



ADD YOUR OWN EGG

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I was summoned to my tutor's office a day or so after I'd arrived in Oxford. It was the last day of summer. A bumpkin from the tropics, I'd never seen an autumn before. I watched the first leaves falling outside his window and heard the eighteenth-century staircase creaking with the weight of suitcases being heaved into new rooms. He told me I was to study moral philosophy that term and that if I wanted a head start on the reading I could get going on—he reached for his bookshelf with the air of someone going through a practiced routine—this book: *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* by Bernard Williams.

My parents were part of the educated Indian middle class who approved of books only as long as they were called, say, *Advanced Statistics*; when they caught me with a copy of *Middlemarch* they told me I oughtn't to be reading storybooks at my age. My adolescent rebellion consisted in spending my pocket money on dog-eared paperbacks with titles like *The Logic of the Hydrogen Bomb* or *Trade Unionism and the Woman Question*, and the opinions I acquired from them had somehow got me through my scholarship interview for Oxford. The blue-and-black Pelican before me belonged to the same reassuring aesthetic universe as these other books.

I went quickly over the opening lines: “Writing about moral philosophy should be a hazardous business,” not least because in doing so “one is likely to reveal the limitations and inadequacies of one’s own perceptions.” I liked this man already, his air of unpretentious authority, and I read the whole book that evening. It was barely a hundred pages long and went briskly through such questions as whether moral judgments are all subjective, whether morality needs God, whether life has a meaning, and whether what makes something the right thing to do is the fact that it maximizes general happiness.

On that last question, Williams allowed that any half-decent moral outlook had to pay some attention to “what men in fact find value in, or need, or want.” But he didn’t think this had to be happiness. He was drawn to a phrase of D. H. Lawrence’s: “Find your deepest impulse, and follow that.” Williams added:

The notion that there *is* something that is one’s deepest impulse, that there is a discovery to be made here, rather than a decision; and the notion that one trusts what is so discovered, although unclear where it will lead—these, rather, are the point. The combination—of discovery, trust and risk—are central to this sort of outlook, as of course they are to the state of being in love.

I went looking for the original quotation from Lawrence, but only found the less resonant “Resolve to abide by your own deepest promptings,” and “Try and find your deepest issue, in every confusion, and abide by that.” I preferred how Williams had put it, his prose there, as everywhere, pared down, elegant and uncynically perceptive. What did it for me was that “of course” in his last sentence, its appeal to shared experience, its air of solidarity, almost of collusion: *it’s just us human beings here*.

October—the month when Oxford’s “Michaelmas” term begins—came and I was sent for tutorials on moral philosophy to a gaunt young Swede. He told me, in the same laconic tone he used to point out a fallacy in Aristotle, that he enjoyed my essays and that my last one—“How, if at all, can the expressivist solve the Frege-Geach problem?”—was first-class stuff. I flushed slightly and carried on, reassured that my scholarship committee hadn’t made a huge mistake. Question by nitpicking question, I was being taught what it was to do philosophy in the *analytic* tradition—as opposed, of course, to the tradition of Continental bullshit.

It was the coldest I had ever known it to be. The clocks went back

and it was dark by teatime. I lived on the taste of those succulent Latinate phrases (*de dicto, ex hypothesi, a fortiori*), on the glow of having made a subtle distinction or scored a palpable hit. It was nothing like I had expected philosophy to be, this self-contained, largely ahistorical, resolutely anti-literary enterprise, faintly embarrassed to be sharing institutional space with the other disciplines in the humanities.

Those I asked said the central question of modern moral philosophy remained the one Socrates identified in Plato's *Republic*: How to live? But answering it seemed to require a detour that went right past the humanities, perhaps right past the human itself. I'm not sure that bothered me at the time. I thought I was happy, and that it was the philosophy I loved. I now suspect that what I loved was the being good at it.



Morality was his first book, but by the time of its publication Bernard Williams was already acknowledged as an academic superstar. A legendary undergraduate in classics at Oxford—awarded a so-called “congratulatory first” by his examiners—he became a “Prize Fellow” at Oxford's mysterious, studentless All Souls College, was conscripted into the Royal Air Force, where he flew Spitfires, then catapulted at the age of 34 to a professorship in London on the strength of some dazzling papers and a reputation for quicksilver sharpness.

