



BERNARD WILLIAMS

Bernard Arthur Owen Williams

1929–2003

WHEN BERNARD WILLIAMS DIED, in Rome, on 10 June 2003 at the age of 73, the loss was felt well beyond the refined world of academic philosophy. In a succession of obituaries, and at affectionate memorial events in Cambridge, Oxford, and Berkeley, distinguished contemporaries from many fields testified to his place as one of the great, inspirational humanists of his time. While all spoke of his terrifying brilliance, his dazzling speed of mind and extraordinary range of understanding, his zest and his glittering wit, many also tried to come to terms with the deep humanity that had infused his life and work, and the seriousness with which he had tried to transform the role of the moral philosopher. The paradoxical combination of exhilaration and pessimism, of complete facility in the academic exercises of philosophy juxtaposed with an almost tragic sense of the resistance that the human clay offers to theory and analysis, let alone to recipes and panaceas, made Bernard a unique, and uniquely admired, figure in his generation.

I

Bernard Williams was born on 21 September 1929 at Westcliff-on-Sea in Essex. He was the only child of Owen Paisley Denny Williams, OBE, an architect and chief maintenance surveyor for the Ministry of Works, and his wife Hilda. He was educated at Chigwell School, which was then a grammar school, later to opt for independent status. He entered Balliol College in 1947 to read Greats, where he gravitated towards philosophy, although he was also taught by two great classicists to whom he later

Proceedings of the British Academy, 150, 335–348. © The British Academy 2007.

paid tribute, Eduard Fraenkel and Eric Dodds. His extraordinary brilliance was immediately recognised, and it is reported that he regularly held informal tutorials in Balliol during which he would assist less gifted students with their philosophical difficulties. His undergraduate career culminated in his entering the final examination on Roman History twenty-nine minutes late, one minute before entry was forbidden, allegedly having needed the time to mug up the subject, which he had hitherto found too boring to study. This did not prevent him from achieving a congratulatory First.

Immediately after graduating he was offered a Prize Fellowship at All Souls College. However, before he could enjoy this he had to perform the then compulsory National Service, during which he learned to fly Spitfires in Canada, an exciting activity filling what he later described as the happiest year of his life. Shortly after returning to Oxford he moved to a teaching Fellowship at New College in 1954. One year later he married Shirley Brittain (later Baroness Williams of Crosby, leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords).

After a year's Visiting Lectureship at the new University College of Ghana, Williams accepted the offer by Professor A. J. Ayer of a Lectureship at University College, London, in 1959. In 1961 a daughter, Rebecca was born, and in 1964 Shirley became the Member of Parliament for Hitchin. In the same year Williams accepted a Professorship at Bedford College, London.

In 1967, at the young age of thirty-eight, Williams was appointed Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy in Cambridge and Fellow of King's College. Shortly afterwards he met Patricia Skinner, née Dwyer, then a Senior Editor at Cambridge University Press, of which Bernard had been appointed a Syndic. They married in 1974, the marriage to Shirley having been dissolved the same year. Two children, Jacob and Jonathan, were born in 1975 and 1980.

During the 1960s, Williams had published relatively little. But his period as Knightbridge Professor saw three books of his own, *Morality* (1972), *Problems of the Self* (1973), *Descartes* (1978), and one, *Utilitarianism, For and Against* (1973), shared with J. J. C. Smart. His growing stature in philosophy was reflected in the wider academic community, witnessed by his election to the Fellowship of the British Academy in 1971 and to be Provost of King's College in 1979. In addition to his academic eminence, he played a considerable role in public life, most visibly as member or chairman of various official public commissions. He did public schools, then gambling, and from 1977 to 1979 he

chaired the committee set up by the Wilson government to review the laws concerning 'obscenity, indecency and violence' in public media (excluding broadcasting). The report of the last committee in particular was widely admired, finding a receptive audience from the professionals in the police and social services concerned with such issues, although less so in Mrs Thatcher's incoming Conservative government. The report, heavily indebted to his analytical and imaginative abilities, and largely his own work, was later published in an abridged form by Cambridge University Press in 1981. It remains an important marker in debates about obscenity and censorship. His flow of work continued with the collection of papers *Moral Luck* in 1981, and the most important of his books on moral philosophy, the vivid and forceful *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, in 1985.

