Psychoanalysis and the Idea of a Moral Psychology: Memorial to Bernard Williams' Philosophy*

Jonathan Lear
University of Chicago

I met Bernard Williams when I went to Cambridge over three decades ago: he was my teacher – indeed, he remains my teacher – but we then became colleagues and friends. It is a friendship that spanned – and transformed – my adult life. There is no one I know who more enjoyed gossiping about others, trading anecdotes, offering shrewd insights about what makes people tick; but even more than that Bernard loved philosophical conversation. He delighted in talking philosophy – any time, with anyone – and philosophy came alive in those conversations. It is thus a fitting tribute to the man to have a session of the APA devoted to his philosophy. I shall thus pass over reminiscences, important as they are to the mourning process. Instead, I should like to talk about how Williams' distinctive approach to ethics leads inevitably and essentially to an engagement with psychoanalytic ideas. This is an unfamiliar claim – both in terms of the general understanding of Williams' work and in terms of the approach to ethics in the analytic tradition of philosophy. And yet, as I hope to show, Williams' approach to ethical life requires that we turn to human psychology; and the form of psychology required will have to be of a broadly psychoanalytic bent.

We can see Williams working towards this conclusion. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) he raises the possibility that a psychological theory, '*particularly of a psychoanalytical kind* … will support some ethical conceptions as necessary to human happiness'.[1] But because in that book Williams was primarily concerned to argue against the possibility or aspiration of providing a foundation for morality or ethical life, he confined himself to arguing that psychoanalysis could not provide the sought-after foundation. But what if we abandon the aspiration to provide a foundation? What would a non-foundationalist approach to ethical life look like? This was a question which preoccupied Williams over the last two decades of his life.

And the question which concerns us is whether psychoanalytical ideas must inevitably come to the fore.

Although Williams was a critic of all attempts to provide a foundation for ethics, he never gave up on the aspiration of providing more nuanced forms of justification or critique. This crystallized around the question of what it would be to provide a *naturalist* moral psychology (1995a, 1995b, 2002, pp. 22–7). The aim is to understand human beings – including the exercise of their moral, ethical and social capacities – as part of nature. This is challenging in part because we have no independent conception of nature that would establish a clear set of constraints on what a naturalist account could be. As a result, we face a particular dilemma. On the one hand, Williams argued, the various attempts to derive an account of values from a purportedly value-free natural science – whether behaviorism, sociobiology or neuropsychology – foundered because they lacked the conceptual and observational resources needed to provide a sufficiently robust explanation, justification or critique of cultural, value-laden life. But, on the other hand, there is a danger that as we try to formulate a more robust human psychology we will import the values we are trying to justify. That is, our attempt at a moral psychology will collapse into a moralized psychology.

Williams argued that the ancient moral psychologies of Plato and Aristotle fell into this trap. For example, of Plato's division of the psyche Williams argues that, 'It is only in the light of ethical considerations and certain ethically significant distinctions of character and motive that Plato's schema is intelligible' (1993, p. 43). There is reason which aims at the good, and two psychic parts which can disrupt or subvert this rational pursuit: a narcissistic component and mere appetite. Conflicting desires are portrayed as constantly at war with each other unless they can somehow be dominated by reason. On this model, reason cannot simply be a calculative faculty concerned solely with the means for satisfying desires. It has to be a 'higher' faculty which sets (recognizes) ends – and organizes desires in the light of those ends. But, Williams argues, the only purchase we can get on the idea that the faculty of reason is 'higher' is in terms of the ethical outcome it is designed to support. Plato wanted to derive a particularly strong result – that it is rational *for each and every person* to live an ethical life – and Williams argues he could only get to it by building that outlook into the psychology.

So, then, how might there be a naturalist moral psychology that is rich enough to provide a satisfying account of human ethical life without thereby falling into the trap of becoming a moralized psychology? It is precisely at this moment that Williams mentions psychoanalysis. In his essay, 'Naturalism and Morality' (1995b), written a decade after *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams says:

A non-moralized, or less moralized, psychology uses the categories of meaning,

reasons and value, but leaves it open, or even problematical, in what way moral reasons and ethical values fit with other motives and desires, how far they express those other motives, and how far they are in conflict with them. Thucydides and (I believe) the tragedians, among the ancient writers, had such a psychology; *and so, in the modern world, did Freud.* (1995b, p. 202; my emphasis)

For Williams, this is to place Freud in a pantheon. More importantly, it is to suggest that psychoanalytic concepts might be of philosophic importance, precisely because they supply the right kind of materials from which to construct a naturalist moral psychology. And yet, Williams does not pursue this suggestion.

Why not? I suspect there is an interesting reason. Here it helps to compare Williams to Nietzsche, the philosopher by whom Williams was most influenced in the last third of his life. I think we shall see both why he was led to this suggestion and why he did not develop it. There are three significant hallmarks and one important lacuna in the Nietzschean critique of ethical life. First, there is a critique of all attempts to ground morality – whether in a metaphysical substance like God or The Form of the Good, or in rationality. As a result of this critique, there is, secondly, a heightened concern with providing a naturalist human psychology. If we can no longer appeal to a supreme source of value, we need a psychological-cultural-historical account of how it came about that we came to value these values. Third, Nietzsche emphasizes a crucial gap between appearance and reality when it comes to the justifications of our moral practices. Our own official accounts of morality are suspect. But this suggests that there must be *unconscious motivations* for our moral practices – motivations that are at once hidden from our conscious understanding and exerting a dynamic influence on daily life.