There are several videos of Williams to be found on the internet, one of them from a weird BBC documentary series from 1972, the year that *Morality* was published. Williams, his shirt a once-trendy shade of orange, is in conversation with the philosopher-roué A. J. Ayer about the philosophy of science. Ayer is sitting on a recliner, chain-smoking, speaking with the patrician cadences of an Old Etonian somewhat exhausted from a career dedicated in equal parts to logical positivism, a European philosophical movement of the 1920s and 1930s deeply enamored of the sciences, and philandering. Williams's voice carries its own kind of authority but its class position is more uncertain. (He grew up in Essex and went, in his own words, to “a very minor public school”—a private school, that is, but one few of his Oxford contemporaries would have heard of.) Ayer appears thoroughly taken with his colleague, twenty years the younger but possessed of a maturity and confidence that make him seem the elder statesman. Right at the end, the conversation turns to the question of where human beings might fit into the philosophy of the twentieth century. “Philosophies that have shown the

most enthusiasm for the natural sciences,” says Williams, since the nineteenth century, have tended to be the more as it were brutally optimistic, unimaginative, short on ... certain deeper perceptions of human life ... It would be difficult to deny that there’s some form of depth in Wittgensteinian philosophy, possessed also, *obviously*, by the philosophy of Nietzsche, which is notably lacking in the philosophies of Russell and Carnap.

It wasn’t that one could only be profound in German, or that philosophers interested in the sciences were doomed to wade in the shallows. It was rather a point about style—that some styles of thought and writing in philosophy, more than others, are able to convey that mysterious thing, *depth*.

The British moral philosophy of the early postwar years, the years in which Williams began his career, was many things—clever, incisive, often funny—but it was rarely deep. It was as if the aspiration to depth had been tarnished, with much else that was the tiniest bit Germanic, by its vague association with fascism. “Ordinary language philosophy” was the flavor of the decade: plain truths plainly spoken, in English. Williams had his first education in philosophy in a series of one-on-one tutorials with a young philosopher named Richard Hare. Hare was severely allergic to Continental notions of depth, something he thought a cloak for lazy thinking. “The thing wrong with the ... Continental philosophers,” he once told a *New Yorker* journalist in the early Sixties, “is that they haven’t had their noses rubbed in the necessity of saying exactly what they mean. I sometimes think it’s because they don’t have a tutorial system.”

One might suspect that Hare’s outlook was the product of a sheltered English upbringing; in fact he had returned to Oxford after a tough war. Taken prisoner by the Japanese while serving in Singapore, he had been one of thousands of forced laborers on the infamous “Death Railway” from Siam to Burma. The first draft of his 1952 book *The Language of Morals* had been scribbled in a Japanese prison camp. “Ethics, as I conceive it,” the book begins, “is the logical study of the language of morals.” To speak the language of morals, Hare told the *New Yorker* writer, was to understand how to say something both universal and prescriptive: “If you say ‘X ought to do Y,’ then you commit yourself to the view that if you were in X’s position, you ought to do Y also.” “Ought,” “right,” “good”: there was little room in Hare’s picture, as perhaps in a prison camp, for mischief or eccentricity or love. Conceived in extremity, Hare’s moral philosophy made no concession to the ordinary conditions of human life. In this view, all the world’s a labor

camp and all the men and women merely prisoners; they do their duty, or don't, and then they die. Too young to have fought in the war himself, a teenaged Williams saw early on just what was missing from a view like Hare's: nearly all of human life.

The hardest thing in philosophy, Williams wrote in the preface to *Morality*, published twenty years after *The Language of Morals*, was finding the right *style*, “in the deepest sense of ‘style’ in which to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do.” The cover of my Pelican edition of Williams's *Morality* bears two details from Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*, a set of double-sided discs that, when spun on a turntable at a specified speed, created the impression of depth. To Duchamp, the idea had come as a solution to the problem, as he saw it, of how to get movement into art. Duchamp's question, Williams was suggesting, was one philosophers might well ask themselves. Could a piece of philosophical writing combine abstract argument with concrete detail? Could its inevitably schematic descriptions of complex situations ever represent enough of their reality? Could philosophy, in other words, have room in it for a real *human* voice?

