernard Williams- *Shame and Necessity*

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# [Under submission to *Agency, Fate and Luck: Themes from Bernard Williams*, editors Andras Szigeti & Matthew Talbert]

I. *Against the Grain*

The discussion in this paper aims to make better sense of free will and moral responsibility by way of making sense of Bernard Williams’ significant and substantial contribution to this subject. However, interpreting Williams presents the reader with some challenges. First, Williams’ contributions are scattered and dispersed over a number of papers and books that were published over a period of nearly four decades. Moreover, throughout this period his views developed and evolved and there were significant shifts in both his methods and his concerns. Finally, Williams’ style can, in places, present further obstacles to securing a clear and accurate understanding of his core aims and commitments. In general, he wrote in a compressed and elusive manner, a feature that became more pronounced in his later writings. For all these reasons it is no easy or simple task to provide an account of Williams’ views on this subject and of their relevance to the contemporary debate.

Apart from the interpretive challenges already mentioned, there is something of an irony about Williams’ place or standing in the contemporary free will debate that should also be noted. Williams is, without doubt, one of the most influential and prominent figures in late twentieth century ethics and his views on free will, agency, and responsibility lie at the heart of much of what he has to say on this subject. Throughout the period that he was working (the last few decades of the twentieth century) the free will debate enjoyed a surge of activity and innovation. In these circumstances, we might expect that Williams would be widely recognized as a central figure in the contemporary free will debate and that, on his side, he was fully engaged with the main controversies and debates at stake. In fact, however, on both sides of this divide, there is what we might describe as a state of mutual neglect and disregard. The most prominent contributions to the contemporary debate, right up to the present, rarely engage directly - much less in any detail - with Williams’ views. Similarly, and perhaps relatedly, Williams has little to say about the major figures and developments in the contemporary debate (i.e. right up to the time he died, in 2003). Although there is the occasional reference to this or that figure or work, for the most part, Williams operates and argues on his own terrain.

What is the explanation for this, otherwise puzzling, situation? One issue, already mentioned, is that Williams’ contributions are scattered and dispersed both over a number of works and over a considerable period of time. While a case may be made that *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) is his “pivotal” work, on the ground that it is his most ambitious and wide-ranging contribution and serves to unite and draw together his central concerns in both his earlier and later work, it is also true that *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* pays relatively light attention to issues of agency and responsibility.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is *Shame and Necessity* (1993) that provides his most detailed and developed discussion of these issues. *Shame and Necessity* is, nevertheless, far from a complete account of his views on this subject. The particular task we have in front of us, therefore, is to show how this work should be integrated with his other contributions on this subject (both earlier and later), such that we have a clear picture of the overall trajectory and evolution of Williams’ thought.

There are at least two further features of Williams’ philosophy that should also be considered here. First, as Williams’ philosophy developed and evolved he became increasingly disenchanted with and critical of analytic philosophy and its techniques – including its propensity to “scientism” and, related to this, its lack of historical sensitivity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Much of the contemporary philosophical literature on the free will problem manifests the attitudes and preferences of analytic philosophy that Williams objected to and found wanting. His own style steadily moved away from analytic methods and techniques that relied on “linear arguments” and ‘proof” (Williams, 2009: 81). The primary task of moral philosophy, as Williams emphasizes in several different contexts, is to “make sense” of our ethical lives (See, e.g., Williams, 1993: 163; Williams, 2006b: 182, 197; Williams, 1995a: Chap.7). The methods of analysis are, Williams argues, insufficient for this task, which requires a deeper engagement with both literature and history.[[3]](#footnote-3) Any approach and perspective of this kind cuts across the grain of the methods and style that dominates the contemporary free will debate.

There is another factor that is more intimately connected with Williams’ critique of the free will problem and that also helps to explain the disconnect between Williams and most of the leading figures in the current free will debate. As Williams sees it, much of this debate is largely misguided and those involved tend to “ask the wrong questions”.[[4]](#footnote-4) The reason for this, Williams suggests, is that most contemporary contributors to the free will debate, on all sides, continue to accept and embrace a conception of “morality” that he regards as deeply flawed. Those who remain committed to “morality” - or operate *within* it – are not only liable to find what Williams has to say on this subject is unwelcome, they may judge that what he has to say simply bypasses their own problems and interests. Williams has, however, no interest in providing a solution to their problems and issues as they are, he believes, based on illusions and “fantasies” that we should abandon. In the final analysis, Williams’ fundamental objective is to *vindicate* “moral responsibility” by way of freeing it from the distortions and misrepresentations that are imposed on it by “morality”. With these preliminaries out of the way, we may now turn to details of Williams’ critique.

II. *Morality and “the Blame System”*

One way of presenting Williams’ philosophy, and particularly his views on ethics, is that he is a “purely negative” thinker.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is certainly true that much of his early work is devoted to discrediting the illusions and distortions of “the morality system” and that this culminates in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), most notably its last chapter (Chap. 10). Williams grants that the exact nature of the morality system is elusive and difficult to pin down. Its core features can, nevertheless, be identified and described in terms of a nexus of concepts constructed around the ideas of obligation, voluntariness and blame. The most fundamental of these, according to Williams, is a special notion of “obligation” that aims to generate a sharp boundary between “moral” and “non-moral” considerations, giving the former overriding weight that uniquely serve as “practical necessities” for the agent. (Williams, 1985a: 7, 192-3, 208-09, 218). This sense of obligation is intimately connected with the other two key concepts of voluntariness and blame. Moral obligations, grounded in reasons that are available to all (i.e. to “the universal constituency”) have a “stringency” that attracts blame and retribution when the agent violates these requirements or demands (Williams, 1985a: 200).[[6]](#footnote-6) Blame, as the morality system understands it, relies on a form of voluntariness that reaches well beyond mere intentional action as guided by deliberation and the agent’s beliefs and desires (Williams, 1985a: 216-17; Williams, 1995a: 14-17). The “metaphysical fuel” needed for this is, Williams maintains, entirely illusionary and “something most of us do not believe in” (Williams, 2009: 203; Williams, 1995a: 17).