In addition, from 1968 until 1986 he was first a member, then Chair, of the English National Opera (formerly Sadlers' Wells). Music was an essential part of Bernard's life, and one about which he thought and wrote with great sensitivity and insight.

This firm place on the pinnacles of British academic and public life increased the surprise with which many friends and colleagues greeted his decision to leave Cambridge for Berkeley in 1988. But the demoralisation of the academic world by the Thatcher government was by then in full swing, and American universities were not slow to seize their opportunity to attract world-class talent. However, various reasons soon brought Williams back to the United Kingdom, in response to Oxford's invitation to the White's Professorship of Moral Philosophy which he occupied in 1990, becoming a Fellow of Corpus Christi College. He retained his Chair at Berkeley, and returned every year to teach. He was particularly proud of having been invited to lecture as the Sather Professor of Classics in Berkeley in 1989, and in 1993 the lectures were published as *Shame and Necessity*, in many peoples' judgement his deepest and finest book.

His return to the United Kingdom was also a return to public life. He served as a member of the Labour Party Commission on Social Justice, established by John Smith, and was a member of the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1971. Drugs thus took their place alongside public schools, gambling, and pornography, enabling him to quip that he had 'done all the major vices'. He brought out a third collection of papers, the one whose title most succinctly sums up his own intellectual quest, *Making Sense of Humanity*, in 1995.

After retirement in 1997 Williams was re-elected a Fellow of All Souls College. He continued to garner academic honours including honorary

doctorates from the Universities of Chicago, Yale, Cambridge, and Harvard. He produced the small but sparkling panegyric to his most admired philosopher, *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy*, in 1998.

A year later, Williams was diagnosed with cancer. He continued to work, and in 2001 provided an introduction and notes to a new edition of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. Homage to Nietzsche, whom Williams came increasingly to admire, is also visible in the larger and many-layered *Truth and Truthfulness* which came out in 2002. He lived just long enough to enjoy some of its many glowing reviews. Up until his death he was also working on a projected volume of political philosophy.

Since his death three collections of his papers have been prepared by Patricia Williams and others. They cover political philosophy (*In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, 2005, edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn), the history of philosophy (*The Sense of the Past*, 2006, edited by Myles Burnyeat), and a set of further essays from every phase of his career, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, also in 2006, edited by Adrian Moore. *On Opera*, a collection of his writings on music, was published in the same year, edited by Patricia Williams.

II

Although it is natural enough to think of Bernard Williams as a moral philosopher, his work covered much more than this term usually implies. His earliest papers included a good proportion on metaphysics, while an ongoing preoccupation with scepticism and philosophical method produced work on Wittgenstein, and was crowned by his book on Descartes. He wrote extensively on the history of philosophy, particularly classical philosophy, although never divorcing it from the dialogue with contemporary problems. Myles Burnyeat records arriving in London in the early sixties and immediately becoming transfixed by the dazzling combination of historical and textual knowledge with sheer philosophical power, that Bernard exhibited in a course on Plato's *Theaetetus*. At the time this represented a new synthesis of history and philosophy, although one that, largely through Williams's own influence, is now the goal of all first-class work in the history of philosophy. His ability to transform a subject is perhaps most visible, in this early work, in his papers on personal identity, later collected in *Problems of the Self*, in which he brought out the delusive role that imagination plays in generating some of our deepest-seated

illusions about ourselves. We think we can imagine ourselves being Cleopatra or Napoleon, and this generates the illusion that the 'I' can float free of its contingent embodiment, and therefore should be identified with something like a traditional soul. Williams pointed out, rightly, that what I call imagining myself being Napoleon is no more than imagining seeing things as Napoleon did—'images of, for instance, the desolation at Austerlitz, as viewed by me vaguely aware of my short stature, and my cockaded hat, my hand in my tunic'. It is akin to acting Napoleon. There is no supernatural self or soul that is transported in the imagining, so the imagining itself has no metaphysical weight. It is no guide to what is possible for us. Inevitably Williams went on to make connections that most other philosophers would have missed, for instance with the difference between seeing a character in a play and seeing an actor, or with the intriguing fact that you can film a scene which is nevertheless presented as being unwitnessed. His method in work such as this perhaps most closely resembles the approach to highly abstract issues through everyday examples that was found in Gilbert Ryle, the Oxford teacher of his time for whom he expressed the most admiration.