The challenge was a practical one, to be faced anew in every work. Williams was wary of any radical formal experimentation—he never published a novel or poem or dialogue, nor did he produce a Nietzschean catalogue of aphorisms. But though he retained his loyalty to the philosophical essay, every paragraph he wrote had a voice inimitably his own, unapologetically interested in what people are like. Even in *Morality*, the abstract prose abounds with human figures. As when, in considering how people sometimes dissociate themselves from their given roles, he described a bank clerk who, while “he may hate the bank, despise banking, and care only about his friend and growing chrysanthemums ... could hardly say that he *wasn't* a bank clerk (really).” Or as when he is considering what someone might say to an “amoralist” to bring them to accept the claims of morality, he suddenly wondered what such a person might actually look like: “Some stereotype from a gangster movie might come to mind, of the ruthless and rather glamorous figure who cares about his mother, his child, even his mistress. ... With this man, of course ... arguments of moral philosophy are not going to work ... he always has something he would rather do than listen to them.”

The examples are schematic, lacking the narrative density of even a mediocre novel, but they have something (those chrysanthemums!) that redeems them from utilitarian banality: the shock of the concrete amid the abstract. *Morality* has no epigraph, but if it

did, it should have been the superbly compressed final draft of Marianne Moore's "Poetry":

I, too, dislike it ...

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it,

after all, a place for the genuine.



I remained in Oxford over Christmas for fear of leaving the first place I'd been so happy. My college wouldn't let me keep my room and I ended up subletting in a large Victorian house in leafy North Oxford with a small kitchen where I boiled eggs for breakfast and had cereal for dinner. Oxford in term-time is endlessly, shallowly, sociable; its vacations are long and lonely for those who stay. I saw my first modest snowfall that December. There was not much else to do, so I read the only novel I owned, a used paperback of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. I found myself fixated on the minor character of Tibby Schlegel, who is introduced as "an intelligent man of sixteen, but dyspeptic and difficile." The first time Forster tells us much about him, he has just been up to try for a scholarship at Oxford. The men were down, and the candidates had been housed in various colleges, and had dined in hall. Tibby was sensitive to beauty, the experience was new, and he gave a description of his visit that was almost glowing. The august and mellow University ... appealed at once to the boy's taste; it was the kind of thing he could understand, and he understood it all the better because it was empty. ... His sisters sent him there that he might make friends ... He made no friends. His Oxford remained Oxford empty, and he took into life with him, not the memory of a radiance, but the memory of a color scheme.

Tibby goes on to study Chinese but never shows the slightest interest in China. So much of the moral philosophy I was studying read like it might have been the work of an army of Tibbies, writing industriously when the students were away. If it was interested in people, it was as beings who might have, or to whom one might have, obligations.

I got over the loneliness of those early terms. The sun finally came out. My new country began to make sense to me. I enjoyed my exams, polishing off an essay an hour, each full of carefully prepared arguments mixed with the odd (rehearsed) epigram. I had, in the

meantime, applied to stay at Oxford for grad school, largely unperturbed by careerist thoughts. I had vague ideas of becoming some sort of writer and had begun to publish reviews and essays. I reckoned that Oxford, small and full of libraries, would be a convenient place to carry on in this belletristic fashion, helpfully near (but not too near) the metropolis where all the magazines and publishers had their offices. No one asked me at that stage to be any more specific about my plans than that. All I had to do was send in two short papers, one of them a lightly polished version of that triumphant early essay on the ominous-sounding Frege-Geach problem, and three references. I was accepted and offered a very decent stipend.

My sense of not being fully *of academia* helped me, I think, to survive the next six years. The philosophy department itself I found deeply intimidating, confronting me with people my age who were terrifyingly well read in contemporary philosophy but whose conversation sometimes gave the defiant impression that they read nothing else. They liked to declare their opponents' views irrational, or obviously false, and peppered their speech with a series of graphic metaphors (“Your second premise is doing the heavy lifting here” or “I’m happy to bite the bullet on that one”), all spoken with a robotic staccato cadence I’ve only ever heard in a philosophy seminar room. Invited to the house of one contemporary for coffee, I was struck by his empty bookshelves and asked him, in innocence, where he kept his books. He told me you could get most everything off JSTOR these days.

I should not give the impression that grad school was all bespectacled bros and chest-thumping. The effacement of the humanistic strand in the history of philosophy came along with something else generally thought a virtue: the effacement of the individual ego and its demands. I once heard a philosopher tell a story about a student who asked him what he ought to do with his life. “Do what you want,” the philosopher said. “But I don’t want to do what I *want* to do,” the student protested. “I want to do what I *ought* to do.”