Despite these difficulties there remains, according to Williams, considerable pressure, coming from “the morality system”, to further refine and develop the idea of “the voluntary”, well beyond the mundane materials provided by intention, choice, deliberation, and related concepts of this kind – all of which are judged to be “not enough” or “not what we really need” (Williams, 1993: 40). What motivates this is an obscure demand for “limitless freedom” (Williams, 1985a: 63-65) or “total control” (Williams, 1994: 4), which is itself required to satisfy the aspirations for “ultimate justice” (Williams, 1985a: 43,216-7). The key additional item required, as part of this conceptual apparatus is “the will”, understood as an instrument of “total control” (Williams, 1993: 36, 40, 46).

This larger aim or aspiration is grounded in an image of *moral* agents as being somehow able to “transcend luck” (Williams, 1985a: 217; and also Williams, 1985a: 42-3; Williams, 1995a: 40-5, 72-5, 241-2).[[7]](#footnote-7) Metaphysical and moral aspirations of this kind, Williams argues, show that morality “puts too much pressure on the subject of the voluntary” (Williams, 1985a: 215; and also Williams, 1995a:16). This is, of course, a recurrent theme, running throughout Williams’ philosophy. The aspiration to insulate morality from luck is, Williams suggests, a “fantasy” that we need to discard if we are to secure a *truthful* understanding of our own (human) ethical predicament (Williams, 1981: 38-39; and also Williams, 1985a: 222; Williams, 1994: 4-5; Williams, 1995a: 19-20).[[8]](#footnote-8)

III. *Morality and the Free Will Problem*

How then does Williams’ critique of “morality” relate to “the free will problem”? According to Williams the free will problem has “two parts” (Williams, 2014:, 264; cp. Williams, 1995a: 16 and Williams, 1995c: 576-78):

(1) The first part concerns the question whether there can be genuine, intentional chosen action within a causal network that extends beyond the agent (i.e. does “strong naturalistic explanation” rule out genuine agency and actions?).[[9]](#footnote-9)

(2) The second part is the question concerning how these ideas of human agency relate to our moral notions and, in particular, to the notions of responsibility and blame.

It is Williams’ core claim that “the second question deserves a much more sceptical answer” that the first. The basic and familiar materials of agency (belief, intention, desire, choice, etc.) are, he claims, in good order and unthreatened by determinism or naturalism (Williams, 1995a: 6-8; Williams, 1985 a: 62-66; Williams, 1993: 30-34, 50, 55-56). We have what we need for ethical life, so why ask for anything more (Williams, 1993: 40; Williams, 1994: 4)? [[10]](#footnote-10) In contrast with this, when one turns to *our* (modern) conceptions of responsibility and blame, we find them to be less stable and in much poorer shape – particularly when contrasted with those of the ancient Greeks (Williams, 1993: 4,7-8, 11; Williams, 1994: 11-12; Williams, 1995a: 14-20; Williams, 1995c: 578).

Williams’ general critique of the “illusions” and “fantasies” involved in morality’s aspiration to “total control” may encourage the view that his scepticism is directed exclusively at libertarian metaphysics and that he is, therefore, making common cause with “reconcilers” and “the old compatibilists” – who share his scepticism about metaphysical freedom. Williams makes clear, however, that he also wants to distance himself from their complacency and confidence that our existing (common sense and metaphysically modest) understanding of the concepts of responsibility and blame are generally in good order. Compatibilists and “reconcilers” of this character are themselves, Williams maintains, closely “wedded” to the assumptions and aspirations of the morality system. (Williams, 1995a: 6-7, 19; Williams, 1995c: 578).[[11]](#footnote-11) Whereas philosophers of this cast of mind suppose that their “reconciliations” serve to “leave everything where it was” (Williams, 1985 a: 177; Williams, 1995a: 15f; Williams, 1986: 207), Williams argues that we need to (radically) “recast our ethical conceptions” (Williams, 1995a: 19; Williams, 1981: 39).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Although Williams is of the view that our modern conceptions of responsibility and blame are full of misconceptions and illusion, it would be incorrect to understand him as endorsing any form of unqualified scepticism. More specifically, Williams is not sceptical about (the concept of) responsibility itself but about the interpretations and demands placed upon it by the morality system. The various efforts of morality to “deepen” and “refine” the voluntary into something unrecognisable and unintelligible is what lands us with “the free will problem” and pushes us to the precipice of scepticism. It is a mistake, Williams suggests, “to suppose that the notion of the voluntary is a profound conception that is threatened only by some opposing and profound theory about the universe” – such as the claim that determinism is true (Williams, 1993: 67-68). It is these “metaphysical expectations” that generate the traditional free will problem.

Just as there is a “problem of evil” only for those who expect the world to be good, there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened. In truth, though it may be extended or contracted in various ways, it can hardly be deepened at all. What threatens it is the attempt to make it profound, and the effect of trying to deepen it is to put it beyond all recognition. (Williams, 1993: 68).