Williams's metaphysical interests also dominated his work on Descartes. In particular his defence of the ability of science to put us on the road towards an 'absolute' conception of the world 'which is to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of inquirers' proved influential, and perhaps unnecessarily controversial. The view is probably implicitly held by most scientists, but the climate in philosophy of science at the time tended to emphasise constructivism over realism, and to celebrate the thickness of the spectacles, or paradigms, through which the scientist peers at nature. Williams later commented on the 'remarkable assumption that the sociology of knowledge is in a better position to deliver truths about science than science is to deliver truths about the world'. By opposing that picture Williams raised controversy, although in later years he was particularly irritated by the travesty occasionally foisted on him that we could have a description of the world without deploying our own language or without employing our own concepts. This was never the idea. Rather, Williams thought that science had a title to knowledge that did not depend on the history, culture, values, or interests of those engaged in it, and in this was distinguished from other inquiries, including philosophy itself. He thought this difference showed, for instance, in the different relation science bears to its own history. The scientist can get by with a very slight knowledge of the history of discovery. But the philosopher cannot do the same, because

our present ways of thinking and acting are only intelligible as historical formations. They are not the inevitable or universal products of uniform human nature facing uniform problems. The subject matter of the humanities is the nature of human life and thought, and that subject matter is necessarily only approachable by us from our own human point of view, albeit a standpoint infused with enough of the same culture, values, and interests as those of the agents whom we interpret for understanding to be possible.

The difference between science and the humanities is visible, Williams argued, in the way the history of science can be presented as a history of arguments that were actually won by one side or another. Whereas a human change, such as the displacement of the *ancien régime* by modernity, is not a history of arguments won, but a history in which one set of ideas has simply displaced another: the defenders of old ways are not refuted, but just die out. Science can write a 'vindicatory genealogy' of its history, couched in terms of progress towards the truth. Humanity cannot write its own history like this, or rather, if it does so it will simply be imposing the perspective of the present, adding another dismal chapter to the story of human complacency. This way of thinking, Williams argued, changed our political relationships. Opponents, for instance in a debate about equality or liberty, should be seen not as simply wrong or mistaken, but as standing somewhere else, either where the future may take everyone, or perhaps forlornly on a set of values that history may be about to trample underfoot.

Of course, this kind of thought can lead either to the quagmire of 'relativism', or to a closely related scepticism about the possibility of knowledge and objectivity in political and moral matters. It also raises doubts about our understanding of others, and one of Williams's constant themes was the tension between the historical mutability of human self-consciousness and the need for us to find ourselves in others if we are to understand them. We cannot write the history or understand the thoughts of beings wholly alien, yet we have to work in the consciousness that the agents in history were not simply displaced versions of ourselves. The difficulty is that genuine pluralism ought not to imply that understanding is impossible, yet it constantly threatens to do so. In his political essays, and his work on Wittgenstein, Williams often lets the issue revolve around who the 'we' are as we oscillate between an abstract, universal aspiration (Kant, or Rawls, or liberalism in its more imperialistic guises) and a more rooted, 'communitarian' reality (Hegel, reincarnated in contemporary times by Charles Taylor or Alasdair Macintyre).

Williams never accepted a simple position in this area, any more than Wittgenstein did, and indeed cheerfully admitted that in this debate ‘my contribution has been to some extent that of making myself a nuisance to all parties’.

