Seminar with Bernard Williams

25 November 1998 — Institute of Philosophy — KU Leuven

Arnold Burms: Professor Williams has said that he is willing to answer some of our questions about his work. Given the amount of work he has to do here in a few days, this was a generous decision for which we are genuinely grateful. Professor Van de Putte will start the discussion with some questions about the relation between theory and practice.

André Van de Putte: In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* you situate ethical thought in the context of a movement of reflection. To quote from page 112: "It is too late at this stage to raise the prior question: `Why reflection?' — too late in terms of this inquiry, (...) and always too late in terms of the question itself, since one could answer it without prejudice only by not considering it." And just before that quotation you also said that "the drive to theory has roots in ethical thought itself" and a little bit further you say: "The important question at this point is why reflection should be taken to require theory." Now I would like to elaborate a little bit on these remarks and ask you to comment on what I'm going to say.

Three things should be stressed concerning ethical reflection which are important for moral philosophy and for our understanding of moral philosophy. The first one is this: the person who is reflecting is already part of a concrete society when he or she starts reflecting. That means that he or she has been socialized in a concrete ethos and has already an experience of a substantive ethical life. In this sense he or she does not need to invent ethical life.

The second remark is this: ethical reflection is in itself already the expression of an ethical intention. By asking the question `How should one live?', one shows that one is interested in living an ethical life. In this sense I can agree with what I think you say in *Ethics*, namely that the question `Why should I be moral?' is not meaningful for a moral thinker. The answer to the moral question, the results of his reflection are not meant to convince him or his readers to be moral. On the contrary, he starts precisely from this interest in morality and tries to understand what it means to be moral, what his wish to be moral implies.

My third point is the most important. In starting his reflection the thinker has as it were decided that his answer will only be acceptable if it is valid for all, if it can be justified for all. In the moral question itself, a norm of universality is implied. And given the fact that the moral question is itself the expression of an ethical intention, this is important. If he would not assume this norm, he would in my view not really be posing the question. We can immediately understand this if we consider the alternative. Suppose a moral thinker who assumes that an answer to the moral question will be valid only when it suits him. Would we say in this case that this person is really asking the moral question? I do not think so. To put this another way, my thesis is that in the reflection the person who reflects is subjecting himself to the law of thinking itself, to the law of reason, in other words, to the law of universality, of non-contradiction. In the question he discovers this law as a norm for himself asking the moral question and thus as a norm inherent in moral intention. I think that this is precisely what Kant discovered and why for so many there is an important link between ethics and reason and why we are, as you say, driven to theory: since we want a universal answer, since a moral norm implies universality, we are looking for a theory, for a universal justification. But this is not yet the full story. All that I have said only becomes visible on the reflective level. It is only visible, as it were, once one starts reflecting. This means that the norm of universality cannot and must not be understood as a concrete norm which can and should replace the norms of the concrete ethos we all already live in when we start reflecting. I think rationalism in ethics is precisely that: the belief that this norm and what one hopes to deduce from it can and should replace the concrete ethos. I think it must be clear that this cannot be done. As we all know the Kantian imperative is *formal* and negative and does not produce any content. If we need content — and of course we need it — it should come from our historical ethos.

But that does not mean, I think, that the norm of universality is useless or that we can ignore the inherent universality of the ethical norm. Although this norm of universality is not sufficient, it is perhaps necessary. It is clear, as I said, that in order to have a content, we need to start from our concrete morality, from our prejudices if you will, from the intuitions we have been socialized in. But reflection cannot stay at the level of that common ethos. The reason is that we start reflecting on our ethos because we have a problem about the morality of that concrete ethos. In other words, neither universality nor particularity are sufficient as an answer to the moral question. Moral reflection means that we try to confront our particular ethos with the norm of universality inherent in morality as such. Again this does not mean that the norm of universality can be constitutive of a whole system of morality. It is merely formal. But what it can do is function as a critical instance vis-à-vis these historical norms. I think that this is exactly what moral reflection means and can mean. Supposing now that what I have just said is sound, I wonder whether we might not understand ethical theory then as a reflective equilibrium, a broad reflective equilibrium, of course, in which the norm of universality and the prejudices and intuitions of our culture are brought into balance, brought into line so that in this movement of going back and forth our intuitions are purified and justified. My question then is this: Would that be an understanding of ethical theory you could accept or would you also reject this understanding of ethical theory?

Bernard Williams: Let me say I'm very grateful for your remarks and also, if I may say something which struck me in the course of our discussion last night, I'm very grateful for the care with which people here have obviously read what I have written. Quite often it turns out that people have not actually attended to what one's actually said, but you manifestly have. So thank you. What I find in your remarks is that there's a piece in the beginning which I thoroughly agree with and a piece at the end that I'm not sure whether I agree with or not but I don't have to disagree with, and a piece in the middle that I disagree with.

I agree with your first two points, namely that the reflecting person is already a member of a concrete society, and of course I also agree that their reflection is guided by ethical intention, that is correct. The remarks you made at the end are in some part, I take it, about the character of a Kantian moral philosophy. Some of these issues I think I will leave for the Kantians; I mean they appear to me to disagree about whether the categorical imperative provides a substantive standard or not. But, to use the famous phrase, I think that it's their problem rather than my problem, except perhaps insofar as I criticized Kant in certain terms in my book which you might disagree with historically. I'll come back to the matter of reflective equilibrium.

Obviously you will have foreseen that I disagree with is what is contained in your third point, namely that the answer that the so situated reflector seeks is acceptable only if it's valid for all, or rather, what I disagree with is the interpretation that you put on that phrase, namely that it's acceptable only if valid universally. Now, I want to make two, well three points really in reply to that.

First of all, I resist the contrast which you used at that point of the argument between either universally or just me. You said it had to be universal because it couldn't just be valid for the reflector. Now those are not the only possibilities. It's a very Kantian emphasis to say that either something applies to rational agents as such or it just applies to me, that it is egoism. That's a very Kantian construction. Why can't it apply to "us"? Now you'll say: Who's us? Then I would say: us is as many people as can be meaningfully involved in this reflection. Now in some ways some of what I'm reflecting about applies only to us in a relatively local sense. Many of our problems, and this is a point I make over and over again, many of our problems are unprecedented. No human beings have ever been in the situation we are now. Not just because no human beings at any given time have ever been in the same situation but because, and this is a separate view, modernity is very special. It's a very special condition and Kant recognized that fact and that's why Kant's great. I do regard Kant as the greatest modern philosopher, though I don't agree with him. Now I think some of our problems are peculiar to us, therefore the answers are peculiar to us too. They're not even questions that could be posed in various other times, so I resist the dichotomy all or me. I would just say the thing has to be valid for us, that's the first point I would make.

Secondly, even granted universally, I don't see why the reflection has to lead to *ethical* theory. Now of course this partly turns on what you mean by ethical theory. For instance, just to make one obvious point, it

seems to me that a lot of ethical reflection is actually psychological or political theory. That is to say, it's a reflection about how well-grounded the assumptions of our ethical practice are, and those assumptions will be in part empirical. Now what I mean by ethical theory is the theorization of the content of ethics. I don't mean just any theory that relates to ethical questions because that would include psychology, sociology, all sorts of things. I've never said that no theory applies to ethics, I just said it isn't ethical theory.

I don't mean meta-ethical theory either. I don't actually find meta-ethical theory very interesting but that's another question. It's just that most of it is frightfully boring, banging on about realism and objectivism and cognitivism and expressivism and all those isms. I mean it doesn't happen to interest me very much but it's a perfectly respectable area of philosophy of language or epistemology, and there are obviously technical problems familiar in the Kantian tradition about how an ethics which fundamentally consists of norms can achieve a cognitive status. That's a well known Kantian problem since Kant himself thought the fundamental principle of ethics was an imperative, that is that fundamentally ethics consists of norms of some kind, then how could it also be in any sense something we could be certain about? This is a very well known issue and very familiar to you I am sure. I mean, for instance, it involves the relation between two things: one is you must not steal, and the other is "you must not steal" passes the test of the categorical imperative. The first of those is an imperative and the second one isn't and then there's a question of what the relation between them is, which is a well known problem in the me-chanics of Kantian philosophy. But all of that is what I call meta-ethics.

What I mean by an ethical theory, and what I say is of no use to us, is a theorization of its content. This is often connected with meta-ethics. Meta-ethics often leads to these results. For instance, it is supposed to be a meta-ethical result that the fundamental concept for ethical thought is `ought'.

Take Hare's position that says the fundamental concept of morality in his terminology is ought, and good has to be explained in terms of it. Well that looks like a piece of meta-ethics, it looks like a piece of determination of "the language of morals", to use his phrase, but it obvi-ously isn't. I mean as a report on how these concepts actually work, it is just wrong. What it means is you won't think well in ethics unless you reduce the content of ethics, which is about the good, to content which is about the right. That's a theorization of the content of ethics just like utilitarianism is, and that's what I think is no good. Now let me add one further remark. I do agree with you that to the extent that we are thinking about the systematic representation of the content of ethics, the right method is something like reflective equilibrium. I agree with you about that, I mean I think that that aspect of Rawls's project is admirable and I also think Rawls's reasons for it are pretty good, though I resist the linguistic analogy, the analogy with Chomsky, I don't believe in that bit, but that was rather fashionable when he wrote the book. I think he's a little less attached to it now than he was in 1971. I resist that bit, but I think as a method it's pretty good and one reason it's obviously pretty good compared with the competitors is that it's not dogmatic or at least it's less dogmatic. Take, say, Shelly Kagan, and I cite him just because he's a very extreme example. Shelly Kagan is an extreme utilitarian and his work takes the form that it's self-evident that utilitarianism is correct and every moral belief that anybody holds that's inconsistent with it is a self-interested prejudice and he grinds out the results of this one principle, so he tells more and more of the citizenry that they're fundamentally off their heads, that they're all victims of prejudice and that what we should be doing is giving all our wealth to the animals or something. I mean he has some paradoxical conclusions. Now that's just unreasonable, in the best sense, in the sense that it is just not reasonable to think you know one thing and everything else follows from it. So I believe in reflective equilibrium; I just think that if you take reflective equilibrium all the way you won't end up with an ethical theory.