The “enormous temptation” to deepen the voluntary, as Williams makes clear, is itself, rooted in the ambition to “purify” morality and achieve a foundation upon which the allocation of blame and responsibility is “ultimately just” (Williams, 1985a: 216-7; Williams, 1994: 4-5). This project expresses an ideal that Williams sees as “in some ways like a religious conception” (Williams, 1985a: 215). While Williams finds aspects of this ideal to be both “moving” and effective in “producing some actual social justice”, it is, in the final analysis, the expression of a “deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life”. (Williams, 1985a: 218) As such, we are “better off without it.” (Williams, 1985a: 193).

IV. *Tragedy & Truthfulness: Williams’ “Historicist Turn”*

It is evident, on Williams’ analysis, that there is an intimate connection between “morality” and “the free will problem”. There is a free will problem for us – we “moderns” – because *we* are committed (in varying degrees) to the assumptions and aspirations of “morality”.[[13]](#footnote-13) This was not, however, a problem for the ancient Greeks, since they *rejected* these assumptions and aspiration (Williams, 1993: 3-4). Understanding the significance of the free will problem requires further thought about how we (moderns) stand in relation to the ancient Greeks, given that they are our “cultural ancestors” and “our view of them is intimately connected with our view of ourselves”. (Williams, 1993: 3). One proposed understanding of this relationship is that the Greeks’ view of agency and responsibility was primitive and crude and that this explains why they lacked the problem of free will – a fact that is taken to be unfavourable to them. This general perspective is described by Williams as “the progressive account” (Williams, 1993: 5-8). According to Williams, progressivism makes two fundamental theses:

1. The first is that the Greeks “lacked a *moral* notion of responsibility” (emphasis in original) and that our modern conceptions represent “a shift in our basic ethical conceptions” (Williams, 1993: 6-7).
2. The second claim, related to the first, is that this shift in ethical conceptions relating to agency and responsibility is indicative of the backward and more primitive condition of Greek culture, which has now been “replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions that define a more mature form of ethical experience” (Williams, 1993: 5).

It is a central concern of *Shame and Necessity* to argue for the converse of these claims and to discredit the progressivist account as a *myth*. (Williams, 1993: 5-7)[[14]](#footnote-14)

When we consider our contemporary situation from this perspective we should recognise that what is needed is not to “choose sides” among the rival parties in the ongoing free will debate, where we take our task to be tweaking and amending some preferred view. On the contrary, as already noted, what is needed is “ to *recast* our ethical conceptions” in a manner that allows them to stand up to critical reflection (Williams, 1995a: 19-20; Williams, 1995c: 578). In order to do this, Williams fundamentally changes his method and approach, taking what he describes as “a historicist turn” (Williams, 2009: 198). Instead of relying on “linear arguments and philosophical “proofs”, Williams suggests we will gain better insight through history and literature.[[15]](#footnote-15) We should pursue this task, more specifically, by means of thinking about tragedy and genealogy.

How can Greek tragedy help us understand our ethical concepts better or provide us with any insight? There is, of course, a significant gap or distance between us and the Greeks. Among other things, our world does not include beliefs about the supernatural around which Greek tragedy is structured (Williams, 1993: 16-17, 130-31). We are, nevertheless, not mere “tourists” in responding to tragedy:

The fact that we can honestly and not just as tourists respond to tragedies is almost enough in itself to show that ethically we have more in common with the audience of the tragedies than the progressivist story allows... What the tragedies demand is that we should look for analogies in our experience and our sense of the world to the necessities they express (Williams, 1993: 18-19).

When we listen to the ancients speak, Williams claims:

...they do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us... They can tell us just not who we are, but who we are not. They can denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves. I believe that they can do this for our ideas of human agency, responsibility, regret, and necessity, among others. (Williams, 1993: 19-20)

In taking this approach Williams makes clear that he follows closely in the footsteps of Nietzsche, who also set out to link together “the question of how we understand the Greeks and of how we understand ourselves” (Williams, 1993: 9-10).[[16]](#footnote-16)

According to Williams, what we learn from the Greeks is the following:

1. The first thing we learn, contrary to the progressivist account, is that we *share* the same basic elements in our concept of responsibility (Williams, 1993: 4, 7-8; Williams, 1994: 11-12). What we share, in particular, are the mundane conceptual elements involved in understanding human agency (i.e. belief, desire, intention, choice, etc.). (Williams, 1993: 30-34; 55-56). Although the Greeks, as we have noted, lacked a concept of “the will” they had more than adequate materials to make sense of their ethical life (Williams, 1993: 5,29,31,33-4,40,46,55-6). With regard to the missing element of the will, which is so central to both “progressivism” and “morality”, Williams claims that “the idea of it is the invention of bad philosophy” (Williams, 1993: 36). The ancient Greeks, therefore, are missing nothing that actually matters for an accurate and truthful self-understanding of human (ethical) life.
2. The first point leads on to Williams’ second point, which is that to the extent that our “basic ethical ideas” differ and diverge from those of the ancient Greeks, their conceptions were in many ways in “better condition” (Williams, 1993: 4,7-8; Williams, 2009: 203). Part of the explanation for this, Williams suggests, is that the Greeks lacked “our capacity for some form of self-deceit” and were more truthful than we moderns are. (Williams, 1993: 9-11, 95, 152,158; see also Williams, 1985a: 219). Echoing Nietzsche, Williams endorses the view that the Greeks were resistant to excessive forms of “reflectiveness, self-consciousness and inwardness” that they were better off without – revealing “their gift for being superficial out of profundity.” (Williams, 1993: 9-10, 68).
3. Finally, when we view ourselves through the Greeks and tragedy, we are made aware that our own ethical conceptions – especially as they relate to responsibility and blame – are “contingent” and “local”. This is something that “morality” is highly resistant to and reluctant to accept. It is, indeed, an essential feature of the progressivist myth, and the outlook of “morality” that it represents, to suppose that we moderns have progressed well beyond the Greeks and have now arrived at the one, unique and correct understanding of moral responsibility (Williams, 1993: 55-56). Not only is this not true, according to Williams, we have good reason to suppose that among the available alternatives, we can construct something more truthful and stable from the same materials that the ancient Greeks drew on. This is not, of course, to encourage any sort of absurd effort to “go back to their world” (Williams, 1993: 10-11 and also cp. Williams, 1985a: 55,179,182.265n.7; 7,11,159; Williams, 1986: 205). On the contrary, as Williams makes clear, the project involves exposing which of our ideas may be wrong in order to begin our task of recasting our ethical conceptions in light of such reflection – with a clear view to the future (Williams, 1993: 4; Williams, 1995a:19-20).

