Bernard Williams' Philosophy of Literature

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Abstract: Bernard Williams, one of the most important philosophical ethicists in the 20th century, tried to use history and culture, especially Greek culture, to readjust the research direction of moral philosophy and expand ethical theory. His philosophy of literature includes three aspects. First, literature serves as a source of example to Williams' moral philosophy. It is the rich, moral particularity conveyed in the literary works that makes it a counterblast to abstraction in philosophy. Secondly, literature serves as a connection between self and other, providing internalized moral principles. In this case, literature is not only a part of human self-awareness, but also a form of public discourse with social value and significance. Thirdly, literature serves as a narrative strategy to search for truth, which includes both accuracy and sincerity. Such literary truth is dynamic and historical, allowing people to pursue and discover truth in their own understanding.

Keywords: Bernard Williams; philosophy of literature; interdisciplinary study

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标题：伯纳德·威廉斯的文学哲学

内容摘要：伯纳德·威廉斯是20世纪最重要的哲学伦理学家之一，他一直试图利用历史和文化，特别是希腊文化，重新调整道德哲学的研究方向，拓展伦理理论。他的文学哲学包括三个方面。第一，文学为威廉斯道德哲学提供例证，正是文学作品所传达的丰富的道德特殊性，使其成为对哲学抽象的有力反击。第二，文学通过自我与他者的连接提供内在化的道德原则。文学不仅是人类自我意识的一部分，也是一种具有社会价值和社会意义的公共话语形式。第三，文学是寻求真理的叙事策略，威廉斯的真理包括准确性和真实性两个方面，这种动态的、历史的文学真理使人们在自己的理解中追求和发现真理。

关键词：伯纳德·威廉斯；文学哲学；跨学科研究

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Introduction

Generally speaking, the theoretical foundation of philosophy is to "follow the logos wherever it leads," and ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is about the nature of moral life and the arguments involved, as Peter Johnson highlights in his *Moral Philosophers and the Novel*.[1] Ethics must transcend life by taking formality and generality. Without a systematic and comprehensive moral theory as a solid foundation, moral beliefs can easily become subjective and contingent. Johnson also emphasizes that "the interest of life to theory is as a source of evidence, a ready supply of illustration, and a region of application of universal principles which aim to pattern life by filtering the permissible from the prohibited." But theory confines life within parameters that are both abstract and static, so it ignores the concrete and temporal dimensions of moral life. In this case, moral philosophy is expressed in language that cannot be wholly technical and abstract. Even the most formal philosophical writing incorporates allusion, metaphor, and anecdote. For example, in Sartre's *Nausea* or Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and some other philosophical novels, there is already something that ethics can recognize as familiar.[2] What inspires ethics to turn to the novel is the possibility of finding its own image reflected there.[3] Art provides a great clue to morals, and "through literature we can rediscover a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can arm us against consolation and fantasy" (Murdoch 294). In the same vein, Nie Zhenzhao once aptly remarked that "aesthetics is the method and approach to discovering the ethical value of literature" (Nie 87).

Among the philosophers who believe that morality is best grasped through moral particulars oscillating in the flow and flux of life, Bernard Williams (1929-2003), as an analytical philosopher with a humanitarian touch in the second half of the 20th century, tried to use history and culture, especially Greek culture, to readjust the research direction of moral philosophy, integrating seemingly unrelated concepts from different fields and expanding ethical theory. In this attempt, Williams attached

1 See Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel-A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 1.

2 See Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel-A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 2.

3 See Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel-A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 2.

great importance to literature by presenting ethical and uncontrollable spaces in literary works, enabling people to understand and recognize the heterogeneity of values and the tragic conflicts in life, value the important role of emotions in good choices, and take luck seriously in facing the difficulties, complexity, and fragility of life. He had a talent for drawing powerful insights from literature, and there are three different uses of literature in Williams' moral philosophy.