André Van de Putte: Why not ?

Bernard Williams: Well let me come back to my absolutely basic question that I'm asking over and over again: What authority has it got? And people say, well it's much more elegant, or it's simpler, or with fewer principles or it has a certain rational structure. I say: So what? I'm not living my life in order to exemplify a mathematical theory. Why are those properties of any interest whatsoever? Of course, if somebody tells me that something I naturally take for granted is actually selfish, or that a group loyalty is just a prejudice, then I will listen and then we'll talk about that. For instance if I'm told that — and we mostly changed our views on these matters in the last years — if I'm told that certain attitudes are sexist or implicitly racist, then let us talk about that, that is that this set of beliefs is a device for supporting male power or male self-regard, well these are discussable issues and we'll talk about it. We'll talk about them psychologically, socially, historically and in such terms, and we will probably end up changing our views. That's what reflection is, but it has got nothing to do with the fact that if I do that I have a simpler body of ethics, which is what is Shelley Kagan does.

Arnold Burms: You have expressed your rejection of ethical theory in a moderate fashion, but it is also true, I think, that there is something radical in your view. It looks radical from a standpoint which is often taken for granted in moral philosophy. But the assumption that moral philosophy should produce an ethical theory already looks less evident if one realizes that the same claim is never made with respect to aesthetics: nobody would expect that a philosophy of art should provide us with a theorization of the aesthetic content.

Bernard Williams: That's right.

Arnold Burms: I was perhaps exaggerating when I said that nobody would dream of constructing an aesthetic theory. But even if proposals of that sort were ever made, it is obvious that they don't sound plausible at all.

Bernard Williams: `Significant form' would be the expression. Instead of being dogmatic as in ethics, they are just vacuous.

Arnold Burms: But although your thesis that an ethical theory is no use to us is less strange than it may look from a certain standpoint, one should not underestimate its radical and striking character within the context of current moral philosophy.

Bernard Williams: Well, it's not a radical view, it seems to me, relative to the temper of a lot of modern philosophy. Modern philosophy has this equation of reason and rationalization of the kind which has been held against the Enlightenment. Take Habermas for instance. He is very keen to get his opponents categorized, he wants to know which class of opponent you belong to. He and I had a long discussion and he was very worried whether I was an Aristotelian or a Wittgensteinian, and I said I don't think I'm either Aristotelian or Wittgensteinian and he said: "What are you then?" I was too modest to say: "I'm me", or something like that so I said, "How about I'm Nietzschean?", and that really did put the petrol on the fire. But of course the analogy with Aristotle, particularly because of an interest in ancient things, is one that's often made. Now, I think that Aristotle didn't have an ethical theory. He uses the notion of what's usually translated as happiness and he uses the notion of virtue and then he uses a lot of notions in the philosophy of mind, like judgement and things like that and that seems to me pretty modest theoretically. He would absolutely claim you can't theorize the content. He keeps saying that over and over again because he's concerned with the particular and with the practical, but I have two objections to Aristotle as the analogy for now. People differ about this interpretation, but to the extent that he gives a metaphysical justification of why human happiness has to be of one form rather than another, we just don't believe it — well, I don't believe it. It doesn't seem to be a very modern view.

The other reason is I don't think he's very reflective. I think he's a willed conservative and he's much more conservative than he needed to be in his historical situation and of course a lot of the social pictures offered by Aristotle are just lies. This picture he gives you of living in a sort of traditional village full of high-brow wise men who are old and sensible and you go to them for advice and all that: well as an actual picture of Athens in 350, it is total fantasy.

I take it that it's connected to the fact that he came from the provinces, and he had to take on this pseudo-aristocratic nonsense, unlike Plato who, being a genuine aristocratic, was a genuine radical.

Frans De Wachter: My two questions have been asked several times in recent discussions between the Kantian perspective on morality and your point of view. They are related questions: (1) why is practical reason not possible? (2) why is a motivational identification with the categorical imperative not possible? Your doubts about the possibility of Kantian practical reason derive from the distinction you make between internal and external reasons. Internal reasons are reasons reached by deliberation from our subjective motivational set (our deepest desires and passions, dispositions, personal loyalties, all kinds of projects that embody our deepest commitments). Such reasons can really motivate us because they are connected to that set. External reasons exist regardless of what is in one's subjective motivational set, for instance a rational principle. Cognitive belief in such a principle alone is not enough to motivate us to action. In this sense, you claim that reason cannot be practical. Of course, we can act for reasons of principle, but only if we desire to act on that principle, that is, if the acceptance of such a principle is already part of my subjective motivational set. My question is: why is it so evident that we can never be motivated by considerations stemming from pure practical reason? Why is practical reason that would motivate us to act not possible?

Let us take as an example the principle of non-discrimination. Of course, there was a time that non-discriminatory egalitarianism functioned as an external reason, as a kind of far-fetched theory expounded by a few enlightened philosophers. It was not yet a part of the moral character (the motivational set) of people in earlier centuries. How did it become an internal reason? I presume you will answer: this was due to historical evolution, education, training, etc., but *not* to the fact that people cognitively began to believe in that idea. But why should that not be possible? In a cognitive and reflexive culture like ours, maybe I could say, independently of what is in my motivational set, that I really can't see a good reason (a justification) for the fact that men and women should be treated differently — and that is enough to motivate me in my action. Here, a cognitive principle (the absence of justification) is already a motivational factor. And if this is true, justificational theories are morally more important that you are ready to admit.

To put it the other way around (and this is my second question): why is it so certain that my motivational set will motivate me? Maybe internal reasons are just not enough to motivate me to act morally. Of course, my deepest desires, loyalties, commitments are important to me, but can I ever fully identify with them? My answer would be: only to the extent that I can *morally* identify with them, to the extent that I can say: this loyalty is not just here in me, but it is *good* that it is here, it *should* be here. I do not only happen to love my children, I have to love them. To be motivated to act, as a moral person I need a kind of second-order (moral) identification with my motivational set, which presupposes the possibility of identifying with the categorical imperative.

Bernard Williams: I think you asked me three questions and one of them I think isn't a question but the other two are very interesting questions. The first question is how does what I call, in some of my pieces about these things, my subjective motivational set, or set of desires and values, motivate me? That was one question.

Frans De Wachter: But the question is: How does it motivate me without me committing myself morally to it?

Bernard Williams: O.K., that's one question. Two: How is anti-discrimination present in my subjective motivational set? And three: How did anti-discrimination come to be present in our subjective motivational sets? This is a question about how it came about that such an attitude is in anybody's motivational set. This is a question of cultural history. This one seems to me not to be a question, that is, my motivational set obviously motivates me. That's just what it is: it's the set of things that motivate me. Now your supplementary question: How can my motivational set motivate me without a moral commitment?

Well, the answer is that a lot of my motivational set motivates me without a moral commitment, and the bits of my motivational set that motivate me through a moral commitment do so because the moral commitment is part of my motivational set. I mean, if I want a glass of lemonade it's only unusually that that motivates me through a moral commitment. I suppose I can have a duty to myself to have a glass of lemonade or I could have promised somebody to have a glass of lemonade. But in general, the desire to have a glass of lemonade doesn't work through moral commitments; some other things do.

Frans De Wachter: So moral commitment is part of my motivational set?

Bernard Williams: Well, I don't like the phrase moral commitment because I think it doesn't stand for anything determinate, but this question is a real question. How do attitudes like anti-discrimination work? That's a perfectly legitimate question and also quite a difficult one in my view. This is an issue I've discussed at some length with Christine Korsgaard whose views I think are the most interesting on this subject. They can be found in her books *The Sources of Normativity* and *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*.

One view is that rejection, say, of discrimination by gender works psychologically because it is an application of a very general attitude or virtue or outlook which is fairness. What has happened is that people have come to see something which is a kind of rational truth, namely that certain kinds of behaviour — with men predominating and so on — violate fairness. Now, this would have the following structure: anti-discrimination is the application of fairness, or a sense of fairness, and a sense of fairness is a very basic feature of most people's motivational set. In fact it could even be argued that in some form it's innate, that is, it's extremely early that children start objecting to a state of affairs on the ground that it isn't fair. It is true that they usually start by objecting to the situation not being fair when it's disadvantageous to them. The first move is to say: It isn't fair because he's got more than I've got. Then the parents get them to see it the other way round, they do the role reversal, and they do that because they're teaching the idea that you are part of the group and if you are part of the group you can't decide what we are going to do unless we all adopt some measures of symmetry.

