Forgiving Masters: On Bernard Williams' Moral Luck

I recently had a lunch with a famous moral philosopher which might have gone better. (Details have been blurred to protect the guilty – viz., me, primarily.) One of the topics over which we failed to bond was the twentieth-century English moral philosopher, Bernard Williams. I wrote my dissertation on Williams, so it was a natural enough topic of conversation. “Why write on him?” my lunch companion asked me. I mentioned some of the reasons why I love reading Williams: the warmth in his voice that survives a dry wit, which seems to consist primarily in simply revealing what he was thinking. I mentioned a kind of social mastery evident in Williams’ writing, such that he manages to sound serious but not sombre, sardonic but not mean, and humane but not mawkish. My companion seemed less than impressed by this too. Regardless of Williams’ style, what about the substance? I segued quickly to the one thing people tend to like, if they like anything at all in Williams – his examples, in all their subtlety, variety, and richness. My companion shook his head. “I could never stand Williams – not in writing, nor in person. He made me feel unqualified to do ethics unless I read novels by day and listened to opera by night. Williams made me feel as if I lacked…” he trailed off. “The requisite sensibility,” I finished his sentence decisively. I feel sorry now for my rudeness; but, at the time, I was furious. I consoled myself with the thought that, after that remark, it was mutual.

***

I was reminded of this by a wonderful recent essay, “Add Your Own Egg,” by Nahul Krishna, another young philosopher and fellow Williams admirer. Krishna’s piece – an almost shocking pleasure to read, paying tribute to Williams in its many well-turned barbs against the utilitarian plunderer of woolly values – takes its title from one of Williams’ sharpest. Williams wrote with a kind of wry ennui, too laconic to be scorn, of philosophers whose endless hedges and caveats betray a desire for “total mind control” in their writing. But the reader “cannot be simply dominated,” Williams tells us. Recalling the instructions on packets of cake mix, the reader must be allowed to “add his own egg,” and make something of the text for himself, Williams counselled.

But as well as a sheer authoritarian impulse that dogs professional philosophy, Williams thought that writing moral philosophy was an especially “hazardous business.” And this, he believed, was for “two special reasons.”
The first is that one is likely to reveal the limitations and inadequacies of one’s own perceptions more directly than in, at least, other parts of philosophy. The second is that one could run the risk, if one were taken seriously, of misleading people about matters of importance.

He continues:

While few writers on the subject have avoided the first hazard, very many have avoided the second, either by making it impossible to take them seriously, or by refusing to write about anything of importance, or both. (Morality, 1972)

Williams, in contrast, is easy to take seriously, and what he writes on clearly matters. So his work is at least potentially subject to both these hazards. And I worry more than Krishna that it does fall prey to them.

Take the eponymous essay in Moral Luck, for example. Williams leads with the case of a fictionalized Gauguin, who abandons his wife and children to go to paint in Tahiti. And Williams invites us to share his judgment that the moral justification of Gauguin’s decision at the time might depend on how things turned out afterwards. The fact that he became Gauguin – or the Gauguin, and not Gauguin’s marginally talented second cousin – renders his decision to leave his family less objectionable in retrospect. Success in one’s “personal projects,” as Williams calls them, mitigates blame and moral responsibility.

I have long believed there was something deep and right about this example, and Williams’ views about moral luck more broadly. And then I asked myself the obvious, but somewhat professionally verboten, question. Moral luck à la Williams: cui bono?

An answer suggests itself: the great white men of history. And these are the figures we tend to want to see pardoned. People often struggle to learn to look up to those they once scorned, or expected to look down upon. But they may also have a hard time going the other way, their chin permanently locked in an upwards tilt towards certain figures – such as Woodrow Wilson, whose vicious racism, even by the standards of his time, has led to protests over his legacy at Princeton. But people are often disoriented by the sight of a fallen hero. And so they avert their eyes. Or they swoop in to save them. “In its least palatable form, [moral luck] is the view that even political atrocities can be justified by history.” Despite this, Williams says, the view is not to be underestimated. (Moral Luck, p. 42) This is a remarkable, if seldom-noticed
admission, relevant as it is to Williams’ second warning.

But couldn’t women be the beneficiaries of moral luck too? In theory, of course they could; but in practice, they seldom will be. Williams’ second main example in “Moral Luck” is that of Anna Karenina, who abandons her husband and son – in her case, to pursue a love affair with Vronsky. But the relationship cannot survive the weight that Anna has put on it, as Williams describes the set-up. There will hence be no moral luck to soften our condemnation of Anna. But if there is no such luck for her, then how many women in history will receive these moral offsets? Women have historically lacked the wherewithal to pursue, let alone succeed in, their personal projects. Women have often lacked the wherewithal so much as to form them, having had to live for others. Even Anna’s so-called personal project – a somewhat unnatural way of describing the pursuit of love relations – is hardly all she might have wanted. Her project, such as it is, is severely constrained by a dearth of options. In other words, it is plausibly the result of adaptive preferences.