Literature as an Example: A Counterblast to Abstraction

First, literature serves as a source of example to Williams' moral philosophy. His comment on Homer's epic in *The Legacy of Greece* foreshadows the ideas in his later work *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, and is developed in *Moral Luck* and *Shame and Necessity.* The idea is that Greek philosophy attempts to isolate the good life from chance in its continuous pursuit of rational self-sufficiency, while Greek literature, first and foremost tragedy, provides us with a feeling that great things are fragile, and inevitable things may be destructive. Literature's value comes not from what it asserts or proposes, but from what it shows. It is the rich, moral particularity conveyed in the literary works that makes it such a powerful source of illumination to philosophy, such a counterblast to abstraction. "Literature, as a unique art of image construction, is not intended to directly promote or propagate a universally recognized value or moral outlook, but strives to fully display the image itself, even the complexity and contradiction of life" (Zhang and Yu 128-129).

Literature provided examples for Williams' main philosophical views as well as a language to express his core ideas. He attached great importance to using literary examples to express a specific viewpoint, such as in his *Moral Luck*, which cites characters and plots from Greek drama and from Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* to discuss moral luck. His accounts of Rousseau and Diderot in *Truth and Truthfulness* also fully reflect his emphasis on literary works. The feature of *Shame and Necessity* is its philosophical engagement with literary texts. In the notes he added to each chapter, Williams used the skills and sensitivity of a linguist to discuss relevant language details. In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams expresses an idea he proposed when discussing obligations, namely, that everyone has their own life, and it was found that examples in Greek tragedy are more appealing than "examples from life" (*Shame and Necessity* 13), as literature itself is an alternative to the self-reflection and self-consciousness that he thought moral philosophy frequently put on offer. He used tragic characters to explore how we approach the limitations of human knowledge and human agency, allowing us to re-examine our self-awareness and sense of responsibility. Things beyond human control are crucial

for how we live a good life.

The main characters in Homer and Greek tragedies provide materials for ethical and psychological reflection, while also maintaining their inherent textual characteristics, making moral philosophy a cause that can truly reflect the complexity of human life. Williams pointed out that ancient Greek tragedy was the best model for contemplating inevitability, opportunity, and the relationship between humanity and the world. Williams does not mean that we will find the perfect model there, nor does he mean that we need to emulate it all. There are obvious differences between us and ancient Greek tragedies, but we do have a lot in common.

Williams was the first moral philosopher to combine the concepts of "moral" and "luck." From his early article "Ethical Consistency" (*Problems of the Self* 103-124) to his discussion of Thucydides in *Truth and Truthfulness*, the Greek poets and historians commanded his respect; he, like Nietzsche, believed that they described our situation more truthfully than most philosophers. In "Ethical Consistency," he strongly pointed out that modern moral philosophy had wrongly characterized conflicts of obligations, believing that in all such situations there is at most one true obligation. Any claim that conflicts with a genuine obligation will not generate any legitimate residual moral tension. Williams used Agamemnon's dilemma at Aulis as an example, arguing that Aeschylus knew better. When Agamemnon said, "Which of these is without evil?" he correctly recorded the fact that the world is more powerful than such ethical theories allow: bad luck may lead to a conflict between two true obligations. A valuable contribution of Greek tragedy to ethical thought is actually a subtle process of deliberation about luck and human misconduct, as we are repeatedly guided to ask ourselves what is pure luck and necessity, rather than possibility, in the terrible events we witness.

Modern moral philosophy always attempts to separate people's moral interests from chance and necessity, but in fact, all that agents are most concerned about usually come from uncontrollable inevitability and chance and can be destroyed by this inevitability and chance at any time. After criticizing traditional normative ethics, he drew on the thinking of ancient Greek philosophers about luck and revealed the misinterpretation of modern moral philosophy on human ethical life, ultimately confirming the influence of luck on the moral field. In ancient Greece, Socrates and Plato were opposed to the chance and contingency presented in poetry and tragedies, as well as the fragility of humanity. They believed that life on the edge of the razor of luck in *Antigone* disrupted people's pursuit of a good life, causing them to accept the inevitability of fate in a pessimistic way, which had a certain negative impact on people. This was also part of the reason why Plato

drove poets out of the Republic. Plato inherited Socrates' view that just people are happier than unjust people, believing that the moral realm should not be influenced by luck, as luck, something beyond human control, can lead to a lack of moral value. The attitude and viewpoint that all good life worth living must exclude luck has influenced many philosophers in later generations. By contrast, Aristotle acknowledges the existence of luck and recognizes both its positive and negative effects. He divides good into three parts: the soul, the body, and the external good. The external good includes external factors such as luck, conditions, and circumstances. Aristotle believed that luck is necessary for achieving eudemonia and a good life.