Someone who thinks only in terms of we and they can't decide what we are going to do, but deciding what we are going to do, and how we are going to do it, is absolutely fundamental. Now that is, if you like, a naturalistic explanation of the source of this motivation, plus a further proposition, namely, that we come to see that discrimination in terms of gender offends against fairness. So, the first question now is the following: Is the fact that a sense of fairness is part of our motivational set compatible with internalism or do you need some rationalistic Kantian idea to explain how a sense of fairness can be part of one's motivational set? Christine and other neo-Kantians are not going to deny that a sense of fairness is part of our motivational set. It is clearly a psychological explanation of what people do to say that he did it because he thought the opposite was unfair. That's a perfectly good psychological explanation, so ex hypothesi something like a sense of fairness is part of his motivational set. The question is, do we need some very special rationalistic explanation of why it is part of his motivational set? And I would say the ball is in the Kantian's court. I can't see why we should need such an explanation. Children are brought up to have a sense of fairness as a general potentiality and it's absolutely explicable why they should be. The roots of this may well be innate because we are after all selected to be to some degree cooperative creatures. Then the next question is: How does the sense of fairness get applied for the first time to gender roles? I think that is the most interesting question. That is: Is it just a change of style? — that's the relativist answer — or have things that were wrongly thought in the past now been abandoned?, in which case you will have a kind of Aufklärung progressivist story. You will say that people have stopped being as prejudiced as they were, that it's moral progress. A legitimation that was offered in the past has been questioned for the first time and it seemed not to be a legitimation. And of course the thing about gender domination, like the thing about racism, is that once you ask for a reason for it there aren't any. It only ever existed for people who didn't ask for reasons for it.

Urbain Dhondt: Let us start from another point of view. Just before the lecture you told me that Kant liked difficulty in moral life.

Bernard Williams: He was distrustful if it was too easy, let us put it that way.

Urbain Dhondt: He distrusted what was easy, because it pleases us subjectively. But, according to Aristotle, the virtuous man does the good gladly and willingly. And Aristotle pointed to the problem of the concrete content of the virtuous act, which does not concern the opposition between the easy and the difficult, but the question of deciding between different possibilities. I ask myself whether I should do this or that, what is fair in my situation here and now. So I have to apply a general rule of fairness to particular circumstances, not in the sense that I must deduce a concrete application from a general law, but I have to interpret the general rule. And that act of interpreting the general rule is, in a certain sense, a judgement of reason, an act of reason in which I look for a reason not outside the norm. I am not asking: Are there reasons to apply that norm? I'm not asking that, I'm asking: What is the content of that general rule here in my concrete circumstances?

Bernard Williams: Yes, you're concerned here, aren't you, with the very interesting question of what might be called subsumptive judgement. We're talking about what happens when the situation is seen as an example of something to which a certain rule should apply and you say: We don't make those judgements from outside. Well, the answer is: Sometimes we do, particularly in the sphere of law and policy. We say: if you allow it to apply to this you simply will not be able to stop it applying to x and y and z. This is the principle of our old friend the slippery slope argument, about which I've written an article, about the two sorts of arguments there are in terms of the slippery slope. But let's leave those aside, the cases where whether I countenance an example is determined by policy, for example. There are a lot of cases in which it is, but you'll say: Let's ignore those cases. Another very good case of policy-driven subsumptions or discriminations which are now found offensive in many states are the cases in which some benefit — tax or welfare benefit — is only applied to couples if they're legally married. People then say: Well, we understand this rule. Marriage used to be an essential part of general ideology, and so on, but now it's unreasonable because couples who live together unmarried and in a permanent state have just as good a ground for having this benefit as any other. Then there's the policy answer: But if we don't take the formal line that they're legally married, we can't draw the line at all. Anybody who's together for three weeks would be applying for the benefit, or else it has to be absolutely arbitrary, and so on. So that's a policy reason, but that's not what you're interested in.

Now the difficulty is this: I can always find enough similarity and I can always find enough difference. We certainly won't allow, except for well known exceptions, that men and women get treated differently in terms of their contributions to debate or whatever the case may be. So, the next step, particularly in California where I spend part of my life, is: What about the children? The children are going to have to live where the family is going to move to, so don't they have a vote too? So then you say, well, yes, all right. I mean it's very important for teenagers to have a vote, as it were, if they're twelve, and then there is a 9-year-old agitation party that said: But what about the rights of infants. Why can't they have a vote, and so on. Now the same thing applies to animals. Our friends say: We treat animals differently from human beings. Then I say: Yes, we jolly well do, that's quite right, and that's a very sensible thing to do, I say. Then our friend Tooley comes along, to take one philosopher, and he says: Very defective human beings, who have very severe handicaps are no smarter than chimpanzees and it's just discrimination to treat human beings differently from chimpanzees. Give me a reason. Well, I'll give you a reason: the ones are human beings, the others are chimpanzees. That's not a reason, he replies, that just embodies the prejudice, so tell me some more. Then I say: Well, human beings are — I don't know — not very hairy. He says: That's a reason?!? So then I say: Well, O.K., they're smarter. But this very severely handicapped old person has got no memory at all and can't do anything, he's absolutely helpless and this chimpanzee, I'm going to show you now, can do a lot of very smart things, so that old person should be excluded and that chimpanzee should be allowed.

Now that way, in my view, madness lies. But why, if the principles of subsumption are somehow just built into reason. What is it that shows that I'm being reasonable and Tooley isn't — or Singer, or any of the pro-animal lobby — that's the question.

I've got a very glib answer, but it's not the right answer obviously, it's a kind of useful answer. I say the following: Look, in the past white males like Singer and Tooley used to speak up greatly for the rights of women and minorities. Now fortunately women speak up for themselves and minorities speak up for themselves so the white liberal spokespersons are out of a job, but there's one group that they can still patronize because they can't speak for themselves and that's the animals. The animals have this great advantage. So I say look, I'm going to take the same line with the animals as I am with the women and the minorities, that is, I'll hear their rights when they express them themselves. Now, that holds the line for the moment, but you see, he's got an answer. His answer is: But you don't mind me being a trustee for infants and you don't mind me being a trustee for the handicapped elderly. They can't express themselves, these very old people suffering from Alzheimer's, they can't say what their rights are and neither can tiny children say what their rights are, so I speak for them and, he goes on, I also speak for the animals. Now, what am I supposed to say to that? You rational Kantian guys, you tell me what I should say. Why is that not a subsumption? Oh, you're Aristotelian? But if you're Aristotelian you've got a good way out because what Aristotle would say is that any sensible man can see it.

Urbain Dhondt: But a sensible man has to make a practical judgement. In deliberating, for instance, about what I should do with my eldest son, I implicitly start from the general idea: What is the aim of educating children? Or, what is a good man? And I must find the concrete content that corresponds to that vague principle. This is an act of reason. I am not asking for outside reasons but for inner reasons, in the sense of what is involved in that abstract ideal.

Bernard Williams: Well when you say: I don't look outside it, I agree with you in that I don't think it is in a policy-driven way where `outside' has the very specific sense which I gave it, namely you don't just think about the content of the principle or maxim or rule, you think about the consequences of implementing it. Now that's

what I meant by outside, but you're now giving a sense of outside that seems to me much more general, and in that sense I don't think it's right that we don't look outside. The deliberation is not: what is it for a parent to be concerned with his or her child; rather it's: what is it for a parent to be concerned with his or her child now, in certain circumstances. Let's take a practical case, which might be rather sensitive, namely do parents instruct or take care that instruction is received by their young teenage children in methods of contraception. Now there is a time and there are places — there was a time and there were places — in which such a suggestion was found very offensive and hostile to the aims of proper child-rearing by the parents. In many places it would be thought the greatest irresponsibility for parents not to do that. It seems to me that's a serious question. It's a practical question of the kind you refer to and in order to answer it you have to look around where you are, not just contemplate the content of this maxim. You have to ask: What is it to bring up a child here, now, in these circumstances, and this has a concrete anchoring.

Urbain Dhondt: But to look at the circumstances is a theoretical point of view. It is a matter of descriptive judgements, whereas in moral judgement we evaluate the circumstances. A practical moral judgement is a normative judgement of reason.

Bernard Williams: Can I interrupt you for a moment? There is an exceedingly important evaluative term, or set of evaluative terms, which operate in this area, and they are very near what we're discussing. I am referring to notions like dotty or crank or eccentric or weird — that's the sense in which a lot of people would say, particularly in the sort of commonsense places like England, they'd say: if somebody had very exaggerated pro-animal views, for instance, they'd say they're just dotty. Dotty means they're not mad but they have an obsession or their judgement is out. It's just this sort of social evaluative term which plays a very important role in satire.

What's satirized is the extreme, the eccentric, the dotty, and of course that's why satire can be very conservative. Many satirists like Juvenal or Horace and others are actually conservatives because they pillory modern developments. For instance, to take a very good example, recall that early women's rightists were pilloried by English comedians as being sort of eccentric ladies in trousers or stridently demanding and making fools of themselves and so on. Those satirists were very conservative in their sense of what was eccentric. The progressives didn't think this was dotty, they thought it was just rational. The question is: Can we get by without any sense at all of what's dotty, off the norm, off judgement. Because, you see, real rationalist theorists do regard the notion of dotty as essentially prejudiced, that is, nothing should ever be rejected just because it's weird or eccentric or funny or out of kilter. You've got to be able to give the reason. That's connected with the point about always giving a reason for a reason. That is, the most powerful thing that drives toward theory is this idea that you must give a reason for a reason. If I say: But it's an animal, they say: Why is that a reason? I've got to give a reason for that reason, in the end. That's why I end up with foundations. But I think Aristotle, your friend, certainly relied enormously on the sense of what no sensible person would regard as a reason. The trouble is that he's an absolute object lesson in prejudice, because he had actually ghastly views about women and about slaves and they were much worse than the people around him. His views were more primitive than those of Plato.

