



IN MEMORIAM

Bernard A. O. Williams
Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy
Berkeley
1929—2003

Bernard Williams, Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy, and one of the world's most important and most distinguished philosophers, died in Rome on June 11, 2003, during a brief family holiday.

Williams was born on September 21, 1929, in Essex, England. He was educated at Balliol College, University of Oxford, where he was a student of legendary brilliance. Before coming to the University of California, Berkeley, he held a series of important academic positions in England. He was a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, from 1951 to 1954, and a Fellow of New College, Oxford, from 1954 to 1959. He spent the next eight years in London, first as a lecturer at University College from 1959 to 1964, and then as Professor of Philosophy at Bedford College from 1964 to 1967. In 1967, he moved to the University of Cambridge as the Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy and a Fellow of King's College, where he subsequently served as provost for eight years.

Williams spent the spring semester of 1986 as Mills Visiting Professor in the Berkeley Department of Philosophy, and he then joined the department as a permanent member on July 1, 1986. He was appointed to the Class of 1941 Monroe Deutsch Chair on January 1, 1988. During the spring semester of 1989, he also held the Sather Professorship in the Department of Classics, under whose auspices he gave the Sather Classical Lectures. Largely for family reasons, he returned to England in 1990 as the White's Professor of Moral Philosophy, and when he retired from the White's chair in 1996, he became a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. Throughout this period, however, and, indeed, until his death, he remained an active member of the Berkeley faculty, and he taught here as frequently as his schedule and (in later years) his health permitted. He was a dazzling classroom teacher, a generous supervisor whose door was always open to students, and a shrewd and valued citizen of the philosophy department. He also made his intellectual presence felt on the wider Berkeley campus, serving with distinction on the editorial board of *Representations* and participating in many cross-disciplinary panels and symposia on such subjects as film, law, and human rights. He was deeply attached to Berkeley, and he and his wife Patricia made many close friendships here. He thrived on the lively and diverse intellectual atmosphere he found on this campus and he relished the time he spent among us.

Williams was the author of eleven books, the best known of which include *Problems of the Self* (1973), *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (1978), *Moral Luck* (1982), *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), and *Shame and Necessity* (1995), which was based on his 1989 Sather Lectures. His final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, was completed while he was suffering from the illness that eventually claimed his life, and was published less than a year before his death. He also produced an extraordinary number of philosophical articles, essays, and reviews; his bibliography runs to well over a dozen pages. He was a wonderfully stylish writer who, in addition to his scholarly work, wrote frequently for more general audiences.

In his philosophical work, he addressed central issues in a remarkable range of areas, from the history of philosophy to the theory of action, and from metaphysics to the philosophy of mind and moral philosophy. His work on Descartes and on Greek philosophy established him as a leading historian of philosophy. He was an important contributor to epistemology. His essays on the self and on personal identity completely transformed the philosophical discussion of those issues. And in moral philosophy he was one of the dominant figures of his time. He was one of the most important and influential contributors to the resurgence of that subject that took place beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, and his writings helped to define many of the problems and issues with which moral philosophers have been concerned ever since. Indeed, it was characteristic of Williams that virtually every subject he wrote about was seen differently thereafter by his peers. His philosophical work was marked by an unmatched combination of brilliance, imagination, erudition, subtlety, and eloquence.

Williams was deeply engaged in the politics and public life of Britain. He served on the board of the English National Opera (formerly Sadler's Wells Opera) for nearly 20 years. He was a member of the British government's Public Schools Commission from 1965 to 1970, a member of the Royal Commission on Gambling from 1976 to 1978, and chair of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship from 1977 to 1979. After his return to England in the 1990s, he served on the Labour Party's Commission on Social Justice and was a participant in the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act.

His honors were too numerous to mention. He was a Fellow of the British Academy and a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received honorary degrees from Harvard, Yale, and the University of Chicago, as well as from several universities in Britain and Ireland. He was knighted in 1999 for services to philosophy.

Bernard Williams brought a remarkable vitality and dazzling energy to every activity in which he engaged. He was a brilliant and deliciously witty conversationalist: a master of the telling remark, the devastating perception, and the lethal insight. He possessed to a very high degree all of the canonical virtues of contemporary philosophy. His dialectical powers were extraordinary; few people were as analytically acute or as formidable in argument as he was. But although he was a master practitioner of the techniques of analytic philosophy, he never overvalued those techniques. He respected the breadth and variety of human intellectual achievement and creativity, and the capacity of human inquiry across a wide range of disciplines to contribute to philosophical understanding. And although he could be impatient with shoddy argument, he was never impressed by the display of mere dialectical cleverness, least of all in moral philosophy. On the contrary, one of the most notable features of his philosophical outlook was an unwavering insistence on a series of points that may seem obvious but which are nevertheless all- too- frequently neglected: that moral or ethical thought is part of human life; that in writing about it, philosophers are writing about something of genuine importance; that it is not easy to say anything worth saying about the subject; that what moral philosophers write is answerable to the realities of human history, psychology, and social affairs; and that mere cleverness is indeed not the relevant measure of value. Notwithstanding his influence within moral philosophy, he was one of the discipline's severest and most perceptive critics, and he was quick to detect, not only fallacies and logical flaws, but also shallowness, pretension, self- deception, lack of imagination, self- indulgence and, especially, ignorance of the complexities of human life.

Bernard Williams's death has deprived philosophy and, indeed, the wider intellectual world of one of its most distinguished, original, and eloquent voices, and it has deprived many of us of a treasured teacher, colleague, and friend.

Alan Code
Samuel Scheffler
Barry Stroud