On the basis of criticizing and also inheriting the idea of moral luck in ancient Greece, Williams elaborated on his "moral luck." Initially, he did not provide a clear definition of luck, but instead used the story of Gauguin to illustrate that when the outcome of something is caused by luck, people will find that the world they originally recognized is not actually the world they want. Gauguin was a painter with great artistic talent. He could not feel satisfaction in his living environment and wanted to fully develop his creative painting talent. Therefore, he abandoned everything, including the ethical responsibility of taking care of his family, and went to Tahiti, a brand-new environment where he focused on painting and led a completely different life.

Can Gauguin's behavior be morally defended? Williams initially attempted to find an auxiliary rule within the existing framework of moral rules before the outcome appeared, based on the presumption that a certain value already existed and was closely related to the results obtained after Gauguin's choices. That is, assuming the existence of such a rule, if a person has a certain creativity or artistic talent, their ethical responsibility can be ignored when making decisions, which can be morally defended. Obviously, this statement is questionable and even absurd, because when a person has not yet determined the outcome, they first believe that they are an excellent and talented artist, and this defense condition itself has the color of self-justification and self-deception.

Williams defended Gauguin's rationality based on utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism, if Gauguin ultimately becomes an excellent painter and contributes to the development of human art, his choice would have been correct. However, if Gauguin fails to become an excellent painter, his choice would not have been justified. From this perspective, it can be seen that utilitarianism does not play a role in the defense of Gauguin's choice, as utilitarian judgments are based on ex post consequences, which are unpredictable at the beginning of the choice, and

there is no prior justification for utilitarian moral rules. Ultimately, only success itself can justify Gauguin's choice, but Gauguin's ultimate success is uncertain and unpredictable, inevitably influenced by luck. Therefore, the defense of rationality also relies on luck.

Luck is further divided into internal luck and external luck. By distinguishing between "internal luck" and "external luck," Williams pointed out that treating moral requirements as unconditional, non-individual, and supreme is the fundamental crux of moral luck problems. In the case of Gauguin, uncontrollable events such as severe weather disasters could have hindered his journey to Tahiti or prevented him from living there, thereby affecting his plan to become an outstanding painter. These natural disasters are external luck, and they play a certain role in justifying the rationality of Gauguin's choice, but this impact is not essential. In comparison, internal luck is embedded within the agent's plan, representing the agent's self-awareness in making choices and actual plans, as well as their self-identity as an individual's integrity. The influence of internal luck is essential and decisive. In Gauguin's example, there are two questions about internal luck: Does Gauguin really have a talent and creativity in painting? Can his creative work achieve success? If Gauguin had a fully correct understanding of his talent for painting and enjoyed the kind of life he had after arriving on Tahiti, his talent for painting could be fully developed, and he could be defended for abandoning all to pursue art. By contrast, if Gauguin overestimates his own abilities, or if he arrives on a small island and feels uncomfortable living a completely different life from before, these lead to the failure of his choice and his inability to obtain a reasonable defense. It can be seen that whether Gauguin's choice can be defended and whether he can become the kind of person he hopes to become is mainly influenced by his internal luck. The distinction between internal luck and external luck also proves that there is no moral value system that can accommodate all human practical activities.

Williams further used Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* as an example to point out that due to the intervention of luck, the emotional experience of the agent in specific events will be affected, thereby influencing the agent's moral life. This special moral emotion that an individual experiences is called "regret." In the novel, Anna is extremely disgusted by her husband Karenin due to his indifference and hypocrisy, and later falls in love with the young officer Vronsky. Anna elopes with Vronsky at the cost of losing her reputation and her child. During the three months of elopement, Anna feels extremely happy. But Vronsky feels frustrated because he has lost his status and life in the upper class. The irreconcilable contradiction