Williams can be seen as drawn to Nietzsche largely because he found him the philosopher who had wrestled the hardest with this conundrum, although there were other temperamental affinities to which we will come. Williams himself, perhaps as a consequence of his endless interest in the human carnival, often emphasised plurality and was impatient with the universalising tendencies of the Enlightenment. As he remarked about writing the history of philosophy, while we have to interpret great and dead philosophers as having something to say to *us*, we should not assume that what the dead have to say to us is much the same as what the living have to say to us. Yet he was equally cautious about overemphasising differences. When he turned to the classical world, particularly in *Shame and Necessity*, it was firstly to take issue with scholars who had magnified the difference between us and the Greeks to the point of making them altogether incomprehensible. Williams gave a closely reasoned rebuttal of such pessimism, and his Homeric agents turned out to be quite like ourselves after all, or ourselves as we might have been without so much Christianity, history, and knowledge in our baggage.

III

Although the historical turn came to dominate more of Williams’s later work, it is as a moral philosopher that he wrote his most influential books and essays. He was an uncompromising critic of two of the major movements that often dominate the subject: utilitarianism and Kantianism. As the doctrine that actions are to be judged solely by their consequences for human good or ill, however that may be measured, utilitarianism has always had critics, and all philosophy students are brought up to puzzle over whether it could be right to hang an innocent man if, through surprising circumstances, more good can be gained or more harm averted by doing so. Williams transformed the standard discussion by moving the issue to the nature of motivation, the nature of agency, and the nature of the good for human beings. By analysing examples where an agent could maximise goods or minimise harms, but only at the cost of performing actions that go deeply against the grain, he argued that we cannot coherently regard ourselves simply as conduits to greater general utility. What

we do is more than what we produce. An agent's integrity is bound up with local spheres of responsibility, and it is the meaning of the actions performed inside those spheres that give us our identities. By trying to turn us into 'servants of the world' utilitarianism in fact destroys the very networks of care and responsibility that are required for life to have meaning at all. Williams's point was not that utilitarianism necessarily gave the wrong answers in difficult cases, but the much more subtle one that it goes about getting its answers in the wrong way.

His examples and his analysis dominated all subsequent work in this area, and were largely responsible for a general awareness of the complex clusters of values that actually determine our decision-making. He was well aware that sophisticated utilitarians, such as Sidgwick and possibly even Mill, advocated various indirect forms of the doctrine. They measured the motivations in a moral consciousness by their impact on utility, but admitted that by this measure the utilitarian consciousness itself might not come out as the best. Williams thought that this complexity produced an unacceptable dislocation or fracture in the theory, or in the psychology of any agent who embodied the theory. He mocked it as what he called Government House Utilitarianism, whereby a higher part of us controls the doings of lower parts for purposes which it is important to conceal from them. The subsequent collection he edited with Amartya Sen, *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (1982), accelerated the general flight from utilitarianism among many economists and philosophers.

Williams's opposition to Kantianism in ethics was also founded on a deep mistrust of the nature of agency as it is construed by Kantians. One issue was the Kantian emphasis on acting from the sense of duty, giving rise, as Williams put it with his usual genius for the memorable phrase, to the problem of 'one thought too many'. If you kiss your wife, or for that matter save her from the shipwreck, because it is your duty, then things have gone wrong: you are supposed to act spontaneously, out of affection, and if you drag duty into it you have one thought too many. The other issue he highlighted is one of what he equally felicitously called 'moral luck'. Kant, he believed, had sought to put right action beyond the sphere of happenstance and contingency. According to Kant, whether you do right or wrong is entirely voluntary, totally within the control of your will. It does not matter what your natural and cultural inheritance might be, nor your emotional nature, nor your circumstances, nor the consequences that actually come about because of your action. This fantasy of pure freedom is part of what Williams called 'the morality system', a system of thinking about guilt and responsibility that still dominates

many of our attitudes. Williams argues, like Hume, that motivation cannot come from reason alone, and that the motivational forces to which agents are subject are never entirely within their control.