V. *Genealogy, Scepticism and Pessimism*

A significant aspect of Williams’ “historicist turn”, and the switch of methodological approach that this involves, is his increasing interest in “genealogy” (Williams, 2009: 198-99; also Williams, 1994: 5; Williams, 1995a: 72-4). Although Williams does not explicitly present *Shame and Necessity* as employing genealogical methods and techniques in the way that he does in *Truth and Truthfulness*, it is, nevertheless, reasonable to view his methodology in these broad terms. In an essay on Nietzsche, written around the same time (1993) Williams provides what could be considered as a methodological schema for his general project in *Shame and Necessity*:

A Nietzschean genealogy typically combines, in a way that analytical philosophy finds embarrassing, history, phenomenology, ‘realistic’ psychology, and conceptual interpretation. The historical stories, moreover, strikingly vary from one context to another ... Some are certainly less helpful than others. But the mere idea that we need such elements to work together is surely right. (Williams, 1995a: 75-76n.12)

He continues:

We need to understand what parts of our conceptual scheme are, in what degree, culturally local. We understand this best when we understand an actual human scheme that differs from ours in certain respects. One, very important, way of locating such a scheme is finding it in history, in particular in the history of our own scheme. In order to understand that other scheme, and to understand why there should be the difference between those people and ourselves, we need to understand it as a human scheme; this is to understand the differences in terms of similarities, which calls on psychological interpretation. (Williams, 1995a: 76n.12).

Williams goes on to summarize this approach by suggesting that “very roughly speaking ... a Nietzschean genealogy can be seen now as starting from Davidson plus history” (Williams, 1995a: 76n.12).[[17]](#footnote-17) This is an entirely apt description of his core approach in *Shame and Necessity*.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Genealogy, as Williams understands it, is “a narrative that tries to explain an outlook or a value by describing how it came about” (Williams, 2009: 210; Williams, 1994: 5; Williams, 2002:*,* Chap. 2). When we examine a concept or outlook in these terms our *confidence* in it may be strengthened or weakened.[[19]](#footnote-19) In saying this we may take genealogical reflection to be either “vindicatory” or “destructive” (Williams, 2009: 199-210; Williams, 2002:*,* 35-38). The question arises, therefore, is Williams’ genealogy of our concepts related responsibility vindicatory or destructive? In order to answer this question we need to distinguish three separate issues.

**(1)** We may, in the first place, direct this question more narrowly to the status or standing of our current (modern) ethical concepts. With respect to this issue Williams’ answer is clear and decisive: genealogy serves to discredit our contemporary self-image as it relates to agency and the associated attempt to “refine” or “deepen” the idea of the voluntary. In taking this view Williams more or less endorses and elaborates on Nietzsche’s genealogical critique (Williams, 1993: 9; see esp. Williams, 2014: 409-10; Williams, 1995a: Chap. 6, esp. 72-76; Williams, 1994: 4-5; Williams, 2009: 210). This dimension of Williams’ genealogical critique – which is narrowly targeted and focused on “morality” – is certainly destructive. However, this target, which is common to Nietzsche and Williams, is not, as Williams points out, “a universal human phenomenon, but a *particular historical formation*” (Williams, 2002a: 38 – my emphasis).[[20]](#footnote-20)

**(2)** The more interesting question is whether this implies a generally sceptical (destructive) attitude to the concept of responsibility understood in more universal terms (i.e. a total, unqualified scepticism)? Williams’ answer to this question is equally clear. He decisively *rejects* any unqualified or complete scepticism follows from this more narrow targeted scepticism. It is certainly true, of course, that the progressivist account encourages the more radical sceptical conclusion. Since, according to this account, there is “just one correct conception” which is the conception advanced and developed by “morality”, the whole edifice of (true) moral responsibility will collapse if we reject our modern conceptions of responsibility and blame.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is precisely Williams’ aim (and achievement), employing the resources of tragedy and the methods of genealogy, to show that we have no reason to accept this extreme sceptical conclusion – and that it is the assumptions of “morality” that encourage it. Contrary to the progressivist story, when we come to understand (properly) our position in relation to the ancient Greeks, as this concerns our concepts concerning agency, responsibility and blame, this understanding will serve to support a *vindicatory* view of these concepts.