There are many ways to take this—paradoxical—statement, but we all understand at some level what the student was saying, something that the ambiguous English word “want” makes it hard to express precisely. The idea is that Socrates’ question—how to live—can be answered in a way that takes any fact about what you actually are or want or value as strictly incidental. Oxford is not alone among college towns in breeding a radically ascetic, almost monastic, subculture of counter-narcissism. Someone has a vegan epiphany every other day, insisting loudly that they don’t want to

eat what they *want* to eat. Someone is constantly “calling out” someone else for failing to check their privilege, with a zeal reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. Morality, curiously enough, is *in*.

At Oxford, I confronted the new moralism most conspicuously in the form of the “effective altruists,” students pledging to give away a sizeable portion of their future incomes to charity. Some among them for example hold their noses and take up jobs as consultants so they’ll have more to donate to charities that (for instance) supply the poorest Africans with medicated mosquito nets. Some very smart people have been doing the math and this is, apparently, among the ways to do the most good with the least money. To settle for less, they say, would be irrational, even immoral.

The rhetoric of the effective altruists tends on the whole to be gung ho. It eschews guilt-tripping for an emphasis on the extent of the good it’s open to us to do. Not everyone in the movement shares the fundamental beliefs of its founders, and some don’t have any philosophical beliefs as such, but the founders themselves tend to be utilitarians of a fairly old-fashioned sort, committed to considering things from what the most brilliant of them, the nineteenth-century philosopher Henry Sidgwick, called “the point of view of the universe.” The basic question is how it would be best for the world to be, and the (rough) answer is that it would be best for the world to be full of happy sentient beings. From this comes a simple formula: act so as to promote the happiness of all sentient beings.

It isn’t only philosophers who’ve found this a compelling project. To be in global terms one of the very rich is to live with the guilty burden of privilege, that most first-world of problems. At once pious and rational, comforting and selfless, effective altruism promises a life free from all the hokeyness involved in the business of finding ourselves and our deepest impulses. It promises to shield our do-gooding from the temptations of faddish causes and poignant advertising. It promises an unsoppy, no-bullshit morality. The fact that it seems to require an astonishing degree of self-abnegation, foresight and mathematical ability does not faze the effective altruist any more than it did the Victorian utilitarian. On the contrary, it poses just the sort of technical challenge likely to galvanize a movement spearheaded by graduates in philosophy, math and computer science, who are already disposed to want to do only what they ought, rationally, to do.

One of the movement’s founders, the philosopher Toby Ord, responds sharply to the charge that his moral philosophy asks for too

much:

Morality can demand a lot. Let's say you've been falsely accused of murder, you've been sentenced to death, and you realize that you can escape if you kill one of your guards. Morality says you can't kill him, even though it means you're going to lose your life. That's just how it is. Well, it turns out that we can save 1,000 people's lives. If you don't do that, then you have to say that it's permissible to value yourself more than 1,000 times as much as you value strangers. Does that sound plausible? I don't think that sounds very plausible. If you think that, your theory's just stupid.

I have heard Ord at seminars a few times and read his work, which is scrupulous and even-tempered, but this uncharacteristically truculent off-the-cuff remark, quoted by the journalist Larissa MacFarquhar in the *Guardian*, is nicely revealing of his outlook. "Morality" appears here as a tyrant who can "demand" or "permit" things. To resist is to expose yourself as holding a "stupid" theory, one that insists your own life matters more than the lives of a thousand strangers.

What made the years of grad school bearable was the jokey solidarity among those of us unsympathetic to this understanding of ethics, the ones who wrote on Aristotle and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, on ambivalence, alienation and anger, and who didn't see morality wherever they looked. Of the contemporary philosophers I read, Williams alone offered a model of a life in academic philosophy that held any appeal.



As Williams saw it, we come to ethical reflection from a life we're living already, with our own ways of thinking and feeling and valuing: this is what it is to have an ethical point of view at all. Altruism may well be part of such a life, but an outlook in which the demands of morality trump everything else has no means of preventing the demands of altruism from dominating life altogether. In such an outlook, if it's ever okay to take some time off from morality, it's only so that you can do more good after the R&R.