Anna Karenina’s decision to leave her family is hence more humanly understandable and probably quite a bit less selfish than we imagine Gauguin’s as being. After all, Karenin made Anna desperately unhappy. And yet, lucky for some, it is Gauguin who gets forgiveness.

Of course, this isn’t direct evidence against the existence of moral luck of this sort. (And there are many other kinds of moral luck too, as well as numerous arguments which have been adduced in support of them, by the many subsequent writers on the topic. Of particular interest to me has been the work of feminist philosophers Claudia Card and Lisa Tessman in this connection.) But it does cast doubt on the probative value of Williams’ pair of cases, which are unfortunately the only two he offers in defense of moral luck as applied to voluntary actions. For those who, like me, initially share Williams’ judgments, our intuitions are subject to a simple debunking story. That is, they can be explained away without supporting the lessons Williams draws on their basis. In a patriarchal culture, we tend to be much harder on women who leave their families for love, as compared with men who leave for the sake of a brilliant career. No wonder we are more inclined to grant Gauguin amnesty.

Having said a little about the second hazard, what about the first? Taken alone, the predictable gender dynamics evident in these cases would just be an isolated lapse of Williams’ much-vaunted sensibility, of a kind that is hardly surprising for the era. But on reflection there are further grounds for broadly aesthetic disappointment. A striking number of Williams’ cases follow
a certain formula: a man is called upon to justify his actions in relation to his family, most commonly his wife, who hovers silently in the background. And Williams in various ways argues that this man is justified, or at least not unjustified, doing theoretical battle against some very hazy opponent (the crude utilitarian, a vaguely Kantian character, and “the external reasons theorist” – a role philosophers have been auditioning for since Williams wrote the bit part).

There is Owen Wingrave, who has no desire to join the army, despite his family’s urging (in “Internal and External Reasons,” the paper in Moral Luck on which I wrote my dissertation). Williams holds that Owen’s refusal is not irrational, in view of his lacking a suitable motivation. Then there is George, the unemployed chemist with a family in dire financial straits, who does not want to accept a job at the expense of his integrity. And again, Williams suggests that George is, if not right, then at least not wrong, in going against other people’s needs and counsel (for instance, those of George’s wife, who does not share his moral scruples, but whose “views need not concern us,” Williams adds parenthetically).

One more case – this being the most painful to me, personally. In a subsequent piece on internal reasons (“Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame,” 1989) Williams introduces us to yet another husband, who is nasty to his wife. And Williams asks us to imagine that we have been trying to reason with him to get him to change his ways. To no avail, however; this man just does not care about his wife or the marriage. “Don’t you understand? I really do not care.” Williams has him say to us. Williams allows that this man can be described in various unflattering moral terms – as “ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things” – as we might imagine. But Williams insists that the husband has no reason to be nicer to his wife, in view of his lacking the requisite motivation. He may be a bad man, but again, he is not irrational. And ordinary blame on this score hence goes by the wayside.

For a long time, I was determined to defend Williams’ view here. I maintained that it was a morally serious position, capturing the sense of powerlessness we might have – and such as this man’s wife might feel – when someone simply cannot be reasoned with on some fundamental matter. But now I find that I have to wonder. Was I just trying to avoid blaming Williams for an example I would surely otherwise find horrible?

***

In the end, of course, I mostly blame myself. The problem is not Williams so
much as what we have done with him. Those of us who find his work deeply appealing have followed his directions too minutely and uncritically. (The metaphor of adding one’s own egg to a packet cake mix is not inspiring, upon reflection. After all, an egg is a rather small and fungible thing to be permitted to contribute, leaving little room for adaptation and innovation. And although Williams tells us that the reader “cannot be simply dominated,” what is the placement of that “simply” there suggesting?) Perhaps above all, we have tended to eke it out on a slim diet of Williams’ cases. And we have overlooked the many obvious and predictable ways in which his work reflects and was sometimes distorted by his time, place, and social position – in terms of its style and, sometimes, its substance. Or I know that I at least have made these mistakes, treating Williams as a kind of guru of sensibility.

In the end, my love for Williams remains, and I will always be grateful for his writing. It has given me so much pleasure, and I have learned from it immeasurably. Nevertheless, I can now better understand my lunch companion’s irritation. Williams’ recipes are not that consistent. But so many eggs have gone into making them.