Arnold Burms: Would it be fair to say that general rules, whatever they are, may contain some wisdom but cannot be applied without the wisdom which inspired them?

Bernard Williams: That's certainly true.

Arnold Burms: Students sometimes ask: How should I write a paper? One may then try to give them some advice and one will express one's advice in terms of a general rule. But everybody knows that a strict, mechanical application of the rule will not result in a good paper. For although the rule itself is merely an interpretation of practical insight, it may misleadingly look as if it had a sort of independent meaning. That explains, I think, how a rigid, thoughtless application of the principle of non-discrimation leads to the absurd discussions about speciecism.

Bernard Williams: I'm not so sure about that.

Arnold Burms: How far should a rule go? What is a wise application?

Bernard Williams: I'm sure some of us will remember Tadeusz Adjukewicz, I think his name was, a logician under the communist regime in Poland. He turned to producing what he called the theory of good work. It was a general axiomatization of ideas about efficiency and all that. A friend of mine once said that what it actually was was the axiomatization of all proverbs. Now the trouble is that the proverbs are all inconsistent with one another. "Too many cooks spoil the broth" but "many hands make light work". And for every such proverb you can find a contrary one. Well, judgement consists in knowing which one applies here. My worry, you see, is that when we use words like wisdom and practical reason, how far do we have something that is a genuinely rational or cognitive ability, and how far are we relying on shared social perceptions of what we can live with. Aristotle is a very good test case of this, and one of the reasons that Aristotle is so important is that he's pretty explicit about all this. You'll remember the famous passage in which he says that we should attend even to the unreasoned remarks of older people. Because they are older, they've had the experience and because they've had the experience it's given them the eye and because they have the eye they see aright. When I try telling that to a gang of teenagers or twenty-year-old people — well indeed try telling this in Athens because even then they didn't like it much. It just sounds silly now. I mean, if we went and said to young people: I don't think you should do that because I've canvassed all my friends aged fifty-plus and they're against it, they'd laugh at you. And they would rightly laugh at you because they don't believe getting older improves your moral eyesight. Now, are they right or wrong?

Bart Pattyn: In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* we learn that ethical convictions can be understood as forms of confidence: we have confidence that someone or something is important, that it is advisable to be courageous in certain circumstances, that it is important to be loyal or that it is meaningful to remain faithful.

But what if confidence is lacking? What if indifference and boredom take over? What if nothing appears any longer as worthy of care or struggle? In such circumstances, being courageous, consistent and faithful is no longer so evident. In communities where it makes little difference to do one thing and to ignore others, heroes and saints are comparatively rare. Whenever thicker kinds of ethical concepts lose their evident character, philosophers often feel themselves called upon to defend the credit worthiness of ethical concepts with rational arguments and complex theories. Prof. Williams shows that, in such cases, they are biting off more than they can chew. It is difficult, if not impossible, to argue over moral convictions, and when we try to do it, the result is often narrow-minded. He himself seems not to be tempted to dramatize this loss of credibility and to enter a plea for conservatism, as some among us have done. I have the impression that he was not so impressed by the letters he received when chairing the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship from morally indignant people who wondered in which morally questionable direction our society is drifting. The Committee's report, in any case, is spared all form of moralism. Regarding the fear that our society might disintegrate, we read in the report that the members of the Committee took account of every community's need for a certain degree of moral consensus, "but moral opinion can, and does, change without the disintegration of society. One thing that can happen is that the society moves to a new consensus; another is that it supports, in some particular area, a real degree of variety and pluralism". The same optimistic tone can be heard when one reads, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*: "Confidence is merely one good among others: it has a price, and the price should not be set too high".

Apart from my curiosity how you would deal with current forms of obscenity in the mass media — in Belgium we have become very sensitive to this — I would like to ask why you end your philosophical reflection on confidence when you say: "it is a social and psychological question what kind of institutions, upbringing and public discourse help to foster it". Can

the philosopher allow himself to hand over the matter to others at that point in his reasoning? Would it not be advisable to reflect on the techniques of mass psychology used by marketing specialists and television producers to create artificial confidence?

Bernard Williams: Well, that raises a lot of very deep questions. I'm not actually sure whether you're accusing me of being a conservative or of being an optimist. I don't take them to be the same. I'm not particularly optimistic and I certainly don't think I'm particularly conservative but the way in which I'm not a conservative is certainly not that I'm a great believer in visionary schemes of social improvement which are going to be put forward by a lot of philosophical reasoning. So maybe you talk about optimism in regard to philosophy which is not the same thing. It's only certain kinds of philosophers who think that optimism and optimism about philosophy are the same thing. With regard to obscenity, that's a specific issue. It is true that our committee thought that pornography, the significance of pornography, had been exaggerated with regard to general moral corruption and discontent and so on, that it's a very easy focus for many feelings of a conservative kind about how our society is changing. In fact there were particular organizations in Britain at that time which centred very much on alleged pornography and the media and in broadcasting and so on, but actually this was the expression of a very conservative moral agenda, in fact a rather fundamentalist group. So we were rather trying to cool the atmosphere in regard to this particular phenomenon as a matter of fact. But regarding your fundamental question: you say I speak in terms of confidence as a roughly social category and you say, `but what if there isn't any?' And you address that to me as if that was especially a question to me, but then the utilitarian, the Kantian, the ethical theorist says: I have reason to make people think they ought to live in a certain moral way and I say: And what if they don't listen to me? What if it has no effect? Now, why is that `What if?' not just as forceful as the `What if?' you directed to me? The point is that the powers of philosophy are the same whether you take the rationalistic view or you take the less rationalistic view.

Now, this truth was known to Plato. What people talk about is the power of reason, and obviously my views are not Platonic, that's manifest, but Plato's question was: How can the power of reason be made

into a social power? That was the question. And the answer was: By running an exceedingly authoritarian society. There is no other way of doing it. Reason will not, as it were, transform society on its own. Now, he must have been right about that. This comes back to the question we asked earlier, which is still an extremely interesting question: How do we construe the invention and progress of liberalism? Kant thought that it was something rather like reason transforming society on its own. He did think this, but it is, let us say, socially and historically a little unsupported, if you see what I mean. It's a little unfulfilled. After him there was a philosopher who tried to tell us what it was that made it the case that reason could change society and that was Hegel, but we don't believe the story anymore, at least I don't and most of us don't. If you say that philosophy is committed to the idea that reason can transform society by itself then you owe us a story of what the mechanism is and how that process relates to social forces which we know transform society and that's what the Hegelian project was and most of us are in the situation at the moment of thinking that that project, whether it be in its Hegelian form or in its Marxist form, isn't a very good story. "Les grands récits" that were supposed to deliver these results are not in good shape, so I wait for the next one. I can give you my own views: one is that I think that it's always a mistake to divorce the power of argument or philosophical reason and make it antecedent to social change. But it's equally a mistake to be totally reductive and think that all reasons are simply epiphenomenal, that changes, otherwise identified, are the real motive power. Marxism always failed to deliver on what it was that, in the famous Marxist phrase "in the last analysis", changed society and we have no reason to believe him, so reason plays some role in that. But the fundamental slogan comes from Goethe's Faust: "Im Anphang war die Tat." What comes first is that somebody does something, usually which they don't understand and the consequences of which they certainly don't foresee. Now, there's one other thing I would say.

You did throw in the suggestion towards the end of your remarks that we might mobilize the forces of mass persuasion to try and make people more moral and better. I mean is it a serious proposal or an argument against my position?

Bart Pattyn: It is not an argument against your position. I was wondering if a philosopher could restrict his thoughts about confidence to the non-psychological or non-sociological aspects of this question.

Marc Hooghe: You more or less have to assume that everybody has a sense of fairness within their moral dispositions but maybe this isn't true.

Bernard Williams: Well, maybe it isn't. I mean that seems to me an empirical question. Do you think it's not an empirical question?

Marc Hooghe: Yes, but let's suppose it isn't like that, then we need a kind of theory or criterion, a theory to say that these dispositions are less valid than others.

Bernard Williams: Well, suppose it isn't so, then we're in a mess. That's absolutely true, I mean there have been social groups who lost any sense of fairness or other such notions. They ended up like the mountain people and their life was extraordinarily miserable, a social mess. Now, it's not a good idea for there to be no sense of fairness around in society. I now see no reason at all to believe there's no sense of fairness around in society.

Marc Hooghe: Let's suppose that the large majority of society adheres to such an ideal and a small percentage does not.

Bernard Williams: That's reality. That's how things actually are. Now, next question: Do you think that if I now wheel out an ethical theory I'm going to convert them?

Marc Hooghe: Maybe it will be easier.

Bernard Williams: Why?

Marc Hooghe: I mean if you invoke the power of reason it's a very powerful argument. Other arguments are less powerful. It's not legitimate to tell something which is not reasonable, which is contradicting itself. On the other hand you can say: I simply have different dispositions than you have and that's the end of the story.