And this brings us to the significant lacuna in Nietzsche's work: while he is a master diagnostician of unconscious motivations and their conscious manifestations, there is no account of how the psychological dynamism works. Once we become aware of this lacuna, psychoanalysis becomes the obvious place to look to fill out a broadly naturalist approach to the understanding of ethical life.

I think we can see this intellectual drama re-created in Williams' later work. In *Shame and Necessity* (1993), a philosophical masterpiece, we can see Williams at the edge of developing a psychoanalytic approach to moral psychology.

The aim of *Shame and Necessity* is not merely to argue for a revised understanding of the psychological life of the ancient Greeks, but for a revaluation of our own moral emotions. In particular, Williams argues that the value of shame as an emotion needs to be revised upwards, the value of guilt revised downwards. The argument moves in essentially two directions. First, if we look at the inner psychological structure of shame we will see that it is a much more complex and ethically rich emotion than it has been taken to be.

This opens up a richer understanding of what it was for the Greeks to feel shame. And this in turn makes possible a more nuanced understanding of what roles shame might play in our lives. Second, if we look to certain concealed and dynamic uses to which guilt is put in moral judgment we will see both that it plays a malign role in human life and that it is a much less clear-cut phenomenon than is commonly supposed.

For Williams, shame needs to be conceived in terms of its inner psychological structure, in particular, in terms of internal objects and our relations with those objects. The basic experience connected with shame is of being seen in some kind of bad condition by an observer whose judgment matters. But: 'Even if shame and its motivations always involve in some way or another the idea of the gaze of another, it is important that for many of its operations *the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do*' (1993, p. 82). This is what is involved in shame's being an internalized emotional capacity, not merely an occurent emotion in childhood in embarrassing circumstances.

Now if shame is to function as a complex psychological phenomenon and if it is partially constituted by the imagined gaze of an internalized other, then we will have to admit that this internalized other is, to a significant degree, operating unconsciously. For we need to account for more than the relatively simple phenomenon of consciously experienced feelings of embarrassment before the consciously imagined gaze. In particular, we want to account for experiences that we take to be shame-filled, though they are not consciously experienced as such. For instance, consider defensive reactions. Williams tells us that 'the reaction in Homer, to someone who does something which shame should have prevented is *nemesis*, a reaction … ranging from shock, contempt, righteous rage and indignation' (1993, p. 80). (This might typically be the reaction of an onlooker, but it could also be a reaction of the actor himself to his own shameful act.) It does not take much psychological sophistication to notice that people can display just such outrage as a way of warding off feelings of shame they might otherwise experience. But if the 'internalized other' is a constituent ingredient in shame, then to make sense of this sort of experience we must conceive of it as continuing to operate unconsciously. How?

Williams points out that it is internal psychological complexity that makes it possible for shame to be such a rich emotion. And it is this richness in possibilities for expression that in turn makes it possible for shame to be ethically significant. This psychological complexity is established via structures of internal object relations. There are three variable features of this internal structure that make for richness in the emotion itself. First, the identity of the internalized other can vary. It can of course be a parental figure or a representative of a social group, but it need not be. It could be, say, the internalization of a particular homeless person one passes on the street. Second, there are no fixed attitudes that this other must have nor, thirdly, need

there be fixed attitudes towards this other. Williams invites us to consider admiration coming from an internalized other who one holds in contempt. Shame could well be an expression of this configuration. (Smerdyakov's 'admiration' for Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* might fit this model. Was it the *admiration* of an internalized Smerdyakov that drove Ivan mad?) The examples proliferate indefinitely (1993, pp. 81–102).

But how? We need an account not only of how these various figures are internalized, but also how they achieve the efficacy they have. This would have to be an account of the efficacy of (unconscious) phantasy. Moreover, we need an account of the *transformations* these internalized others can undergo after they have been internalized, the transformations of internal psychological structure which in turn facilitate emotional transformations. This has to point us in the direction of explicit concern with psychoanalytic ideas. Indeed, these are the transformations Freud called the vicissitudes of psychological dynamics.

Williams does begin to give an account of how these processes of internalization occur. The aim is to show how more complex psychological phenomena – in particular, recognizably ethical reactions – can arise out of less complex ones. This is what it would be to fulfill the demand for a naturalist moral psychology. Williams argues that if his account involving the internalized other, 'is to be useful it must not involve at the most primitive level an appeal to the emotion it is trying to explain' (1993, p. 219). At the extreme, we certainly don't want to 'explain' shame simply by invoking an inner homunculus who evokes shame. Williams proposes a '*bootstrapping*' operation, in which experiences of shame are built up out of more primitive psychological reactions. In the case of shame, following a suggestion of Gabriele Taylor (1985), Williams suggests that the elemental reaction is a sense of exposure – in the special sense of feeling at a disadvantage, or losing power – at being seen by another. 'A process of internalization is now possible', Williams says, 'and "bootstrapping" can proceed in terms of increasing ethical content given to the occasions of shame' (1993, p. 221).

