Bernard Williams (1929–2003) was one of the greatest English-speaking philosophers of modern times. His work displays a remarkable combination of conceptual subtlety, arresting argument, imagination, sensitivity to literature, and humane insight. It is also more accessible to the wider public than most academic philosophy because of Williams’s trenchant interest, especially in his later career, in making sense of humanity, to borrow from the title of one of his collections of essays.¹ The titles of two of Williams’s earlier books—Problems of the Self and Moral Luck—reflect this special contribution eloquently, and it is registered with particular force in Truth and Truthfulness, the last book that he completed before his untimely death.² This is not to say that Williams shied away from the technical issues that professional philosophers argue back and forth in the academic journals. He published numerous articles on such topics as personal identity, scientific realism, and the freedom of the will. But, as his illustri-

ous career developed, he came to focus increasingly on ethics and on what philosophy, in his view, can do, and more especially on what it cannot do, to help us live morally admirable and meaningful lives.

Williams’s understanding of what to include under the ethical was much broader than that of most contemporary philosophers in their typical practice as members of the academic community. His writings cover numerous political issues, and they show a profound concern with history, including both the history of philosophy and the history of classical antiquity. This complex array of interests is brilliantly on view in Shame and Necessity. Ostensibly the book is a selective analysis of how its title’s two themes, together with the themes of responsibility and agency, are deployed in Greek literature and philosophy. Williams’s treatment of these topics is highly perceptive and philologically exact—a major contribution to classical studies as such—but it is also informed throughout by his philosophical and cultural insights and by a deeply personal engagement with the material. As he remarks of the Greeks, in his inimitable style, at the end of chapter 1, “They can tell us not just who we are, but who we are not: they can denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves” (20).

Shame and Necessity began its life as the series of six lectures that Williams delivered in 1989 as Sather Professor of Classical Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Each year the Department of Classics at Berkeley invites a scholar to spend a semester at the university as a visiting colleague whose duties are to deliver a series of lectures on a topic of his or her choice and to teach a graduate seminar. Appointment to the Sather professorship is regarded in the community of classical scholars as the equivalent of a Nobel Prize. It was my great good fortune to be chair of the classics department during Williams’s tenure as Sather professor. Thus I had the privilege not only of hearing
his six lectures but of introducing him on each occasion, and I also had numerous discussions with him in advance of the lectures' publication in this book form.

If Williams the professional philosopher had received his higher education in the United States, his qualifications as a classical scholar of the necessary eminence might have prompted puzzlement. In fact, as a British high-school and Oxford University student, he received the linguistic and historical training that would have equipped him, if he had wished, to make a career as a professor of classics or a scholar specializing in ancient philosophy. While he chose instead to make his mark as a highly creative philosopher, in the ways I have indicated, his classical education and his interests in Greek literature and philosophy shone throughout his career, especially in his later years. The great delight he took not only in speaking about Homeric poetry or Sophoclean tragic verse but also in quoting such texts in the original Greek to his audience was evident to everyone who attended his Sather Lectures. We Berkeley classicists could not have chosen a Sather professor whose infectious enthusiasm for the classical literature was more palpable.

Shame and Necessity was an instant classic from the moment when it was first published by the University of California Press, in 1993. The book is entirely approachable as its stands, but unlike many modern scholars, Williams preferred to let his readers think and react for themselves, rather than summarising everything himself in a lengthy introduction or telling them exactly where he was coming from. Actually the book's argumentative force, evident as it is to any careful reader, acquires even greater interest and significance when set in the context of Williams's earlier interests. Because he chose not to spell these out in Shame and Necessity, I offer a brief account of them here.³

³ In what follows I draw selectively on an essay I contributed to Bernard Williams, ed. A. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
In 1981 Williams published an outstanding survey of Greek philosophy. Referring to Plato’s *Republic* and the “egoistic . . . rationality” Plato attributes to Thrasymachus, Williams observes that the Thrasymachean position derived some of its historical grounding and appeal from the “aristocratic or feudal morality” evidenced in the competitive success highly valued by Homeric heroes (243). For such a morality, he observes, “shame is a pre-dominant notion, and a leading motive the fear of disgrace, ridicule, and the loss of prestige.” However, we should not suppose that shame is occasioned only by failures in competitive and self-assertive exploits; it may also be prompted by “a failure to act in some expected self-sacrificing or co-operative manner”:

The confusion of these two things [i.e., the value set on competitive success and the occasion for shame] is encouraged by measuring Greek attitudes by the standard of a Christian . . . outlook. That outlook associates morality simultaneously with benevolence, self-denial, and inner directedness or guilt (shame before God or oneself). It sees the development of moral thought to this point as progress, and it tends to run together a number of different ideas which have been discarded—or at least rendered less reputable—by that progress. (244)

This dense passage, when read retrospectively, can be seen as setting much of the agenda for *Shame and Necessity*, especially the later book’s close attention to Homer, the recognition that shame can motivate cooperative as well as competitive action, the negative assessment of a Christian moral outlook, and criticism of the progressivist moral attitude for being confused and irrelevant to much human experience.

In this survey article Williams finds certain aspects of Greek ethics problematic: for instance, the Socratic ideal that a clear-headed person always has “stronger reasons to do acts of justice . . . rather than acts of mean temporal self-interest”, and Aristotle’s “rational integration of character” (249–50). Summing up, however, Williams concludes that in many respects “the ethical thought of the Greeks was not only different from most modern thought, particularly modern thought influenced by Christianity, but was also in much better shape” (251):

It has, and needs, no God. . . . It takes as central and primary questions of character, and of how moral considerations are grounded in human nature: it asks what life it is rational for the individual to live. It makes no use of a blank categorical imperative. In fact—though we have used the word “moral” quite often for the sake of convenience—this system of ideas basically lacks the concept of morality altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand.

