Booknotes

Bernard Williams died in 2003, and volumes are now appearing of his previously uncollected (and some unpublished) papers. **The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy** is edited by Myles Burnyeat and, like the other two, is published by The Princeton University Press (in 2006, in this case). There are twenty five essays here on the history of philosophy, going from pre-Socratic times to Wittgenstein and Collingwood (whom Williams interestingly compares, and not entirely to Wittgenstein's advantage). As will be expected there are several essays on each of Descartes and Nietzsche.

On Descartes, Williams stresses that he was not a sceptic, but aimed to build up a systematic body of knowledge; not in itself so surprising an interpretation, but Williams adds to it the point that in Descartes' time the need for validating scientific knowledge was far greater than it is now. It is, indeed, a useful part of Williams' method in the history of philosophy that he is very aware of the importance of the historical context of the philosopher in question. Then in an interesting essay on Nietzsche's perspectivalism ('There are many kinds of eyes'), Williams points out that what Nietzsche was drawing attention to in speaking of an interpretation or perspective could not have been transcendental in the Kantian sense:

> If our perspective were such a thing, we could not have the idea of there being more than one of them, and then, as Donald Davidson has rightly argued, we could not have the idea of there being even one of them. Nietzsche is concerned with a recognisable multiplicity of perspectives, and that implies a multiplicity of recognisable perspectives.

Over half the essays in the book are about the Greeks. As Williams himself rather wonderfully puts it (as he might have put it of someone else) in the first sentence of the volume 'the legacy of Greece to Western philosophy is Western philosophy'. Among other things in the book is Williams' scintillating introduction to Plato ('Plato: The Invention of Philosophy'), and it would be fair to say, of the ancient philosophers, it is Plato who most engaged Williams.

But we should take seriously Williams' saying about Western philosophy being the legacy of Greece, and not just of Greek

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philosophy. As well as a discussion of the concept of action and responsibility in Homer, there are a few arresting pages on Sophocles' **The Women of Trachis**. In this play all suffer, and in so far as they suffer in the play, all suffer undeservedly, especially Deianeira, the main character, a sweet woman whose only fault was to have been beautiful when young (which fault eventually precipitates the terrible events described in the play). The gods are our fathers, Sophocles tells us, but what is pitiable for us is shameful for them (because they are wholly indifferent to our sufferings). Yet, Sophocles says, 'there is nothing here that is not Zeus'. It is hard to think of an attitude to the cosmos more different from either the Christian view of redemption or from standard Russellian atheism (the universe is quite mindless and has no plan for us, or for anything else). What we have here is a sort of religious attitude to the world and to the necessity of what happens in it (so not atheism), but one which gives us humans no consolation (so no intimation of Christianity). Williams connects all this with Nietzsche's late saying that we have art so that we do not perish from the truth. Sophocles gives us no escape from the truth; in his tragedies we grasp it fully, yet (through his art) we gaze at it without perishing from it. This form of art Williams designates 'stark fiction'. As with so much from his immensely creative philosopher, a few pregnant pages or phrases deserve whole books to themselves.

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