He went on to assault the morality system by concentrating upon the moral emotions of shame and remorse, and the many ways in which luck determines whether someone gets into situations in which those emotions are appropriate. Thus two people might behave in exactly the same careless way, and one of them may get away with it and walk away blithely enough, whereas the other, because of bad luck, meets catastrophe and remorse and shame may dog their footsteps. The morality system, Williams argued, can make no sense of this difference, since by its reckoning each equally did what was right or did what was wrong. Yet the emotional difference cannot be ignored: life would be unrecognisable without it. So the moral emotions, properly understood, suggest that human life both is, and ought to be, conducted in terms of a much more pluralistic and heterogeneous set of values, which Williams preferred to dub 'ethics' rather than 'morals'. This became known as the 'Gauguin problem' after the salient example that Williams gave of the painter's bad behaviour later vindicated by unforeseeable success. In the eyes of many the discussion of luck attacked the Kantian picture just as effectively and influentially as his assault had attacked utilitarianism.

Williams thought that Kant offered an illusion or consolation of another kind: the realist or objectivist fantasy of a moral system that will trump politics, an 'argument that will stop them in their tracks when they come to take you away'. Like some of the opponents of Socrates, Williams had a keen eye for the moment when politics takes over from moral principle, and in the eyes of some critics the book flirted with the same radical scepticism about the entire enterprise of ethics that animated Callicles or Thrasymachus. The limits referred to in the title often seemed more like limits to the coherence of ethical thought itself, rather than limits to our philosophical understanding of what ethics is supposed to be. Thus, as legacies of the Enlightenment, both Kantianism and utilitarianism purport to provide a standpoint from which moral criticism can be made, to which in some sense the reasonable agent must listen or ought to listen. But while the brilliance of Williams's criticism of each was universally acknowledged, it was harder to know what positive system he intended to put in their place. Evidently an agent's 'projects' or deepest attachments, or even his integrity as an agent, can depend on something falling short of a common point of view with other people. It seemed as if they might issue in highly local and restricted concerns and

loyalties, or in other words, a politics of identity. And then it remained unclear what resources Williams would have left for exerting pressure towards more universal or liberal values. It sounded as though he might be joining with 'communitarian' opponents of the Enlightenment, allowing people their traditional prejudices and partialities, but with a clear conscience. This criticism is doubtless misplaced, for much of Williams's later work is concerned exactly with the interplay between the universal and the particular, or the challenge that equality, liberty, justice, and the common point of view pose to the rooted and potentially blinkered perspectives of our everyday priorities and concerns. By refusing to countenance easy or self-deceptive solutions to this conflict, he was acknowledging its depth rather than turning his back on its importance. In his final book he talked of the 'intellectual irreversibility of the Enlightenment' and described any moral or political forces that might undo it as potentially catastrophic.

Philosophers travelling in roughly Williams's direction often fall into the arms of Aristotle. But Williams's profound sense of the varieties of human existence prevented him from subscribing to any complacent view of a single human nature and a single proper expression of it. Aristotelians try to derive what it is to be a good human being simply from what it is to be a human being, just as once we know what a knife is, we know what a good knife is. But Williams was not likely to be seduced into equating behaving well, even in ethically minimal ways, with flourishing 'by the ecological standard of the bright eye and the bushy coat'. There is simply too much slippage between being a good person and being a successful or healthy or happy person, and in spite of the endeavours of Plato and Aristotle, it is at least partly a question of luck whether circumstances are such that the two come close together. Hearing a colleague comparing being a good action to being a good knife, Williams once drily remarked that if a knife was bad enough it stopped being a knife altogether, whereas when someone does something really bad, they still do something. It is therefore simplistic to think that our human nature, all by itself, contains a template for living as we should, and Williams was the last person to lose sight of what he called the sinister downside to the injunction to 'be a man'. He characteristically placed Aristotle in his disturbed historical situation in fourth-century BC Athens, and regarded him as a 'provincial who became exceedingly impressed by a conservative view of a certain kind'. He described the vision of each thing striving after its own perfection, or as he called it, his 'pretty self-satisfied account of the virtues', simply as 'an astonishing piece of cultural wish-fulfilment'.