and gap in their thoughts leads to their emotional breakdown, and Anna commits suicide by throwing herself under a train in grief and anger. In this story, Anna and Vronsky's love is the internal luck, and their ultimate failure is the failure of their ground project. Internal luck can sometimes be reflected in the luck of another agent who is crucial for their planning and selection. From this, it can be seen that Williams' moral philosophy values the internal state of the individuals such as their emotions, and he also divides regret into two types: agent regret and bystander regret. Agent regret is a description of one's own state, an anticipation of one's own choices and actions, and a special psychological mechanism in which people tend to have a regret towards certain early choices influenced by luck, as people often say, "If only things were the other way around!" Bystander regret is a kind of emotion generated by others who only have a cognitive level of the event. There is a fundamental difference between the two types of regret.

Williams was always concerned with the instability of things that are considered part of a prosperous life, and how easily those things we cherish are lost. He emphasized the forces beyond human control, and in *Shame and Necessity*, he called on us to pay attention to the human behavior and experiential patterns in ancient Greek tragedies. In order to restore the concepts of moral luck and necessity which are suppressed in mainstream moral traditions, Williams suggested that we reassess the content of luck and necessity and recognize how much of our own ethical thinking still exists. Williams' emphasis on luck in ethics, by contrast, revolves around the perceptions, first, that life projects such as Gauguin's and Anna Karenina's will sometimes succeed and sometimes fail and, second, that those life projects will only be justified by life itself—so that it would be foolish past all imagining to say to Anna that she should have rallied herself either with the thought that it was merely an accident of fate that her life project did not work out or with the thought that there is a moral doctrine by which her life had actually worked out better than she realized. As Ferguson observes, "The differences of character that 'give substance to the idea that individuals are not inter-substitutable,' along with the judgements that luck so randomly passes on individual project, suggest why ethics cannot be reduced to a science as Jeremy Bentham aimed to do in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation.* Whereas science can work with notions of typicality and causation, ethics remains a collection of individual projects for Williams" (195).

He wrote of the limitations of philosophical examples, of how their lack of detail contributes to the starkness of the choices they pose, so that it comes to look as though no ethical decision could arise directly out of one's circumstances and

as though "only an obligation can beat an obligation" (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 180). Bernard Williams drew powerful insights from literary works to develop his moral philosophy, emphasizing the heterogeneity of human values and the important role of emotions in human choices, and resisting the influence of utilitarianism and Kantian rationalism.

Above all, in this first category of his use of literature, it is deployed as a source of example. A character, a moral decision, or a narrated sequence of events is used as a way of illustrating the weakness in the ethical theory that purports to explain them. Williams' literary philosophy enables readers to actively face the contingency and fragility of life through stories, and arouses readers' ethical identification. The ancient Greek tragedies and novels that Williams cites present a living space which is sometimes not under the readers' control, causing emotional fluctuations in their hearts in order to awaken them to being in this space with a positive attitude. In this case, literary works are equivalent to an event that must be understood and processed by readers before corresponding reactions can be made. As Iser puts it, "What happens when we read these texts as readers, and what actions the text prompts readers to take, are of great significance" (68) .

Literature as a Connection between Self and Other: Internalized Moral Principles

In the second category of Williams' use of literature, it serves as internalized moral principles in moral philosophy. Literary works not only bring aesthetic experience to people, but also highlight the moral consciousness and values of the community and era in which they live. Williams' central aim—in both *Shame and Necessity* and throughout his career, though he did not frequently use the word outside of this particular book—was moral "progressivism," the conviction that moral problems do not simply have different guises and urgencies in different historical eras but that modern thinking has made progress in tackling moral problems. The Greeks, from the perspective of such modern progressivism, are mere children, and only modernity—sometimes seen to have begun with the advent of Christianity, and sometimes seen as having waited on Kantianism and utilitarianism—showed itself capable of mature and sophisticated moral thinking. It was against such a progressivist account that Williams sought to defend the ancient Greeks along lines that Nietzsche had broached when he praised the Greeks for their superficiality and said, as Williams notes with the approval of repeated quotation, that they were "superficial out of profundity" (*Shame and Necessity* 9). Literature provided him with a language for tracking some of his most central thinking.