The critical passage in relation to this matter appears in Williams’ chapter titled “Recognising Responsibility: (Williams, 1993: Chap. 3). Once he has established that we have “the basic conceptions of action for human life” (Williams, 1993:40), he proceeds to show that we can and must draw on these to frame any concept of responsibility and to navigate ethical life as we experience it. Williams identifies four basic “elements” of this concept (Williams, 1993: 55-56):

(i) There is the idea of someone bringing about “a bad state of affairs” through what they have done. Williams takes this causal element to be the *primary* element and argues that “the other issues can arise only in relation to the fact that some agent is the cause of what has come about.” (Williams, 1993:56).

(ii) The second element is the idea that the agent did or did not intend this state of affairs. One key point that Williams places emphasis on is that while the Greeks certainly understood this distinction they did not place the same weight on it that we do. In particular, the Greeks were of the view that we could be responsible for “bad results brought about unintentionally” (Williams, 1993: 33, 50-54; 63-64, 67-69; see also Williams, 1981: 27-29).[[22]](#footnote-22)

(iii) Another element is the question of whether or not the agent was in a “normal state of mind”. Being in an abnormal state of mind need not imply that the agent did not act intentionally but when the agent returns to his senses he cannot simply dissociate himself from the action, even though it did not flow from “his usual self” (Williams, 1993: 52-55;72-4).[[23]](#footnote-23)

(iv) Finally, there is the idea that in circumstances of these kinds it is the agent’s “business to make up” for what has come about through his conduct or actions. In the case of Ajax, who slaughters a flock of sheep while in this altered state of mind, he is driven to conclude that he “cannot live as someone who has done these things” (Williams, 1993: 73-74).

It is, Williams argues, these four basic elements that we *share* with the Greeks. With us, as with them, the notion of causing harm of some kind is primary. (Williams, 1993: 56-57). However, while these are the *universal* and *shared* materials of any concept of responsibility, this does not imply that we understand or interpret them the same way.

There is not, and there never could be, just one appropriate way of adjusting these [four elements] to one another - as we might put it, just one correct conception of responsibility. Quite apart from the differences between our practices and those of the Greeks, we ourselves, in various circumstances, need different conceptions of it... These [four elements] really are universal materials. *What we must not suppose is that they are always related to one another in the same way or, indeed, that there is one ideal way in which they should be related to one another* ... Above all, what we must not suppose is that we have evolved a definitely just and appropriate way of combining these materials – a way, for instance, called *the concept of moral responsibility*. We have not. (Williams, 1993: 55-56 – my emphasis)

It is evident that Williams’ immediate target here is the “progressivist” account and the assumptions and aspirations of “morality” associated with it. If we are looking for a model or predecessor for Williams’ pluralistic and vindicatory genealogy then we should turn, not to Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals (which is, as Williams notes, largely destructive), but to Hume’s similarly vindicatory genealogy of justice (Hume, 1739-40: 3.2). Although Williams does not draw this comparison directly in *Shame and Necessity*, his subsequent remarks about Hume in *Truth and Truthfulness* suggest that such a comparison would not be unwelcome. (William*s,* 2002:33).[[24]](#footnote-24)

**(3)** Another issue that is also of fundamental importance for Williams is that of *truthfulness* about our predicament. While pursuing this does not preclude a vindicatory picture of moral responsibility, it does not deliver “good news” (SP, 49, 52-54).[[25]](#footnote-25) On the contrary, a more truthful self-understanding may well generate some sense of “disenchantment” when we consider our situation in these terms (Williams, 2009: 200; Williams, 1994: 8,11-2). The closing passages of both *Shame and Necessity* and *Truth and Truthfulness* explore these issues, about which Williams has important things to say.[[26]](#footnote-26) He notes, in particular, that what we must come to recognize is that social reality, no less than supernatural forces, “can act to crush a worthwhile, significant character or project” and that this happens without any redeeming deeper, or hidden purpose or meaning behind it (Williams, 1993: 162-5; cp. SP, 54-9). As Williams suggests in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, the stance that we must take here is far from optimism. It is, rather, more akin to Nietzsche’s “pessimism of strength” (Williams, 1985a: 190; also 179).[[27]](#footnote-27)

What exactly, it may be asked, is the basis of the *pessimism* that is involved here? In general, pessimism is called forth or occasioned when something we value is threatened or on some way discredited. One account, that contrasts with Williams’ view, suggests the relevant source of pessimism here is *scepticism* about moral responsibility. A pessimism of this kind is based on the worry that our standing as free, responsible moral agents is somehow placed in doubt or jeopardized. To the extent that scepticism of this kind can be defeated or kept at bay, so to that extent pessimism can be avoided.[[28]](#footnote-28) Clearly this cannot be the basis of Williams’ pessimism since, as explained, he rejects any form of (global) scepticism that might support such a view. The source of pessimism that concerns Williams rests with *denying* scepticism. What is fundamental to Williams’ description of our ethical predicament is to show that the way in which we exercise and operate our moral and rational capacities is itself subject to fate and luck. It is these features of our human situation that Greek tragedy identifies and that (still) “speak to us”. The pessimism that concerns us here involves, therefore, recognizing that while we cannot, on one hand, deny or repudiate our standing as responsible moral agents acting in the world, we also cannot deny that there are forces and features of the world that we do not control that, nevertheless, substantially shape and condition our particular moral trajectories.[[29]](#footnote-29) The morality system, as Williams sees it, is highly resistant to accepting this fundamental truth about our human predicament and falls back on various forms of illusion and misrepresentation to evade it. It is the efforts of philosophers to vindicate morality’s fundamentally optimistic outlook that fuels much of the free will problem.[[30]](#footnote-30)