So far, so good; but it is crucial to recognize that 'bootstrapping' does not itself name any determinate psychological phenomena or theory. It is rather *serving as a placeholder* for that theory, whatever it is, that will acceptably explain how more complex psychological reactions of shame are built up from less complex ones. It is not an answer to the question, but an indication of the place in which we need to come up with a constructive philosophical account.

Moreover, there is no reason to assume, as Williams seems to, that any acceptable bootstrapping account must show how internal psychological states are built up exclusively on the basis of 'outer' experiences.[2] This is a holdover from British empiricism, not an inherent demand of bootstrapping itself. In particular, one could countenance the existence of primitive, innate

aggressive fantasies or experiences of vulnerability without thereby violating the constraints on a naturalist moral psychology. Indeed, we may even want to call some infantile emotional expression an 'early expression of shame.' A naturalist moral psychology will show how complex emotional reactions develop from less complicated psychological formations. In particular, the capacity to express complex shame-filled emotions ought to be the outcome of a developmental process that includes a prior medley of internalizations and projections of less complex figures and intrapsychic structures. But that itself cannot be a reason for refraining from calling the bottom rungs of this developmental process elemental experiences of shame. What matters is that the elemental psychological reactions – whether we call them shame or not – be phenomena that it is plausible for an infant to experience. Again, this is, to a significant extent, an empirical-psychological question that cannot be settled by any a priori ruling as to what is to count as naturalist.

Williams adapts an example from Max Scheler and Gabrielle Taylor: a nude model is posing for an artist, when suddenly the artist's gaze changes to one of desire. Suddenly, she feels exposed, unprotected: 'She had previously been clothed in her role as a model: that has been taken from her, and she is left exposed to a desiring eye' (1993, p. 221). It is, I think, important to recognize that the artist's gaze need not have changed for this experience to occur. All that need happen is that she experiences a change – and that experience could well be the outcome of a phantasy of hers. Nor need we suppose that, for that kind of projection to occur, there must have been some prior experience in which that kind of desiring gaze was actually part of the external world and was then internalized. Perhaps it did happen. Perhaps, even, we will come across interesting and persuasive empirical reasons for thinking that it must. But there is nothing in the idea of 'bootstrapping' itself, nor in the idea of a naturalist moral psychology, that requires it. Rather, these considerations suggest that we are going to have to bootstrap ourselves into an adequate account of bootstrapping: we shall in the future slowly discover what a naturalist moral psychology is via a complex interplay of inquiries in which the sharp boundary between philosophical moral psychology and psychoanalysis comes to seem like an artificial split.

What matters is that we develop a philosophically and empirically acceptable account of how psychological complexity is built up. While there is no reason why the internalized figure *must* express anything we would recognize as a moral point of view, we can see why an ethical outlook *might well* arise out of these psychological ingredients. As Williams points out: 'The other *may be* identified in ethical terms. He [or she] … is conceived as one whose reactions I would respect; equally, he [or she] is conceived as someone who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed to him' (1994, p. 84; my emphasis). In short, from the rudiments of primitive shame reactions, we can see how a psychological complexity can be

built up which facilitates the growth of interactive social bonds and of ethical life.

Now once we get this far in Williams' argument, we can see that the general structure will hold for guilt as well as for shame. Williams is concerned to downgrade guilt as a morally significant emotion – and we may or may not want to go along with him. But if we don't want to go along, the obvious route for disagreement is to show that guilt is in fact a richer and more complex emotion than it is often taken to be. The way to do this is essentially parallel to Williams' treatment of shame: show that guilt has an inner psychological complexity that arises from transformations of internal structure and complex interchanges between inner and outer worlds. In short, philosophy is again led to psychoanalysis. The basic importance of psychoanalysis for moral psychology is independent of Williams' particular analysis of shame.

Obviously, much work needs to be done to fill out this picture; but by now it should be clear that to do so will take us in the direction of psychoanalytic ideas. For while some notion of bootstrapping is necessary for a naturalist approach to moral psychology, no plausible account is going to be a simple internalization of an external experience, which then allows the internalization of a more complex external experience. Any plausible account of bootstrapping will have to give us an account of subsequent internal transformations which in turn facilitate more complex perceptions and misperceptions of the external world, which then get internalized and transformed in their own ways. And so on. Once we admit that we need to admit into our bootstrapping theory an account of internal psychological transformations that can be both strategic and unconscious we are in the realm of distinctively psychoanalytic concerns. I don't see how this overall approach to ethics can develop without going down this road. This, I think, will come to be seen as an important legacy of Bernard Williams' approach to ethics: the use of psychoanalytical ideas to develop a robust, naturalist moral psychology.[3]

NOTES

1 Williams (1985, p. 45, my emphasis).
2 By contrast, see Williams (1993, pp. 218–23).
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Jonathan Lear, Department of Philosophy, University of Chicago, 1010 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. E-mail: jlear@midway.uchicago.edu