Ancient Greek tragedy not only tells us who we are, but also tells us who we

are not, because the characters in the tragedy display the falsehood and limitations of our own image. Williams' description of ancient Greek literature, especially ancient Greek tragedy, aimed to showcase the ethical landscape of the ancient Greeks and reflect our own ethical concepts. He used the words chosen by Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Thucydides to describe the world they knew and imagined, which also applies to the current world. Williams wanted to see what Greek literature can teach us, not through a set of positive maxims or a series of role models, but through examining our reactions and asking if we really need what modern moral thinking attempts to provide. Williams valued literature so much not because it imitates or resembles life, but because it enables us to view life from a non-universal perspective.

We must be cultivated to have the ability to surpass the present and envision better possibilities for ourselves and others. If we do not fully describe the world or our own picture, the resulting ethical perspective will also be inadequate. Williams emphasized the importance of necessity and contingency in ethical thought, as well as their relationship to concepts such as action and responsibility. At the same time, Williams believed that ancient Greek philosophy was "considered the most fundamental problem" ("Philosophy" 202) in almost all subsequent philosophical fields. Williams' exposition of ancient Greek philosophy mainly focused on three aspects: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Regarding ethics, Socrates attempted to refute Thrasymachus' concept of "complete egoism of practical reason" in Plato's *Republic*, and Williams observed that the status of Thrasymachus stems from the concept's historical foundation and its own attractiveness, which is mainly reflected in the highly valued "aristocratic or feudal morality" (Long 156) of competitive success among Homer's heroes. For such a moral perspective, Williams believed that shame is a major concept and also a major motivation. Shame means fear of negative external evaluations, such as ridicule and loss of reputation. A person knows that doing something will be disliked and despised by others, and if they do so, they will also be subject to the same attitude as others. This sense of shame will make the agent do what he thinks is good. "However, we should not suppose that shame is only occasioned by failures in competitive and self-assertive exploits; for it may also be prompted by 'a failure to act in some expected self-sacrificing or co-operative manner'" (Long 156). The culture of shame frequently found in Homer's epics is a value system. Williams used ancient Greek tragedies as his text, unifying the concept of shame into a self–other relationship. Through emotions, he made people aware of who a person was and what kind of existence they hoped to become.

Williams uses Sophocles' tragic character Ajax to begin his analysis of shame. Ajax, the son of King Teramon of Salamis, was a Greek warrior second only to Achilles in the Trojan War. After Achilles' death, Ajax repels the Trojans, who intend to snatch Achilles' body and armor. Achilles' mother decides to award her son's armor and weapons to the bravest and most contributing hero in the Greek army. Unexpectedly Odysseus wins the prize through his clever words. Slighted by the award of Achilles' arms to Odysseus, Ajax plans to kill the leaders of the army. To prevent this, Athene drives him mad. Thinking that he is actually killing Odysseus and the others, Ajax slaughters the army's flock of sheep and cattle. After recovering his mind, Ajax is extremely ashamed and angry, and after explaining to his wife, he pulls out his sword and kills himself. Ajax's behavior embodies key features of shame, particularly the concept of moral boundaries based on honor, respect, and responsibility towards oneself and others, and internalizes the dominant values of society. Ajax is blinded by Athena, loses his sanity, and kills the sheep instead of Odysseus, which makes him experience the pain of losing himself. It is an expression of self-anger towards the gap between his behavior and ideals, a sense of shame. However, Ajax's response to this shameful behavior is to choose suicide, which seems to be full of heroic spirit. He responds to his non-heroic behavior with typical heroism, once again showcasing the values of the various roles he plays, all of which are constructed and disseminated by the society he is in.[1]

On the one hand, shame is an experience of self. Shame was 'Aidos' in ancient Greece, meaning 'exposed.' The most primitive experience of shame is associated with watching and being watched. People's reaction to shame is to cover themselves up or hide, and they naturally take measures to avoid being in a shameful situation. In this way, shame is a feeling of self-protection, a way of self-reconstruction or self-improvement. In ancient Greek tragedies, Odysseus is ashamed to walk naked with Nausica's companions; Nausica experiences shame and embarrassment at the thought of mentioning her longing for marriage to her father; Odysseus is ashamed to let the Fayaquians see him crying; and so on. In Homer'sepic, shame can serve as a reason for war or a slogan for battle.