Bernard Williams: Well it seems, with respect, that there are two propositions there, one of which is obviously true, the other of which is false. What is obviously true is that if you're assessing things as arguments, arguments do better than things that aren't arguments. In other words an argument is a better argument than a non-argument. That's self-evidently true. What isn't true is that what changes a situation in which people are very unfair and nasty is more likely to be an argument than something that isn't an argument. That's not true. What I suggest is that you take a sack full of utilitarianism or Kantianism or whatever the preferred mark of ethical theory is and try it out in Serbia. What happened in Serbia or Bosnia was that people had lost the sense of living with their neighbours and of fairness and of living in a community which had to operate under law. They'd been taken over by the most primitive forms of loyalty and then exactly the ground that is needed for using your ethical theories is what is then absent. Somebody's got to stop the war, shake them up, appeal to their images of what they can do before anybody can start these arguments, and therefore it seems to me just inappropriate to appeal to situations of extremity to motivate the force of moral arguments. Not surprisingly, moral arguments do better when the situation is not very extreme. That's because you have a bit of elbow room. That's even a part of *Was ist Aufklarung?* People aren't so stuck to necessity that they can't begin to reflect on their situation in argumentative terms.

Carlos Steel: You discuss at length in *Shame and Necessity* Aristotle's defence of slavery. Is that an ethical theory for you?

Bernard Williams: Well, it's quite an interesting question whether it is. What it actually is is a sort of metaphysical or anthropological theory for social practice.
Carlos Steel: The important thing is that Aristotle tries to find arguments, reasons, to defend the institution of slavery. He doesn't just take slavery to be a necessity. If it has a function at all, if you have to accept it as part of society, then you have to find reasons, and one can then argue that his reasons to defend slavery are wrong, are contradictory, because there are other texts where he seems to accept that slaves have forms of reason. In fact the way you discuss Aristotle's own theory of slavery is a kind of arguing with reasons against reasons, etc. Now, once you are doing that, I think that an ethical theory can have a function, a critical function. At the moment you give justifications and these justifications seem not to be justifications at all, they seem to be contradictory, then even the institution itself becomes questionable.

Bernard Williams: It's very helpful to bring up this clear case. I just totally disagree with you. I give a different picture. Nobody ever accepted slavery because they agreed with Aristotle's argument. Aristotle's argument is an *ex post* attempt to justify a somewhat modified version of slavery, Greek slavery. Now, it's not irrelevant that the arguments are terrible. Even by the going standards, they were terrible arguments. The fact they're terrible is connected with the fact that they are a manifest rationalization of something that already exists, and the best argument he can think of is that one simply fails to fit the practice. Now, the reason for that is that the explanation of slavery and of its acceptance hasn't got much to do with these functionalized arguments that he is deploying. It is a form of social organization which enables you to produce, say, cultural leisure surplus by getting other people to do productive work by terror. Now, the great virtue of the traditional Greek attitude to it, while it did not make slavery a good thing or a justified thing, was that it acknowledged the fact, that it wasn't based on a lie. Of course there was always snobbish or aristocratic rhetoric. I actually quote some Greek poet who mentions all that stuff about the aristocrat stands straight and the slave is bent over, slaves look like frogs and aristocrats look like trees. You know all that stuff and you would expect that from Theogones.

But they recognized the fact that it's based on force. That's what slavery was and therefore they have a virtue which they recognized as a virtue and we recognize as a virtue, which is honesty. They weren't humbug. Aristotle's account is absolute sheer humbug, it's rubbish. It's an attempt to turn into a form of reason what is in fact an argument that is based upon the functionality of violence for a certain way of life. Now we can grant them the fact that they didn't have, or they didn't see any alternative to that way of life. Maybe there wasn't one. That's another question. But they didn't see one and that's what it was based on. It was based in every sense, as I said in the book, on the category of necessity. Of course, you may be right in saying this much: that Aristotle's attempt to produce a functional, metaphysically or anthropologically based argument for it is a step in the direction of its collapsing, but that's because people don't wish to face the fact that it's simply based on force. They want to be able to justify it. Now which is the cause and which is the effect, that's a good question. I think I'm quoting Nietzsche, more or less, when I say that there is actually one thing worse than slavery which is to think slavery is justified. To try to justify it actually makes it worse, because you add to the violence of slavery the humbug of pretending that it isn't based on violence.

Carlos Steel: I'm not defending the justification of slavery, I'm just saying that once you put it on the agenda of reason and arguments and justification you start something. Once you start discussing the role of women and men, once you start doing that, in a way I think that ethical theories have been an important factor in social cultural change.

Bernard Williams: Some have in some cases.

Carlos Steel: Of course this is an historical discussion, but I think it cannot be denied that certain ideas or theories come to be developed, and for various reasons get in the media, in books and come to influence things.

Bernard Williams: Let me ask you this. This is not as it were a dialectical question, it's a straight question. Consider the abolition of the slave trade in England. As you know, Britain was part of the leading element in the slave trade and it packed it up long before slavery eventually came to be ended in the United States, with the committees of the House of Lords and others finally banning the slave trade with tremendous agitation from quakers and other Christians. But what had great effect — I remember Herbert Hartle used to tell me this — what had great effect on the committee of the House of Lords wasn't people giving theoretical reasons. They sort of knew the reasons already. Everybody knows what's bad about slavery, it's not a mystery. Plus the fact that, as you know, a lot of people in those days would have shared the racist assumptions which came to help the slave trade in the modern era, and the interesting thing was that what carried most weight was that the reformers brought to them the instruments of slavery. They displayed to their lordships the manacles, the collars, the whips — they would have brought photographs had they been available — they brought before them people who had been lashed and they told them how many people had died in the ships. They showed them what the ships were like. It was simply the barrage of what Hume would have called vivid impressions which persuaded them. They were told what this business actually was and then they were faced with that and they said: Do you will that this should continue?

Carlos Steel: You could say the same is true for utilitarian theories. In a way, whatever you may think of it philosophically, in a way it has been effective in the reduction of punishment. If you accept that ...

Bernard Williams: No, sorry, that it's been effective in the reduction of punishment is extremely unclear. I mean the history of utilitarianism in the history of punishment is extremely ambivalent. After all it was Bentham who invented the idea of the Panopticon and scientific penal policy. Now since scientific penal policy is almost a totally irrational nightmare which we're still living with, I don't think that should be put up on the utilitarian success board.

John Stuart Mill was a great man, he was a very noble and radical figure, and he was somewhat uneasy about utilitarians, but I think he did better with the rights of women, really. I don't think penal policy is good news on the whole. But I do agree with you that it's not a bad idea to think about penal policy and the utilitarian spirit. As Nietzsche correctly says anything called "the function of punishment" is unrecoverable because, as he puts it, nothing can be given the definition except things that have no history, and you have to tell the story of these archeological levels which have led to the modern institutions of punishment which are actually rationally unintelligible I'm afraid.

Carlos Steel: As an example for punishment being in defence of a form of theory, ethical theory, we could look at Plato himself. As has been shown, Plato's theory of punishment in the Laws is absolutely radical against the existing terrible practices of punishment. You cannot deny the importance of theorizing on very important moral elements in a change of society.

Bernard Williams: Let me just say once again very quickly I've got nothing against bringing up theoretical, reflective considerations with regard to social and moral practices. The question is how much value there is in ethical theory in the sense which philosophers particularly use it. That is the issue. There's another dimension which I've not mentioned. I won't go into it now but I do actually believe that there's more room for certain kinds of systematic theory nearer to ethical theory with regard to political and social practices than in regard to personal ethics. That's because of the nature of our state, that is, that it's a discursive state. I mean, that's what a liberal state is. It has to explain things to itself in general terms. That's actually quite a good idea, certainly the only game in town which is tolerable.

William Desmond: You've repeatedly expressed your admiration for Nietzsche. As you know yourself there are many Nietzsches, but I wonder how one Nietzsche (I think a very justifiable Nietzsche) might less create problems for you, as require some response. How you would respond to something like this: Suppose we see Nietzsche as a kind of mutant in the Kantian family?

This is not entirely unpersuasive in this sense: One way to read Kant would be to say he wants to have a rationalized form of autonomous will. Yet another Kantian, or anyway a philosopher in that family, namely Schopenhauer, will reply that the very rationality of the will leads into a darker source. This source is not at all transparent to itself; and Nietzsche will suggest that while this source is the source of the subject it also destroys that subject. It's not unimportant that Nietzsche himself returned to the presocratic Greeks for some sense of that deeper original source, the Dionysian source. Later Nietzsche will come to describe that in terms of the language of will to power and again this is a very ambiguous. But certainly one of Nietzsche's deployments of will to power is against any easy self-justification of modernity and certainly the modern liberal state, and the Enlightenment. Thus his rejection of the modern approach to the distinction between slaves and masters: the truth about nature is not fairness but differences that want to accentuate themselves. Some of the traditional systems of slavery were not infected by the bad conscience that Christianity especially makes more tender. You are no banner carrier for institutions like slavery, yet there is your admiration for Nietzsche. I would be interested in your response to that other darker Nietzsche.

Bernard Williams: Well, thank you for those remarks. No he's not the only philosopher I warm to. I said earlier I do regard Kant as the greatest modern philosopher, I just don't agree with him. I think that Nietzsche is certainly the greatest, if you want to use the expression, "moral philosopher" of more recent times. I once had a great admiration for Hume. Now I think that he suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism. Nobody who's got to 1999 can take it that seriously. Now it seems to me that you're absolutely right in reminding us that there are many Nietzsches and in a way he brought that about himself and almost intended to. It's very important about the work, it's no accident that it's so hard, thank goodness, to turn Nietzsche into an academic philosopher. He made it that way. That was the idea, and it seems to me a very good idea actually.