Whereas some of his stress on emotion in human affairs affiliated Williams to Hume, he could never accept a Humean account of our ethics as simply an expression of our passions or attitudes, given by nature and moulded by culture. He had a pronounced antipathy to the whole issue of whether with ethics we are in the domain of representation of moral fact, or whether we are in the domain of attitude and prescription. He held that issue responsible for what he somewhat unfairly regarded as the arid and boring substitute for real ethics that dominated the Oxford of his upbringing. His only interest was in the practical and political expression of the issue, for instance in the reasons we may have for diminishing our bigotries or for expanding our tolerations. In many of his writings he instead explored the centrality of 'thick concepts' in practical reasonings. A thick concept is used when we describe someone as modest, or just, or courageous, in which there are both elements of description and elements of evaluation. Fact and value are seamlessly entangled, and this entangling gives us a way of crossing, or perhaps ignoring, the distinction between fact and value that preoccupies so much ethical theory. Williams did not, however, see this entangling as a way of evading the perspectival nature of ethical thought; we must not jump to the other extreme, and suppose that with ethical concepts we describe 'what is there, anyway', or give an absolutely true description of things such as science may aspire to deliver. Again, the bogey of relativism or scepticism lurks in the wings, and the task is to reconcile the perspectival element with a satisfying account of the claim of ethics to be a subject about which knowledge is possible. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* the treatment of relativism even allows that the movement from an unreflective, primitive ethic towards something more reflective, and perhaps closer to a liberal, egalitarian ideal, might nevertheless represent an actual loss of knowledge, which in turn suggests that knowledge itself loses its status as the kind of commitment that cannot be undermined by real improvement in the subject's position. In a revealing interview shortly before he died, Williams said that most of his efforts had been concentrated upon making 'some sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can't have an idealized version of it'.

A similarly perspectival and pluralistic attitude informed Williams's discussion of yet another topic that he made his own, that of the nature of tragedy and tragic dilemmas, as when Agamemnon must either betray his army or sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Williams again gave a central place to notions like remorse and shame. But he also suggested that these examples set a limit to the goal of consistency in ethics. Whereas

consistency is the first virtue of theory that purports to describe how things stand, in response to tragic dilemmas the inconsistency of thinking both that you must do something and that you cannot do it, seems far from being a vice. Indeed, it seems to be a virtue, since not to think both things would seem to be crass and insensitive. Here too we have a contrast between an ethical response to the world and a description of its fabric. When we face two contradictory descriptions of 'what is there, anyway', we resolve the problem by settling for one, and the other disappears without trace. But in a tragic dilemma, even if we decide we must pursue one course of action, the other does not disappear, and typically a vivid sense remains that we have failed in the obligation that we did not meet.

Williams's final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, weaves together many of these themes. The aim is described in Nietzschean terms as provision of a 'genealogy' of truth: an account of its place in our lives that would, he hoped, vindicate its importance, putting back some of the lustre supposedly rubbed off by postmodernists, relativists, and other 'deniers' of the very notion. The aim was ambitious, given Williams's fundamental sympathy with the principal thought that motivated postmodernism, which was the ineluctably historical and contingent perspective that any interpreter or investigator must bring to his activity, and which is only transcended, if at all, in the abstract area of scientific theory. In the upshot the work was not a full-frontal assault on postmodernism, but a discussion of the central virtues of accuracy in investigation and sincerity in transmission of information. Applied to plain facts about our immediate environments, these virtues will have their utility in anything recognisable as human life, which actually means that they are unsuitable subjects for a genealogy describing a possible history of how they might have emerged under natural pressure from a form of human life that lacked them. They would seem at best to have had an evolutionary biology, having emerged as variations on primitive animal signals. But the point for Williams is that their utility rapidly drops off as we depart from the here-and-now, until when we think of the scripts that make up our cultural and national identities, and indeed the writing of history in general, myth and fiction may serve our particular ends just as well or better than the truth. Hence it is a remarkable fact, a piece of what Nietzsche called our asceticism, that we can care about truth as much as we do, and that our concern extends to accuracy even in these regions where it may not benefit us at all. Williams in fact located the discovery of historical truth as a datable occurrence, occurring at some time between Herodotus and Thucydides.