*VI. “Recasting” Responsibility and the Tragic Predicament*

The above vindicatory reading of Williams’ genealogy of responsibility, as based primarily on Williams’ discussion in *Shame and Necessity*, is entirely consistent with the position and arguments advanced and defended in his earlier contributions. Indeed, this vindicatory reading returns us to Williams’ key conclusions in both “Moral Luck” (1976) and “How free does the will need to be?” (1985). Two especially important conclusions can be summarized as follows:

(a) The first is that it is not Williams’ intention to simply defuse these issues relating to responsibility and “leave everything where it was”. Any sort of Wittgensteinian quietism is far removed from Williams’ orientation and intent. His most striking remarks along these lines appear in the final paragraphs of the two papers cited above (Williams, 1981: 39; Williams, 1995a: 19; and see also Williams, 1995a: 15-16). What is crucial in both these contexts is that the various “illusions” and “fantasies” involved are not the sole property of libertarian theories. On the contrary, Williams is pointed in his criticism of the “reconcilers” and “old compatibilists” who are also attached to many if not most of these faulty assumptions and aspirations (Williams, 1995a:6-7, 15-6,19-20; Williams, 1995c: 578; Williams, 1993: 214n42). Whatever final position Williams arrives at, it should not be understood as any form of comfortable or complacent compatibilism.[[31]](#footnote-31)

(b) Despite his misgivings about both libertarian and compatibilist alternatives Williams is equally clear that when it comes to our freedom as agents “we have quite enough of it to lead a significant ethical life in a truthful understanding of what that life involves” (Williams, 1995a: 19).

The will is as free as it needs to be. That does not mean, as libertarians would take it, that it is able to meet all the demands of the morality system... Nor does it mean that it is free enough to keep the morality system in adequate business, as reconcilers usually take it to mean. It means that if we are considering merely our freedom as agents... we have quite enough of it to lead a significant ethical life in truthful understanding of what it involves. A truthful ethical life is, and always has been, one that can include our best understanding of our psychological life, and we know that such an understanding is compatible with naturalistic explanation. (Williams, 1995a: 19-20)

What follows from this is that Williams *rejects* any form of *unqualified* or *global* scepticism about moral responsibility. What encourages scepticism of this kind, as Williams sees it, are the claims and aspirations of “morality” and its “progressivist” partner. It is their efforts to further “deepen” or “refine” the notion of the voluntary, with a view to securing “ultimate justice”, that take us to the precipice of scepticism (Williams, 1993: 67-8). In *Shame and Necessity* Williams presents a vindicatory genealogy that serves as an effective antidote to this tendency. Understood this way, this work contains the *constructive* dimension of Williams’ overall argument and analysis.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The interpretation of Williams provided here gives particular weight to his “historicist turn” and his use of tragedy as a means and method for understanding the contemporary free will problem. With this in mind, it may be asked if Williams provides us with a “solution” to the free will problem and, if so, to what extent he has carved an alternative position on this subject? One way of responding to the first part of this question is to say that Williams does not aim to “solve” the free will problem, since it is part of his diagnosis to show that the problem rests on false assumptions and misguided aspirations.[[33]](#footnote-33) When we dispense of “morality” and its metaphysical and ethical paraphernalia we *collapse* the free will problem rather than solve it. Solving the free will problem involves, on this view, respecting its own standards of “solution”, which in this case involves securing (or failing to secure) an account of moral responsibility that achieves the ends of “morality” (e.g. ultimate justice and luck free moral agency). It is part of the outlook of “morality” (and “progressivism”) to insist that this is “the one correct conception of responsibility” that is available to us. It is, as we have explained, crucial to Williams’ entire constructive project to show that *unqualified* scepticism about moral responsibility is itself rooted in these faulty and misguided assumptions. Looked at this way, scepticism is *the last gasp* of the morality system.

Having unmasked the illusions and fantasies of our current ethical ideas as they relate to agency and responsibility we are left with the task of “recasting our ethical conceptions” (Williams, 1995a:19). It is here, however, that Williams is especially insistent on the importance and value of historical consciousness and reflection. The role of our reflections about the Greeks and tragedy is precisely to show that in order to move forward, into the future, we need to first *look back* at where we have come from. The value of these “untimely” observations is that they provide us with alternatives and options that we might otherwise lack (Williams 1993: 4). What we discover, when we consider the Greeks, is their commitment to a “pessimism of strength” that rests on *rejecting scepticism*. It is this two-sided perspective on our ethical predicament that delivers a more truthful account of our human situation, one that will help us discard those illusions and fantasies that we are “better off” without. An account of this kind refuses to accept an optimism that insists that any form of responsible ethical life must be one that is immune to the influence of luck and fate – this being a basic requirement of “morality”. Scepticism itself is a product of this optimistic prejudice. This is the fundamental lesson that we can learn from the ancient Greeks and that Williams seeks to “recover” for us.[[34]](#footnote-34)

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*Free Will & The Tragic Predicament : Making Sense of Williams*

**ABSTRACT**:

The discussion in this paper aims to make better sense of free will and moral responsibility by way of making sense of Bernard Williams’ significant and substantial contribution to this subject. Williams’ fundamental objective is to vindicate moral responsibility by way of freeing it from the distortions and misrepresentations imposed on it by “the morality system”. What Williams rejects, in particular, are the efforts of “morality” to further “deepen” or “refine” the notion of the voluntary, with a view to securing “ultimate justice”. It is these aims and aspirations, he argues, that take us to the precipice of scepticism. In *Shame and Necessity* (1993) Williams advances a *vindicatory* genealogy that unmasks the “illusions” and “fantasies” of our current ethical ideas as they relate to agency and responsibility. What we are then left with is the task of “recasting our ethical conceptions” .