It's also, I think, inherent in his view and also, if I can put it this way, inherent in the truth of some of his view that there are going to be bits which modern readers of at least my sort of outlook and many other people are going to find repellent and useless. I think that's just inevitable; that's the way it is. I don't make many dogmatic unifying claims about Nietzsche because I think that's usually an unhelpful way to go about it, but I do make one which is that the deconstructionist tradition which has identified Nietzsche's views about truth and the value of truth with the sort of thing that is said in "On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense" are mistaken. I mean that his problem, his aim, was not to get rid of the category of truth at all. In my view, he correctly saw that the huge respect for the intrinsic value of truth shares the same origins as the metaphysical values he was opposed to. He was concerned among other things about how you put it back, how you recover it, how he could go tell a story about his own honesty which divorced it from the self-destructive honesty of late Christianity, as it were. That interests me very much. On the whole, I think a lot of his insights in the direction of moral psychology are correctively salutary.

I think there's a great deal in the general rule adopted by Freud, you know, look for the shameful story which has been buried, that's not a bad line on the whole, though he overdoes it a little. I agree with you about the Kantian derivation via Schopenhauer. He actually said at one point that when people come to realize what the philosophy of Kant really means they will see that it causes absolute destruction, that it was not, as it were, the justification of all the things it was supposed to be the justification of. I have a lot of trouble with the concept of the will to power, particularly in the Heideggerian emphasis: this sort of metaphysical force in the Nachlass. I belong to the Anglo-American view that those things are best left where Nietzsche left them, just like a lot of Wittgenstein's Nachlass actually. If he wrote it and put it in the waste basket, his sister should have left it in the waste basket. But the point I principally want to make is that I do think that the weakest part of Nietzsche's work by far is when he addresses himself to social and political formations in modernity, and I share to this extent the view of Mark Warren in his book about Nietzsche's politics (*Nietzsche and Political Thought*) that Nietzsche didn't understand what a modern society was. There were various reasons for that. One was that he'd been brought up in Germany,

being surrounded by something that wasn't a modern society fundamentally. I mean, Germany's great problem was how to become one. It's not a problem they solved in a spectacularly successful manner for a hundred years. That was a local feature, part of the problem goes right back to Goethe, whom Nietzsche quite rightly admired enormously, and he didn't read or have an experience of much formations which would have given him a different view what a modern society could be. He was brought up as a classical philologist despite his wide reading in other areas and I think that a lot of his pictures of liberalism, the co-operative movement, socialism and so on are just nonsense. I mean they're just those of a dotty reactionary, aristocratic German professor of the middle of the 19th century and we have to leave that out of it.

William Desmond: One of the reasons why I think Nietzsche has exercised a spell over so many is that he exhibits a certain magic to the extremes, as he himself acknowledges.

Bernard Williams: Absolutely, of course, that's right.

William Desmond: Will that magic of the extreme lead to the destruction of commitments of the more moderate sort we find in the English common sense tradition?

Bernard Williams: I don't think so, with respect, I mean I think no doubt that's true and I think that in its social history it might be thought that Britain has been more fortunate than, say, Germany if you look back over the last 300 years, but not in other aspects, for instance culturally. That's why my friend John Skorupski always says I shouldn't go on so much Nietzsche, but that I ought to look at the English Nietzsche, namely John Stuart Mill. That seems to me to be pushing it a bit, but I see what he means. I agree with you, but I think he had no conception of how a modern society works, for instance the concept of Weber. Weber was very influenced in certain respects by Nietzsche, but his ideas would have been quite strange to Nietzsche.

I mean the idea that there are self-regulating social structures, that there are always forms of authority which are quite different from those of big leaders and so on. I mean, none of this is anywhere in Nietzsche, he doesn't understand this. Once you've learned some elementary modern social theory you won't look at things like that. Now Warren thinks that if you allow him that, then take his principles, that you'll end up with liberalism. That seems to me wrong. I think the challenge is much worse than that. I would put it like this. I think that Nietzsche came to many true conclusions about the nature of morality's relation to humanity, the value of truth and things of that kind and raised the most fundamental problems about that, and we know we have very good reason to think that the institutions of a civil society of a roughly liberal form are about the only thing that are likely to stop people behaving in ways that Nietzsche himself foresaw with total horror, and which we have seen. Now, the question is: Is there any way of making those institutions live in a moderately honest way, in a sort of way that Nietzsche was right about? That seems to be the problem which his work poses.

William Desmond: I think that on Nietzsche's own terms, it is difficult to live in terms of a moderate honesty. At a certain point a genuine honesty will be led to raise questions about its own justification. When honesty goes to the limit, one discover that what justifies some social arrangements are in fact lies. Nietzsche adds that they are necessary lies. This poses difficulties for philosophers who would wish to be radically honest. If one becomes hyperconscious of the fact that it's only lies posing as truth that sustain social solidarity, can one continue to live in that society without severe dislocation? I think this is the bind that Nietzsche found himself in.

Bernard Williams: Well, that's absolutely right and part of his great power is that he makes it perfectly clear that that is the bind, and so we had better try to get out of it and you speak exactly to that. It's very interesting that you put it like that, and I'm very grateful to you because you speak exactly to the project which I'm concerned about. I mean, I do think that's a central question that we're confronted with and that he knew much better than many of those who reply to him what was involved in these various sorts of enterprises. Now, let me just say two things very quickly, since I think I'm rather unlikely

to be giving a slick answer to it. One is I think that Nietzsche and Foucault, Foucault in the steps of Nietzsche in this respect, did too much tie the notion of the genealogy, a naturalistic genealogy to a condemnatory or disapproving conclusion. That is, they tied it to the idea that genealogy always finds a phrase I already quoted, a *pudenda origo*, a shameful origin. Now I don't think that's true. I think there is such a thing as a vindicatory genealogy of the naturalistic kind. It's still offensive to pure Platonic or Kantian reason. I mean, Hume's derivation of justice and property is an example of what I call a vindicatory genealogy. What I mean by that is it's a naturalistic reconstruction of the rules of justice based on pre-moral — well, sort of pre-moral: motives of sympathy are involved — but not pre-right. If you understand it you can still believe in justice. It tells quite a good story; it doesn't look quite the same as it did before you started but it doesn't damage it, whereas if you really believe what Nietzsche tells you about a lot of these moral motives, then it's very difficult to have them. So that's one consideration.

The second thing is you very interestingly brought into one frame of reference the notion of whether it's based on lies and whether it involves hyperconsciousness. Now, I'm very against lies. I admit that's a first-order value of mine of the Nietzschean kind, and I have to admit to being fairly shameless about that, but that seems to me to be a value which certainly philosophers are very ill-advised to give up. They better try and tell the truth, on the whole. I mean truthfulness seems to me to be part of the profession, if it's worth doing, but I'm not so keen on hyperconsciousness and that seems to me consistent. There's an old slogan in English: Ask no questions and you get told no lies. It may be that some questions you had better not ask because the answers to them are going to be lies. Now, Nietzsche actually thought that hyperconsciousness in itself was part of decadence because he thought that if you didn't have the form of confidence we were discussing earlier, then you were in a state in which you couldn't do anything, where the thing imploded really into the hyperaesthetic and all those things he calls decadence.

William Desmond: We are often reticent and we often maintain silences, because if we ask the question it would be destructive.

Bernard Williams: Well, you see why it's connected with the sense of the dotty I was referring to.

William Desmond: The dotty at one level, but also I think the tragic. I mean Nietzsche's admiration for presocratic Greeks was precisely that they asked such questions; his feeling was that they didn't tell lies; but the way in which they answered through tragedy was not philosophical in a rationalizing sense, and some of this had a salutary effect on the social whole.

Bernard Williams: Well he thought that. I'm sure you correctly interpret Nietzsche; the trouble is that his account of what archaic, presocratic society was like is pretty fanciful, but I absolutely agree with you about the area of concern.

Toon Vandevelde: I would like to ask you a question on your distinction between internal and external reasons for action. You tell us that only internal reasons for action can explain it, that there are only internal reasons for action and that you reject external reasons. Yet it seems to me that there are certainly some external considerations, maybe not motivations, but external factors that help to explain. Take the example of marriage: whatever may be the actual motivations of married people, there is a lot of evidence that the stability of marriage is to a large extent determined by the accessibility of the exit option for both partners. Apparently the social regulation of marriage is not just an external factor that codetermines the way that people experience their marriage. I can pose the same question in a more elaborate way by referring to your article "Formal Structures and Social Reality". I was struck by the fact that in this article, you refer almost exclusively to motivational structures. Now, as an economist, I like to think about human action in terms of desires on the one hand and situational constraints on the other hand. So maybe I agree with you, but I think that motivations are not all that matters. One could even say that, from a policy point of view, contextual or situational or institutional side constraints of human action matter more than human motivation, for example Thomas More, who asked why there were so many murders in England in the 16th century, answered that theft was punishable by the death penalty, so thieves that were caught stealing would murder any witnesses. Now from a policy point of view you should not try to change his motivations, the instinct of survival. You should change things by abolishing capital punishment at least for minor crimes. So it seems to me that these considerations are highly important if one wants to elucidate the kind of structure that might support cooperation.

