

Jürgen Habermas (see Obituary, p83) once asked Bernard Williams whether he was an Aristotelian or a Wittgensteinian. The German philosopher was keen on categorising philosophers; the British philosopher wasn't. Too modest, he recalled, to say "I'm me" or something similar, he finally answered, "How about: I'm Nietzschean?"—a riposte, he wrote, that "really did put the petrol on the fire".

Williams had not always admired Nietzsche. In the 1960s, he used to charge the Nietzsche enthusiast Michael Tanner with "wasting his time on rubbish that even Joad [despised philosophy populariser CEM Joad] could have refuted". Then, during a lengthy wait in Tanner's rooms, he began browsing the Nietzsche books scattered around and found that the very ideas with which he was currently wrestling had been developed at greater depth by the German. In an interview in 1994, Williams said that, although his philosophy lacked positions and theses, what unified much of it was his "obsession" with Nietzsche's phrase "becoming what you are". Williams applied that notion not just to ethics and human self-fashioning, but to philosophy itself, and the flux of philosophical concepts. *Bernard Williams on Philosophy and History* is a collection of philosophical essays that examine Williams's treatment of the relation between those two disciplines. What the various authors do best is redirect us to Williams's own work.

"Lack of a historical sense is the hereditary defect of philosophers," wrote Nietzsche in 1878—an indictment, wrote Williams in 2002, that is just as apposite today. Certainly, philosophers revere and rehash the history of their subject, said Williams. For scientists, how the concept of the atom (for instance) originated and developed over time is immaterial to their current thought and practice, whereas philosophers continue to mull over and contest past philosophical theories and concepts. Yet, Williams regretted, his colleagues often fail to factor in how the concepts they seek to understand have changed meaning over time. Gilbert Ryle, in the heyday of analytic philosophy,

urged philosophers to approach Plato's works as though they had appeared in last month's issue of *Mind*. But, said Williams, if one abstracts a concept or idea from its historical context and subsequent influence, "one has an obvious problem of what object one is even supposed to be considering. One seems simply to be left with a set of words in some modern language". To translate the ancient Greek *dei* as "ought" may be unavoidable (Williams borrowed this example from the historian Robin Collingwood), but it is misleading if that term is construed as carrying its modern sense of moral obligation, so that the moral theories of the ancient Greeks are then assumed to be concerned with the same thing as those of Kant. You might as well translate *trieres* (a term for the ancient Greek galley) as "steamship".

At its extremes, at least, analytic philosophy is prone to what Williams called "triumphant anachronism". Which, he might have added, is odd for a type of philosophy that is so concerned with language. Not only have Anglo-Ameri-

can philosophers, for almost a century, tended to take language as the equivalent to Kant's categories—the medium through which we perceive, and conceive of, the world—but they have insisted that, far from being a static set of lapidary logical or descriptive statements, it is essentially an activity. Words have meaning, and meanings are what they are, by virtue of the particular context in which they are uttered or written. Language should be treated almost anthropologically, as an intertwined series of "language games". Words (as Wittgenstein put it) have meaning "only in the stream of life".

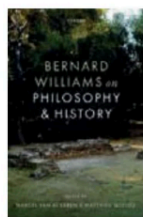
Yet the defect that Nietzsche diagnosed does indeed seem to be congenital: philosophers still (as he complained at the end of the 19th century) think and write as if there were "an eternal man" and "unalterable facts about mankind", therefore an "*aeterna veritas*"—as if concepts such as "good", "justice", "duty" each somehow transfixed and condensed the entire process of their history, and possessed a timeless, transcendent, perpetual meaning. "Only something that has no history can be defined," Nietzsche wrote. When tackling the question of morality, what gave him "a pointer in the right direction", he said, was looking at how terms we would now translate as "good" and "bad" have been used in different languages and different eras. The

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