The question he finally broaches is whether our commitment to truthfulness leads to tragedy, or whether it is possible for history to be both truthful and hopeful. Williams does not close the question, but his sympathy lay with the view he represented as Nietzsche's own, that 'there are very compelling true accounts of the world that could lead anyone to despair who did not hate humanity'. Significantly, the book ends with the passage from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which the narrator admits that Kurtz was a remarkable man, and describes his despairing last words as the appalling face of a glimpsed truth.

IV

There is a deep pessimism at the heart of much of Bernard's writing, and one could catch a tone of nihilism underneath some of his very funny but frequently destructive remarks about almost everybody else (of a showy colleague: 'If you look carefully under the artificial tinsel, you will get a glimpse of the real tinsel'). But he never came across as bitter, perhaps because he was always too clear-sighted to have had large-scale hopes whose betrayal by time would engender that vice. He appeared a singularly happy man, especially in his private life, even if his world view was closer to that of his favourite Greek tragedians or to the stark historian Thucydides than to anything more reconciled to the nature of things. For him, as for Sophocles or Conrad, the order of what we call reason is a fragile and perishable veneer, barely covering for a time the kaleidoscope of divergent lights and darkneses, triumphs and horrors, that is the human condition.

The philosophical project of finding some deep bedrock on which to stand our own ordering of thought and conduct struck Bernard as bound to fail, and he could be savage in his contempt for 'the tireless aim of moral philosophy to make the world safe for well-disposed people'. His final word on the relentless systematiser Sidgwick was: 'The fact that Sidgwick's theory so clearly and significantly fails in these respects follows, I believe, simply from the fact that it is so clear and significant an example of an attempt at an ethical theory'; and he gloriously summed up Robert Nozick's influential libertarian theory of rights simply as 'a device for switching off the monitors to earth'. But the pessimism about theory did not go along with any Tolstoyan or Wittgensteinian celebration of the wisdom of the everyday: Bernard may have been an egalitarian and a social democrat, but he was unsentimentally aware of the 'emptiness

and cruel superficiality of everyday thought'. Complacency was one of his principal targets, and he was careful to run no risk of joining those who offer an easy recipe or handbook of living, and thereby condemn themselves to fall into its capacious jaw.

Bernard offered no handbook and no consolation, but he was also far from resigned. His reaction was to seize life, horrors and all, with an energy that was the opposite of fatalism. We may live under the great indifferent thoughtlessness of the gods, but then the right response is to live. This energy, constantly expressed in his intense intellectual curiosity, goes some way to resolving the paradox that in spite of the tragic sense of life, he was the most exhilarating of writers and companions. It is not just that he was endlessly informed and endlessly hilarious; but that in spite of the bite of his wit, he was also intensely sympathetic, notably generous to those that needed it, and quick to notice who they were. I remember myself as a fledgling philosopher being mauled by one of his more violent colleagues at the Moral Sciences Club in the early 1970s, and after the meeting Bernard scooped me up, took me back to King's, opened a large bottle of whisky, and for around an hour turned my dejection into gales of laughter with his plentifully illustrated, detailed and scurrilous diagnosis of the psychology of my assailant.

Above all, both his writings and his presence forced everyone to tap their own resources more deeply, to raise their game. One had to try harder in Bernard's presence, not for fear of being eclipsed, since that was inevitable, but simply to repay the privilege, to rise to the occasion. He burned brighter than anyone, and the world seemed duller and darker when he went.

SIMON BLACKBURN

Fellow of the Academy

Note. I am very grateful for help in writing this memoir from Myles Burnyeat, Baroness Williams, Adrian Moore, David Pears, Tom Sebestyen, David Wiggins, and above all Patricia Williams, who answered my questions patiently, and who willingly made a great deal of material available to me.