Bernard Williams: That's a very interesting question. I don't think there's anything in it that I have to disagree with because I think your remarks about external considerations are not, as you yourself have said, connected with what I identified as "external reasons". The only thing that I would say, and I think this is not interesting for the moment, is that you didn't quite adequately express my view at the very beginning of what you said, namely that there weren't any external reasons because actions had to be explained by the agent's motivational state. That's not what I said. What I said was everybody has to agree that explanation has to go through the motivational state, which is what we'll come to, therefore those who believe that there are such things as external reasons have to explain what happens if in fact they come to explain what the agent does. Now, I don't think we need to linger over that bit for the moment because I don't think that's what you're really asking about. You see, in all the cases you've taken, the idea of an external reason was the idea that somebody could say that somebody has a reason to do something although that is not mirrored or contained in or implicit in his motivational state. That's the consideration, that's what external reasons are about. You have reminded us that there are a lot of explanations of people doing things which don't go directly through the agent's motivational state — the agent's `S' — but they aren't typically reasons for him doing it. Or in the cases you've given me in which they are reasons for him doing it, they do run through his motivational state. What you've shown is this: suppose I've got an agent, and there are two courses which he can take, or again this is a thief and there are two courses he can take: murder witnesses, not murder witnesses.

Now, you draw our attention to various social conditions. Let's stick to the divorce case for the moment, and mutatis mutandis we can run the same story for the witness murders: independent income, divorce laws, etcetera, and this is an external state. Now, does the existence of the possibility of an independent income give this woman a reason to divorce her husband. That's the question. Or to put it more generally, how does this social fact affect this outcome. The answer is that it must be like that, specifically it must be like that if what this does is give her a reason, because it means that the fact that she can make money to survive, although she is divorced, is mirrored, even if in a confused form, in her motivational state. Then, as you rightly say, the general effect of all this is to alter the motivational background. For instance, she has a general disposition not to look like an irresponsible, shamed or excluded woman. She doesn't want to look like the woman in *The Scarlet Letter*. She doesn't want to be going around the place with a figurative condemnation of her. She has an aversion to social shame. Now, when we change the social background, the shame or rejection or peculiarity attached to being a divorced woman, especially one who initiates the divorce, is reduced. Amazingly, or not amazingly, this leads to more people getting divorced. But only because it runs through their S.

Toon Vandevelde: You could also give examples where there is a kind of external determination without ever being capable of having an influence on the motivational state. Take gift relations. From an external point of view they are engaged in a kind of tit for tat exchange, but from an internal point of view, from the point of view of the actors, they would be indignant if you said they are engaged in this reciprocity.

Bernard Williams: That is correct. Now, I agree with you that there are a lot of interpretational relations which have to be brought in if you're trying to tell a story about how social facts influence outcomes, and not just influence it but also explain. Now, I absolutely agree with you that not all social explanations are in terms of individual motivation, that's true. However, my paper was only about explaining individual action and in particular explaining individual action in terms of reason. I don't believe that any of these explanatory general social facts will explain action in terms of

reasons unless it runs through the S. Now, if you say: why has she started to complain that she doesn't get a Christmas present, the answer is, because she tends to expect people to give her presents if she's giving them presents. Now the next question is what's the explanation of her thinking that? Answer: She lives in a society in which as a matter of fact gift relations are controlled, though the agents aren't aware of this, by reciprocity considerations. Does that make sense?

Toon Vandevelde: The problem is that you have, let's say, two different kinds of telling about the same reality, and what is the connection between them?

Bernard Williams Can I give you another example? What about the modalities connected with religious behaviour? We note that the inhabitants of a certain place are very diffident about entering a certain place, let us say for instance that women are very diffident about entering a mosque. So we find that though the men go in at certain times, they take off their shoes and in they go, the women do something else. We ask: Why are they doing that? Now there is no mistaking that they're doing it intentionally. That's an important statement. It isn't for instance that the men have generated an electric current such that when the women tried to go in they would receive a shock. It's not like that; it's a thought which stops them going in. They say: "Well, its forbidden". Of course, "it's forbidden" is only an abbreviated explanation; it's forbidden and they know it's forbidden. Then we do a bit of anthropology: it is forbidden in the mode of the religious, that is, that the explanation they've been given — the legitimation — has got something to do with Allah and the Koran. It's not forbidden just on health grounds or one of those reasons. Then we ask why is it forbidden. And we get a piece of theoretical sociology which tells us something about why this sort of society has very strong gender divisions in regard to religious practice. Now, that all seems to me to make sense, it means that the explanation of a practice is a different sort of thing than the way in which the practice works. Now do you think I need a unification there that I haven't got?

Toon Vandevelde: Well, the economist would say that there is regulation, without this regulation becoming, let's say, an immediate motive for action.

Bernard Williams: I'm having a problem in locating the view that you're opposing to mine. I understand notions like what marriage means. These seem to me to be socially hermeneutical categories, that is, I'm going to tell a story about what in this society marriage means, and some of that — quite a lot of that — has to do with motivation and some of it doesn't. For instance some of it helps to explain why people get taught some things and not others. It helps to explain why for instance when they get married the ceremony has one character rather than another, for instance, why it is taken as an occasion of rejoicing instead of being conducted like a funeral, but then you add your economist's picture about side constraints. That's quite a different story. That is an amazingly schematic description of that decision which is done in terms of costs, benefits, side constraints and so on, and the way this works is that it makes divorce much less expensive. Previously divorce was prohibitively expensive because of zero income, social rejection, thus no prospects for the future. That seems to me to represent the interface between individual and society entirely in terms of costs and benefits.

   Now, if you are asking whether only motivations explain what people do, I don't believe that. That's because many things explain people's motivations which aren't themselves motivations. One of the ways they explain their motivations is by their absence, that is to say — but I've made that point in several places — one form of moral education, for instance, is to bring it about that certain considerations never even occur to somebody. That's the point about necessity and so on.

Jaap Van Brakel: I'm always at the end because my questions are very boring. I'm not going to present my views, I just have some questions. I wonder whether you would mind if I asked four questions to which you answer with just one word.

Bernard Williams: I don't guarantee you that in advance. That would be very imprudent to agree to do that in advance.

"Have you stopped beating your wife?" "Yes." Do you want me to answer them one by one, or after you have given all four?

Jaap Van Brakel: I would like to ask two questions afterwards which are a bit longer but just now I will ask one — we're already spending much more time discussing what we are going to do.

Bernard Williams: Yes, but I mean do you want to ask 1,2,3,4 or 1, answer, 2, answer, ...

Jaap Van Brakel: One, answer, ...

Bernard Williams: O.K., fine, fire away.

Jaap Van Brakel: Thank you. You use expressions like asking for a story how something works, and asking for reasons. Is that something different?

Bernard Williams: Sorry, I can't give you an answer because I'm not quite sure what the question is. Is there a difference between asking for a reason and asking how it works? Yes.

Jaap Van Brakel: Do you make a clear distinction between issues that are reducible to empirical questions and other issues?

Bernard Williams: No.

Jaap Van Brakel: [third question] When you say things like `Aristotle's account is absolute sheer humbug, it's rubbish' [i.e. Aristotle's `argument' concerning slavery], or `Nietzsche came to many true conclusions' [about the nature of morality's relation to humanity], are you appealing to universal reason?

Bernard Williams: No. Well, sorry, there I can't say yes or no.

Jaap Van Brakel: You could say `dotty' or `humbug' or `no answer'.

Bernard Williams: Well, the trouble is how to define universal reason, because in our much earlier discussions this morning, we appealed to universal reason in a rather special sense.

Of course there's a sense in which I'm appealing to universal reason. One is that in making all those remarks I'm saying that if I assert or have a right to assert P, I don't have a right to assert not P. That's appealing to universal reason, so of course I'm appealing to universal reason.

Jaap Van Brakel: [fourth brief question] What would you think of the suggestion that what we need in moral philosophy is inspired adhoccery?

Bernard Williams: I thought you were asking a question to be answered by yes or no, but you just asked what do I think about ...

Jaap Van Brakel: You can also reply `humbug'.

Bernard Williams: I see, but that's a new rule.

Jaap Van Brakel: I said `one word', I didn't say `yes or no'.

Bernard Williams: I thought you said one word, yes or no. OK, you meant one word, *for example*, yes or no.

Jaap Van Brakel: I asked you to answer the question with one word. That word could be `dotty' or `excellent' or `humbug'.

Bernard Williams: Ask the last question again.

Jaap Van Brakel: What do you think of an appeal to what Stanley Fish has called `inspired adhoccery'. Is that a good thing for moral philosophy?

Bernard Williams: Well I'd say if I knew what it was I'd say yes, all right?

Jaap Van Brakel: Thank you. Then, if I may, I'll ask my two `real' questions; both are straightforward questions too. I'll first mention them and then elaborate a bit.

Bernard Williams: Very socratic kit you're using: whenever anybody says with that innocent look, "I'm just asking a perfectly simple question", it usually means it's got some trap in it.

Jaap Van Brakel: The first question is: How many *we*s

are there? The second question is: What goes with the `we' of `science and logic' and what with the parochial `us'? To make it a bit more concrete I'll give two quotes from your review of Thomas Nagel's *Last Word* in the NYRB of last week.

Bernard Williams: I suspected this was coming up.

Jaap Van Brakel: In this review you suggest that there are two wes: the contrastive we and the inclusive we. I'll now mention four possibly other wes culled from your writings and would like to ask how they fit in with the inclusive and contrastive we.
— There might be groups with which we are in the universe, and if we can understand that fact, then they also belong to we: the all-in-the-universe we.
— The we which is not one group rather than another in the world at all, but rather the plural descendant of that idealist I who also is not one item rather than another in the world: the transcendental we.
— The we of morality that is potentially broader than the group that could share science: Kant's moral we.
— The we of the encounter between two persons, sharing the project of investigating the world: I'll call this the `first contact we'.