It is here that Williams is especially insistent on the importance and value of historical consciousness and reflection. The role of our reflections about the Greeks and tragedy is precisely to show that in order to move forward, into the future, we need to first look back at where we have come from. The value of these “untimely” observations is that they provide us with alternatives and options that we might otherwise lack. What we discover, when we consider the Greeks, is their commitment to a “pessimism of strength” that rests on *rejecting* scepticism. It is this two-sided perspective on our ethical predicament that delivers a more truthful account of our human situation, one that will help us discard those illusions and fantasies of "morality" that we are “better off” without. An account of this kind refuses to accept an optimism that insists that any form of responsible ethical life must be one that is immune to the influence of luck and fate. This is the fundamental lesson that we can learn from the ancient Greeks and that Williams seeks to “recover” for us.

Paul Russell

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1. For a more general survey and account of Williams’ ethical thought see Russell (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This attitudes appears early on in Williams’ work in his Preface to *Morality* (Williams, 1972: xvii). It is given sharper focus and expression in a number of his later papers, including “On Hating and Despising Philosophy” (1996), “What Might Philosophy Become?” (1997), “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” (2000). Perhaps Williams’ sharpest and most severe remarks about contemporary (analytic) philosophy are to be found in his 2002 interview with Kenneth Baker (Williams, 2002b) – although even here his criticisms are qualified and tempered. Nevertheless, more than once Williams states his view that a great deal of (contemporary) philosophy is “unhelpful, boring, sterile” [Williams, 2014: 367; Williams, 2006a: 204 ] – a flaw that he regards as closely bound up with the process of “professionalization”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One way of understanding Williams concerns here – particularly as manifest in his later work - is to say that the *methods* of philosophy have been too narrowly conceived in the analytic tradition and that for this reason philosophy has proved unhelpful in performing its key tasks. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “But we should remember that a work may be unimaginative not because it is badly argued but because it is arguing with the wrong people; not because it has missed an argument, but because it misses the historical and psychological point; not because it fails to be clever, but because it is stupid.” (Williams, 2006a: 212). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Williams, 1995b: 216-9: “...it is hard to deny that, as the critic says, it is destructive. Is it, as the critic next says, purely negative? I would rather say that it is impurely negative....” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Williams refers to “the universal constituency” at Williams, 1985a: 16. Elsewhere he refers to “the citizens of the notional republic”, governed by its own laws of reason, (Williams, 1985a: 70, 73, 114, 214). See also Williams, 1981: 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A classical statement of the outlook that Williams is criticizing is presented in Nagel, 1976. Nagel’s paper was presented as a reply to Williams’ paper “Moral Luck” (Williams, 1976) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Williams, 1995c: 578: “... the task of which provides the principle aim of all moral philosophy, of truthfully understanding what our ethical values are and how they are related to our psychology, and making, in the light of that understanding, a valuation of those values.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Williams makes clear that the relevant issue concerns not the implication of “the obscure and over-ambitious doctrine of determinism” but “the relations between freedom and the strongest version we can imagine of psychophysical science” or “the strong scientific claim” (Williams, 1995c: 276; Williams, 1995a: 6-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Of course for Williams, the answer to this (rhetorical) question is that “morality” wants more because it seeks a “real” or “ultimate authorship” of a kind that will license its conception of *blame*. (Williams, 1994: 4-5; see cp. Williams, 1985a: 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The close relationship between the morality system and various prominent representatives of (contemporary) compatibilism is evident in Wallace, 1994: 39-40, 64-6. Wallace is explicit that his own (neo-Kantian) account of responsibility is erected around the core conceptual apparatus of “the morality system” and contrasts it, in this respect, with Williams’ “shamed-based” account. See, in particular, his remarks: “The account I am developing thus situates our practice of holding responsible within a distinctive nexus of moral concepts, namely those of moral obligation, moral right, and moral wrong....”(Wallace, 1994: 64) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Williams’ views in this respect may also be contrasted with those of Dennett, another leading representative of contemporary compatibilism. Dennett claims that his compatibilist views “are neither revolutionary nor pessimistic” They are, he says, “only moderately revisionary” (Dennett, 1984: 19). Contrary to this, Williams’ compatibilism is presented as both radical *and* pessimistic. (I note in passing that in one of his later interviews Williams expresses his particular disdain for a “certain kind of American optimism”, which he clearly associates with “empty scientism” and aspirations to make philosophy edifying.) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Williams, 1993: 2, 171n7: Williams is aware, of course, that questions may be asked about who “we” (moderns) are supposed to be (i.e. as we stand in relation to the Greeks). This identity, as he sees it, is shaped by our “cultural situation” and our shared uncertainty about how we should *now* think about our ethical lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The work of Bruno Snell is a particular target of Williams’ critique (Williams, 1993: 21-6, 28-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Williams’ remarks at Williams, 1993: 12-13: “In trying to recover Greek ideas, I shall turn to sources other than philosophy...” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See also Williams’ reference to Nietzsche’s remarks about the value of the historical study of the Greeks and the sense in which its findings are “untimely” – namely, that they “help us to see ways in which our ideas may be wrong” (Williams, 1993: 4, 9-10) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Williams is referring to Donald Davidson, whose key papers are found in Davidson (1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Williams’ admiration for Nietzsche’s methods and achievements is made clear in the following passage: “It is certain, even if not everyone has yet come to see it, that Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century. This was, above all, because he saw how totally problematical morality, as understood over many centuries, has become and how complex a reaction that fact, when fully understood, requires” (Williams, 2014: 183). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On Williams’ account the concept of confidence “is both a social state and related to discussion, theorising, and reflection”. (Williams, 1985a: 189-90). It is Williams’ view that *philosophy* has much less to do with fostering the conditions that generate confidence than widely supposed. The relevant standard for confidence is that when we reflect on how we live we have “a life worth living” and values that we want to share with our children and future generations. (Williams, 1985a: 54,190,192; cp. Williams, 1998: 252). Williams is also clear, however, that achieving confidence is not the same as vindicating optimism (Williams, 1985a: 190) – a point we return to further below. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Although Williams is plainly keen to emphasize the affinities between his own methods and concerns and those of Nietzsche, there remains some question as to whether Nietzsche appears in Williams’ later work more as an afterthought than as a *source* for his own views. More importantly, by emphasizing his affinities with Nietzsche, Williams encourages the (mistaken) view that his own agenda is primarily negative and destructive in character. The interpretation advanced here finds room for the destructive genealogy but goes on to emphasize the importance of the *vindicatory* dimension of Williams’ concerns. This, of course, raises the interesting question, in relation to Nietzsche, whether or not his sceptical intentions reached beyond these more “local” ethical conceptions. For a helpful discussion of Williams’ debt to Nietzsche in relation to these issues see Clark, (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sceptical views of this kind are now pervasive. See, e.g., Strawson, (1994); Pereboom, (2014); Levy, (2011); Harris, (2012); Mills (2015); Waller, (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Williams refers to the example of Homer’s Telemachus who unintentionally leaves the door of the armory open, making weapons available to the suitors. While he plainly has simply made a mistake he recognises, nevertheless, that he will have to make up for it. (Williams, 1993: 54,64) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The examples that Williams uses in this context are those of Agamemnon and Ajax, who although they act in an abnormal state of mind due to the intervention of the Gods, nevertheless, accept responsibility for their deeds. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hume’s account of justice, like Williams’ account of responsibility, has a sceptical aspect (e.g. debunking metaphysical foundations in moral relations etc.). Hume’s constructive view is also erected on the foundations of his description of the universal features of our human situation and human nature (i.e. the relative scarcity of goods and confined benevolence). It is on these foundations, Hume argues, that each ethical culture finds its own way of solving the general problem of social cooperation and stability by way of establishing its own distinct conventions and rules relating to property and promises. What is especially significant here, for our purposes, is that Hume allows that while there may be any number of different conventions and rules established by various ethical communities there is, nevertheless, a common and unifying structure and function with respect to them. Having described the general structure and function of justice, Hume neither recommends nor endorses any *particular* convention (and plainly he does not regard this as a sensible task for philosophy). Williams’ views about responsibility are similar in form to this (i.e. allowing for pluralism and variation without denying that some interpretations and practices are more plausible and effective than others). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news...” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, in particular, Williams’ remarks in the final paragraphs of *Truth and Truthfulness* (Williams, 2002a: 268-9): “Doubtless people will continue to make sense of the world in terms that help them to survive in it...” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In several contexts Williams suggests that he is not interested in defending “isms” or offering an “outlook” of any kind (e.g. Williams, 1995b: 186; Williams, 1985a: 83; Williams, 1994: 7-8). There is, however, an important sense in which this is a misleading. These remarks are, no doubt, largely motivated by his desire to distance himself from styles of “analytic philosophy” that he came to reject and found uninteresting (especially their efforts to produce “theories”). There remains, nevertheless, a general *outlook* of a recognizable kind that Williams seeks to articulate and defend – one that, among other things, rejects “morality” and the forms of (untruthful) optimism that it encourages. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Strawson, 1962. Strawson believes that scepticism is not credible and that the threat of pessimism is for this reason both philosophically implausible and psychologically unreal. There are, of course, those who hold that scepticism cannot be discredited (along the lines that Strawson and others suggest) but who go on to deny that any significant form of pessimism follows from this. See, e.g., Pereboom, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. What (Greek) tragedy makes clear is that with respect to these matters some agents are deeply, tragically *ethically* unfortunate. The general point, however, applies to us all, since we are all in the same predicament, whether we are fortunate or unfortunate in these respects. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The general position that Williams takes up may be described as a form of “free will pessimism”. For a more general account of this view, which is informed by Williams’ critique of “morality”, see my “Free Will Pessimism” (Russell, 2017a; and also Russell, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The fundamental objection to these accounts, as we have noted, is that not only is their complacency misplaced, their accounts are generally both psychologically and historically impoverished – manifesting failures, as Williams sees it, that are common to much contemporary “analytic philosophy”. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. In an illuminating interview that he gave not long before he died Williams makes a very important observation about his own fundamental intentions: “So we come to a point where most of my efforts have been concentrated: to make *some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can’t have an idealized version of it.” (Williams, 2009: 203 – emphasis on original) This remark goes to the heart of Williams’ position on this issue. More specifically, it explains the basis of his particular opposition to scepticism of any general kind (i.e. as motivated by disappointment in not being able to secure some “idealized version” of moral responsibility). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Drawing on Williams’ own remarks, we might say, by analogy, that just as atheism should not be understood as aiming to provide a “solution” to the problem of evil, similarly Williams’ critique should not be understood as advancing a *solution* to the free will problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I am grateful to the audience at the “Agency, Fate and Luck” conference held at Lund University in June 2019 for their comments and discussion. I am similarly grateful to the audience at the “Free Will and Methodology” conference held at Leuven University, also in June 2019. I would particularly like to thank Andras Szigeti and Matt Talbert for their comments and suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)