I returned during my early years at grad school to these arguments, first set out in Williams's 1973 essay "A Critique of Utilitarianism," with a deep sense of urgency. The utilitarian was no longer a theoretical construction to do dialectical battle with; he was knocking at the door armed with pamphlets, asking me to sign away 10 per-

cent of my income (I was happy to oblige) and, in the seminar room, claiming authority over how I was to live (which I respectfully declined to concede to him). It was in Williams's essays from the Seventies that I found what I missed in this picture of moral reflection as arbitration between the claims of different people, one of whom just happens to be me. In this picture, it seems like the fact that *I'm me* has been declared, right at the outset, irrelevant. To direct my charitable donations to training guide dogs for the blind (an obscenely inefficient way of doing good, the effective altruists say) would be to treat (mistakenly) the fact that I happen to care about this cause as if it meant something.

There's a subtle move in these arguments from saying, reasonably enough, that I might want to reconsider what I care about in the light of evidence, to saying that I'm only allowed, at pain of admitting "stupidity," to care about doing the most good. The insinuation is that if I resist the moral demand for absolute impartiality between what I care about and what other people care about, it can only be because of selfishness or vanity. But this dichotomy, as Williams put it in *Morality*, leaves out "almost everything" that actually makes a difference to our thoughts and sentiments about how to live. I can see what "doing the most good" offers as an ideal to those who haven't got one already; roughly what the Church or the military once offered to young men who didn't have any firm ideas about what they wanted to do with their lives. They could certainly do worse. But what if one has firm ideas on this question already? How could an attempt from the outside to overrule these thoughts be anything other than alienating?

Alienation schmalienation, comes the inevitable reply. If this is what a *human* moral philosophy sounds like, so much the worse for humanity. How many new ways will we find of dressing up our refusal to do the right thing? The right thing, that is, from the point of view of the universe. Well, I suspect that it comes naturally to a certain sort of person—and this is one of many ways to be a human being—to adopt this point of view, to long not just to do some good but to do the most good. I'm not one of them, and that's another way to be a human being. I bridle only at the thought that rationality itself tells against my way, that it tells against preferring my own point of view to the universe's (whatever that means), against my not wanting to do the most good (whatever that turns out to involve), against caring for someone (rather than everyone).

Does that sound like a plausible view of rationality? I don't think that sounds very plausible. If you think it does, well, it takes all sorts to make a world: utilitarians, fruitarians, Sabbatarians, gang-

sters who love their mothers and bank clerks who'd rather be growing chrysanthemums. The world, Williams thought, is full of temptations to take simple moral views—everything from “bomb Iraq” to “maximize the good”—because the longer route of self-understanding and critique is hard, uncertain and risky. If philosophy can help us with any of this, it won't be because it discovers a formula to replace the traditional sources of moral understanding—art, other people, *life*—but because it helps to improve the reflective self-understanding of those who have more, much more, to their lives than philosophy.



Williams followed up “A Critique of Utilitarianism” with a series of subtle, probing essays on aspects of morality: character, luck, integrity, conflicting values, building up to what is considered his great work, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, which was published in 1985. These years saw him sit on several government commissions; his recommendations on the regulation of pornography are generally thought a model of good political judgment. He became provost of King's College, Cambridge, showing an unexpected flair for academic administration. He wrote opera criticism and reviews (his literary executors put together a collection of these essays in a volume published last year). The Nineties saw him lecture on Greek tragedy at UC Berkeley and, as he went through a difficult course of chemotherapy, finish his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, an elegant defense of the idea that there is, both in philosophy and in life, something that counts as “getting it right,” hard though it may be to work out what that is.

Intensely successful by any conventional measure, Williams was nevertheless given to thoughts of failure. His work, he once remarked to a friend over whiskey in an American bar, had “consisted largely of reminding moral philosophers of truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings except moral philosophers.” He sounds here a little like Wittgenstein, who famously told his most promising students to do something, anything, other than philosophy, the urge to philosophize being a kind of malady. Williams actually had contempt for “vulgar Wittgensteinianism,” which he believed “makes an academic philosophy out of denouncing academic philosophy.” Wittgenstein, however, had been right to see that “there was one problem that was everyone's problem, an emptiness and cruel superficiality of everyday thought, which a better philosophy certainly could not cure, but which it might stand against.”

