The Philosophy Café.

Morality, Suffering, Luck, and Obligations:

Is Morality ethical?

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Hosted by

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INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

What does mean to do good? "My contribution to the philosophical debates has been to some extent that of making myself a nuisance to all parties," so wrote Bernard Williams ('Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism'. *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 33).

William's criticism of what he calls morality comes from that understanding of pluralism.

Williams, who disdains all system-making, is hard to pin-down in stating some over-arching approach:

> "The correct conclusion is not that foundationalism is necessary for social critique. What we are left with, if we reject foundationalism, is not an inactive or functionalist conservatism that has to take existing ethical ideas as they stand. On the contrary, once the resultant picture of ethical thought without foundationalism is made historically and socially realistic, in particular by registering in it the categories of modernity, it provides a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers." ('Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism'. *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 37).

It is exceedingly difficult to sum up the many elements which makes Williams's case that morality, what is signified as the basic system of 'moral theory', as ***not*** ethical, in two ways – phenomenology, in that common moral sense, an institution of right and wrong; and rational moral theories which reaches for explaining the good. Williams demonstrates the flaws in both approaches.

The good news is that there is a book, designed to discuss this topic, and to critique Williams' thinking as well:

Heuer, Ulrike and Gerald Lang (eds., 2012). *Luck, Value and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, **Oxford: Oxford University Press**

The bad news is that the work is challenging for those who have not extensively read these types of works.

However, I have provided access to my markup copy of its Introduction. You will find it [here](#).

The language and terms take some time to master, and so I will list the relevant SEP entries. Most of these entries contain the intellectual backgrounding to understanding of the *focused* question, Is morality ethical?

Chappell, Sophie-Grace and Nicholas Smyth, "Bernard Williams", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/williams-bernard/>.

Campbell, Richmond, "Moral Epistemology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-epistemology/>.

Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, "Consequentialism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/consequentialism/>.

Stratton-Lake, Philip, "Intuitionism in Ethics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>.

Schlosser, Markus, "Agency", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/agency/>.

Talbert, Matthew, "Moral Responsibility", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

Väyrynen, Pekka, "Thick Ethical Concepts", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/thick-ethical-concepts/>.

Finlay, Stephen and Mark Schroeder, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/reasons-internal-external/>.

Richardson, Henry S., "Moral Reasoning", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/reasoning-moral/>.

Alvarez, Maria, "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/>.

Nelkin, Dana K., "Moral Luck", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/moral-luck/>.

Peter, Fabienne, "Political Legitimacy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/legitimacy/>.

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