So my question is: are these four wes all part of the inclusive we, are some of them perhaps `false' [i.e., without reference or extension] in that you merely mention them but are not committed to them, or something else again.
 If I may I'll add a second question which covers the same subject. In the Nagel book review you say: "Parts of our morality, for instance, our longer-haul historical narratives, or our models of personal self-understanding, are more open to suspicion, more liable to be shown in an unsettling way to depend on a narrow and parochial `us', than our science or our logic are." A preliminary question could be: Is this statement part of science and logic or part of some parochial chit chat? But I want to ask something much more concrete. In the Nagel review you also say something about greenness and funniness which I'll quote leaving the funniness out:

"Our concept of greenness is surely rooted in our sensibility and in our ways of responding to the world" and also: "we cannot say and think just what we do say and think about greenness without using this concept, or concepts like it". Assume somebody would disagree with one or both of these statements. Is this a disagreement in science and logic or a parochial one and would the answer depend on whether one takes the we in the statements about the concept of greenness in an inclusive or exclusive sense?

So my questions are how do the four wes fit in and how does greenness or talk about it fit into the dichotomy of the scientific us and the parochial us.

Bernard Williams: Right, well I don't think I can give very short answers to those questions. The last one is an extremely difficult question. Partly because, as I can see which way your thought is going, that the issue, the claim made about the status of greenness in our experience and so on is some form of philosophical question or claim in the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, etc., and that it therefore ought to command a fairly wide status, but of course it itself embeds the claim that you can't understand this unless you can understand green and you can't understand green unless you use it, so how could you discuss it with somebody who hadn't got it. That is a problem. The problem, I take it, is that it would have to be done at a more abstract level. It's a little like the old issue that used to arise in for instance *Der logische Aufbau*, the idea that what you couldn't map onto various experiences is going to be a form, a certain form predication. It's tied up with questions about qualia and all that. Suppose that we were confronted with a group of human beings who were genetically colour blind in both genders. It's a contingent fact presumably that we aren't.

Jaap Van Brakel: I was thinking more of those questions that already arise if we assume that nobody is `colour blind'.

Bernard Williams: I thought that would be the problem.

Jaap Van Brakel: I thought it would be a common sort of question to ask.

Bernard Williams: But that looks as if it's inherent to the last question that you asked me.

Jaap Van Brakel: Yes, the general question is the same: what goes with the we of science and logic and what with the parochial us?

Bernard Williams: Well, that's exactly what I'm speaking to. It's meant to go with the we of science and logic but it has this problem, namely that it embeds something which is a feature of our experience. It's quite a well-known problem. It's a problem that was discussed for instance by Carnap and others of that stage in the development of thought about these matters.

Jaap Van Brakel: If I may interrupt, if `it embeds something which is a feature of our experience' is `it' [the same `it' as in the quote] also supposed to go with the we of science and logic?

Bernard Williams: Yes, suppose I'm giving you a thought experiment in which green is a parochial perspectival concept. I mean it's a human perspectival concept as things stand and maybe a bit beyond human but we don't know any other groups, obviously, who have a similar experience or way of sorting reality and also talk about it, so it's for us a human one, but I take that to be a contingent fact. It could be otherwise.

Jaap Van Brakel: Then perhaps you could first answer my question about how the four wes I mentioned fit into the inclusive/contrastive dichotomy.

Bernard Williams: There's a slight difference here. The contrastive/inclusive distinction, though I've applied it to contrastive we and inclusive we, is actually a linguistic distinction, a distinction between two uses of the expression we, one of which means effectively we as opposed to they and one of which doesn't. The inclusive we therefore has the widest range, if you like, and for these purposes I don't think I need to distinguish between them. I think the distinction between the first two you gave me — the distinction between the universal and transcendental — doesn't matter for the present discussion unless you tell me otherwise.

Jaap Van Brakel: I agree that it doesn't matter directly. What I'd like to know is whether the transcendental we is a third kind of we or whether it's nothing or whether it fits into one or the other of the inclusive/contrastive

dichotomy.

Bernard Williams: Well, I think whether it's nothing is an extremely difficult question, one which Jonathan Lear addressed in "The Disappearing "We"", and the question is how firmly does it disappear, and I don't think I have a settled view about that because I find it extremely difficult. It's very much tied up with the matter of science. Now, Kant thought that it was important to make a distinction between a logical we and a scientific we, as also between a moral we and a scientific we, because he thought that science was relative to a set of capacities, capacities of transcendental psychology, which enabled us to perceive a shared external world. Stop me if I'm wrong, but I take Kant's view to be the following: it was possible to conceive of creatures who had reason and indeed a will but didn't have our way of synthesizing experience into an objective world. Now, if you think that the audience for sharing a concept of science is the widest you can get for its objectivity — something like any group of creatures capable of in-vestigating, theorizing the world — this will be the group capable of having experience of the objective world, and for Kant that's a smaller set than a conceivable set of rational creatures. But I think we should collapse that. I think we should collapse that because I think the idea of a rational creature who's not living in space and time and is not in empirical relations to a world of objects is of no use to us. So I think we can leave that out. Let's collapse those two. Now the question is, and this is where I don't know the answer, I think that it's meaningful to say that our idea of truthful science, the idea of that theory, doesn't disappear.

Jaap Van Brakel: So perhaps we can say about the transcendental we and Kant's wes that they can be `collapsed', or might `disappear'. What about the we of the encounter between two persons. Would you say that this we also collapses or `disappears'?

Bernard Williams: No, because when I say you and me in this encounter, I mean you and me.

Jaap Van Brakel: How does that fit in with what you were saying earlier that the inclusive/contrastive dis-tinction is merely a linguistic thing. That seems to be avoiding the issue of encounters between you and me.

Bernard Williams: Hang on, sorry, there is another distinction to be made, perhaps I've been too quick about this. There is one issue about whether the way I use `we' implies that there are some others. There's a more refined distinction about what it does to the hero, which I've not mentioned in what I said and what you quoted [from the Nagel review] whether I am or aren't including the hero. I mean Cortés & Co. appear in Mexico, they're confronted with Montezuma & Co. Assume for the sake of the argument that they somehow understand one another, and one of the Cortés group says we. Now clearly he can mean one of two things: he can mean you and me, or he can mean us lot as opposed to you lot.

Jaap Van Brakel: You didn't really answer the question about the greens but you pointed to the problem so I'd like you to commit yourself more explicitly. You said that's a difficult issue. But how does it bear on the distinction between the we of science and logic and the parochial we.

Bernard Williams: But that is an absolutely general problem. Consider the ethical case, consider the her-meneutical case. I think you can say some general things about the role of various concepts in various group's lives. Now, those remarks are at the level of general theoretical considerations in the philosophy of language and I'd hope that any persons who addressed themselves to these issues would come to some such conclusion. The same is true in a stricter scientific context about the perception of colours. There's also a social theory of funniness which one would hope something could be said about.

Now, if I take any given example of one of these, whether it be a perceptual one about green or a moral one about chastity or the concept of funniness, then the general theory will have to embrace this, but the theory itself predicts that the force of chastity or some Greek virtue will be for me intelligible only from an anthropological, hermeneutical, borrowed, second-order understanding of that life, and that is by definition perspectival. So the theory of perspectival concepts is meant to be a non-perspectival theory which, however, with regard to any such given concept is one that is perspectival. Do you feel that that hasn't been put into the world of the scientific us unless it's been reduced? But suppose the universal theory is that it can't be reduced, have you got a problem with that?

Jaap Van Brakel: No, not with that reductionist conclusion. I simply wonder how it fits into that very strict distinction between the we of science and logic and the notion of a parochial us. It seems that that strict distinction needs to be refined or `given up'; otherwise it forces us to the conclusion you just suggested that we might draw.

Bernard Williams: Well, that may be right. I must confess that as I understood the argument to this point, even if that's strictly correct, it looks to me like what might be called a housekeeping operation. It means it's got to be tidied up. It isn't a matter of principle.

Jaap Van Brakel: The distinction between `science and logic' and the views of the parochial us is not a matter of principle?

Bernard Williams: No, because it would be wrong; I just tried to explain why it would be wrong. The moment that I agree that any embedded concept which has been so explained is perspectival, the entire claim about it implodes to the level of the perspectival. That's what I just deny.

Jaap Van Brakel: It seems we have to define things a little bit and what comes out of it is that the universal theory has to be such that the we of science and logic includes all of the `parochial us' too, because all experience, all moral concepts, all greens and so on, they're all somehow included.

Bernard Williams: Look, `included' exactly obscures the problem. In one sense, of course it includes it because all human groups belong to humanity in general, in that sense it includes all groups. The trouble is that might carry a much stronger theoretical claim, namely that there is a perspective from which every perspectival concept can be given a comprehensible mapping, relative to every other, that is, there is a vocabulary in which all the world's ethical concepts can be put into a net. Now, a lot of people believe that. I think McDowell actually believes that.

Arnold Burms: I think we have to stop here.

Bernard Williams: Does that mean it's clearly wrong?

Arnold Burms: I said a couple of hours ago that it was very generous of Professor Williams to be here at this meeting, but it was even more generous of him to give such extensive and interesting answers to our questions. We should thank him for the fascinating glimpses we were allowed of his mind at work.

Bernard Williams: Thank you very much.