. . . Relatedly, there is not a rift between a world of public “moral rules” and of private personal ideals: the questions of how one’s relations to others are to be regulated, both in the context of society and more privately, are not detached from questions about the kind of life it is worth living, and of what it is worth caring for.

Williams acknowledges that the Greek philosophers’ application of this outlook is neither fully recoverable nor fully admirable: we cannot inhabit a Greek city-state, and we certainly should not endorse Greek attitudes to slavery and women. In addition, he finds that Greek ethical thought, like “most ethical outlooks subsequently”, rested upon an “objective teleology of human nature” which “we are perhaps more conscious now of having to do without than anyone has been since some fifth-century Sophists first doubted it” (252). Even so, he approves Greek philo-
sophical ethics for representing "one of the very few sets of ideas which can help now to put moral thought into honest touch with reality."

Toward the end of his 1981 survey Williams turns from Greek philosophy to tragedy; and here, as in his brief remarks on Homeric values, he adumbrates ideas he was to develop strongly in *Shame and Necessity*. Whereas Greek philosophy, "in its sustained pursuit of rational self-sufficiency", seeks to insulate the good life from chance, Greek literature, above all tragedy, offers us a sense "that what is great is fragile and what is necessary may be destructive" (253). This passage is strongly marked by Williams's qualified endorsement of Nietzsche:

Granted the range, the power, the imagination and inventiveness of the Greek foundation of Western philosophy, it is yet more striking that we can take seriously, as we should, Nietzsche's remark: "Among the greatest characteristics of the Hellenes is their inability to turn the best into reflection."

The Sather Lectures that generated *Shame and Necessity* gave Williams an opportunity to expatiate on Nietzsche's dictum, an opportunity he clearly relished, for the most notable feature of the book is Williams's sympathetic engagement with the implicit ethics and psychology of Homer and the Greek tragedians. Equally notable in *Shame and Necessity*, and in surprisingly sharp contrast to his survey chapter in *The Legacy of Greece*, is the strongly critical posture he adopts toward the moral psychology of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato. To understand this shift, we need to take account of Williams's sceptical challenges to what he calls "morality" or "the moral system", as articulated in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, a book that he wrote after his survey article on Greek philosophy and before *Shame and Necessity*.5

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, building on many of Williams’s earlier studies, is a vigorous challenge to the coherence, psychological plausibility, and practicality of contemporary moral philosophy. Although he discusses numerous “styles of ethical theory”, the principal target of his critique is “the special notion of moral obligation”, inherited from Kant, which he characterises as “the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us” (174). The many problems Williams has with the concept of moral obligation include its categorical claims to trump all other kinds of motivation; its focus on a supposedly autonomous will undetermined by particular persons’ dispositions, interests, and social roles; and, in sum, its insulation from their lived experience as members of a community with an outlook that is both partly shared but also meaningfully individual. This book presents a wholesale challenge to the idea that philosophical reflection, just by itself, can generate ethical norms and shape people’s outlook in abstraction from their social context and psychological particularities.

Williams approaches his criticism of “the moral system”, as so characterised, by contrasting it in the above respects with Greek philosophical ethics. Yet right from the outset of his book he raises doubts about whether any moral philosophy, now including that of the Greeks, “can reasonably hope to answer the question of how one should live” (1). Nonetheless, he identifies that Socratic question as “the best place for moral philosophy to start” (4), inasmuch as the question, in its generality, is non-committal about any specifically “moral” considerations or assumptions about duty or goodness. In Williams’s terms the Socratic question pertains to “ethics” rather than “morality”, which he uses as his name for the narrow kind of ethics that emphasises the notion of obligation.

In Shame and Necessity Williams chiefly looks back beyond Plato and Aristotle to Homer and the tragedians, whose work was untouched by philosophy in the sense of a special type of
discourse and inquiry that Plato was the first to inaugurate fully. In that material and especially in its treatment of the key themes of shame and necessity he finds evidence for an outlook that not only escapes his earlier strictures against moral philosophy but is also, he suggests, the outlook “we shall recognise in ourselves if we can come to understand the ethical concepts of the Greeks” (by which he primarily means those authors who preceded Socrates and Plato).

As he states a page later, in another riveting sentence, “If we can liberate the Greeks from patronising misunderstandings of them, then that same process may help to free us of misunderstandings of ourselves.” Rather than spoil the reader’s anticipation by saying more about Williams’s remarkable ability to move back and forth between the ancient and the modern, I close with a comment of personal appreciation for this book.

*Shame and Necessity* is splendid in its treatment of the Greek material but is perhaps most illuminating and provocative for what it shows us about Williams the creative philosopher and his remarkable ability to cut through the hackneyed distinction between thoughts that are strictly “philosophical” and ideas that are only “literary.” Ever since he published the seminal essay “Moral Luck”, with its subtle discussion of Anna Karenina and an imagined Gauguin, his gift for drawing cogent insights from “literature” has been evident, and it is superbly present in his account of Rousseau and Diderot in *Truth and Truthfulness.*

What I find especially impressive about the present book is Williams’s philosophical engagement with great texts conventionally called literary. Under his guidance, which stands as a model for the practice, the leading characters in Homer and Greek tragedy offer material for ethical and psychological reflection without

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losing their contextual identity; and that, I take it, is precisely what Williams intended to achieve in his mission to make moral philosophy an enterprise that is true to the complexity of human life as it is actually lived or brilliantly imagined.

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