If Williams's prose stands up to rereading, as analytic philosophy seldom does, it's because it leaves, in its epigrammatic compression, room for its readers to add something of themselves to it. Unhinged with cautious qualifications, his sentences demand something beyond a knack for spotting the fallacy, not cleverness but a richness of sensibility. They goad you to distinguish what you *actually* think from what you *think* that you think (under the influence of some premature, dishonest generalization). Williams reconsidered his remarks about philosophical style in a new preface to *Morality* written twenty years after its initial publication: certainly, he allowed, "analytic argument, the philosopher's speciality, can ... play a part in sharpening perception. But the aim is to sharpen perception, to make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling."

Everything, from the political economy of the modern university to the rationalist pathologies of the age, militates against Williams's style of philosophy becoming anything other than marginal to the contemporary university. That style asks for so much, from both reader and would-be emulator, and what academic has that to give after a youth spent propitiating the gods that grant tenure? So we carry on, paraphrasing his arguments into a gawky, affectless prose that has nothing left of the man's voice. And yet I find in Williams's professional success a kind of comfort. Out of sympathy for much of his life with the direction of philosophy, he still thrived in the institutions of academia and acknowledged their virtues: the possibility of friendships based on shared intellectual sympathies, of long-term disagreements prosecuted with humor and civility, of generous tolerance of individual eccentricity.

These virtues are real, and I too cherish them. Most of all I cherish the university's natural capacity for renewal. When the leaves begin to fall is when the campus is most alive. Fresh hordes of human beings—young, curious and not yet doctrinaire—are moving, or moving back, into their dormitories. Some of them will find in something they hear or read, a passage, a sentence, a phrase that makes them more acutely, more honestly aware of what they're saying, thinking, feeling. Very few of them will become professional philosophers, and thank heavens for that.



That first lonely Christmas in Oxford, I cooped myself up in that oppressively Victorian house with a copy of Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. I was drawn to its dry, sardonic tone, its elegant, unsentimental modernism, but I found it a difficult book to


finish. It was clearly written at the level of the sentence, but puzzling at the level of the paragraph, and positively baffling at the level of the chapter. I was relieved to find that I wasn't the only one to feel that way.

More than one reviewer complained that the compression of Williams's prose made him dangerously easy to misunderstand. But Williams wouldn't grant the assumption that one should write, as the Roman rhetorician Quintilian had recommended, so that one cannot be misunderstood. Williams thought this advice indeterminate—misunderstood by whom? One writes for an imagined reader with whom one shares something: intelligence, seriousness, knowledge and so forth. “But that reader will also have thoughts of his own, ways of understanding which will make something out of the writing different from anything the writer thought of putting into it. As it used to say on packets of cake mix, he will add his own egg.” A reader's thought, Williams said, “cannot simply be dominated ... his work in making something of this writing is also that of making something for himself.”

Rereading *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* in preparation for a conference a little while ago—to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the book's publication, as it happens—I was struck by just how helpful this stylistic remark had proved. I was less worried about not knowing at any given moment what “the argument” was, less concerned to trace an orderly progression of ideas. Six years of grad school later, I had finally become able to appreciate the book's contentions about the “limits of philosophy.” This had a little to do with knowing more about philosophy, and a little to do with knowing more about philosophers, and what in my temperament had first drawn me to them.

More than anything, though, it had to do with growing up. As Aristotle saw a long time ago, there's no place in ethics for intellectual precocity. I had once seen a book-length gripe about everything other philosophers were getting wrong. I saw now that focusing on the errors of philosophers was a way of getting at something much more important: the evasions of human beings in their hankering after certainty and system. My favorite aphorism of Williams's, almost a throwaway line in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, goes, “The only serious enterprise is living, and we have to live after the reflection; moreover (though the distinction of theory and practice encourages us to forget it), we have to live during it as well.”

In making something of the book, while life went on in the fore-

ground, I found I had begun to fashion an insight or two for myself out of its materials. That it's hard to distinguish a love for philosophy from a love of being good at it. That it's all too easy to move from the hope that philosophy might help me understand my deepest impulses to the thought that it is, itself, my deepest impulse. A perverse part of me wants to leave philosophy just to give this story the ending toward which it is so obviously tending, but narrative tropes tend, like systematic moral theories, to distort the phenomena. There might prove to be good reasons for me to leave academic philosophy (no one should have to be a serial adjunct, for instance), but none of them are philosophical reasons. Few reasons are. This is one of the many places in life where we come up against the limits of philosophy. We have to live after, and during, the reflection. 

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