On the other hand, shame can also elicit reactions from others, known as "nemesis" in ancient Greek, which can be understood as shock, resentment, anger, hostility, etc. Shame is often associated with the gaze of others, as "the basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition" (Williams, *Shame and Necessity* 78). But "for many of its operations the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do" (Williams,

1 See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1993, 72-74.

Shame and Necessity 82). In many cases, the gaze of the other involved in shame does not necessarily come from the gaze of the real other, but from the gaze of the imagined other, or is related to the attitudes and reactions of a certain community, which Williams referred to as the "imagined other" or "internalized other." If we want private morality to be consistent with public morality, we need this internalized other. If a person wants to avoid being looked down upon by others, an obvious strategy is to avoid the gaze, but once these gazes are internalized, this strategy fails. Agents are constantly observed, and they are constantly influenced by a sense of shame, discovering that they are constantly under pressure to make their behavior more dignified. As a result, shame becomes an effective ethical consideration, and this internalized other becomes a common rule that members of the community abide by. As Long observes, "Here we already get a foreshadowing of Williams' insistence in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy on the necessity for a satisfactory ethical imperative to address internal reasons, first person deliberations and interests, and facts to do with an agent's character, as distinct from presenting themselves as external impositions and purely objective obligations" (157). Thus, shame carries the expectations of community and determines how a person's actions and reactions will change their relationship with the world.

Aidos and Nemesis are two ends of this social relationship. People not only have a correct understanding of their own honor, but also have respect for the honor of others; when their own or others' honor is violated, they feel righteous anger or other forms of anger. Williams describes shame as being "not merely a structure by which I know that you will be annoyed with me because you know that I will be annoyed with you. These reciprocal attitudes have a content: some kinds of behavior are admired, others accepted, others despised, and it is those attitudes that are internalized, not simply the prospect of hostile reactions. If that were not so, there would be, once more, no shame culture, no shared ethical attitudes at all" (Williams, *Shame and Necessity* 83-84). "These are sentiments that people share when facing similar objects, and their role is to unite people in the same community of emotions" (Williams, *Shame and Necessity* 80). The internalized other is recognized in an ethical sense, thus becoming the focus of moral motivation and moral evaluation. Therefore, there is an interaction between oneself and the other, forming an emotional community between oneself and the other. Shame is embedded in the relationship between oneself and others. Through a sense of shame, community members identify and internalize an other who can convey values and enforce behavioral standards, making individuals closely connected to society and ensuring they adhere to shared moral principles.

What Williams wants to reveal to us through the tragedy of ancient Greece is that this other does not need to be a specific person or a representative of a certain social group, but can be confirmed through ethical means. This is the correlation between his expectations for the world and the world's expectations for a person. Williams elaborated on whether there were concepts such as "determination," "self," "free will," and "willpower" in ancient Greek tragedies, pointing out that what tragedy requires of us is to find something similar to the necessity they express in our experience and understanding of the world. With the imagination associated with it, we can gain the ability to understand the world from the perspective of possibility.

The shame culture of ancient Greece cared about not only individual existence, but also the existence of the whole community. From this perspective, literature is not only a part of human self-awareness, but also a form of public discourse with social value and significance. It is a discourse representation of social ideology and participates in the construction of specific cultural contexts of the times.

Literature as a Narrative Strategy: A Search for Truth

The themes of truth and the nature of the good life are taken up in Williams' third use of literature. As Nussbaum says, "literature can be and is philosophical: it plays a part in our search for truth and for a good life" (228). The inherent value of truth and virtue is structurally related to shame and honor. At present, whether in public life or the field of natural sciences, people's skeptical attitude has brought a crisis to truth and honesty. Williams once again cited ancient Greek stories to defend the intrinsic value of truth, enabling community members to gain a consensus on moral values. "The value of what I shall call the 'virtues of truth' [is] qualities of people that are displayed in wanting to know the truth, in finding it out, and in telling it to other people" (*Truth and Truthfulness* 7). In this sense, "truth and truthfulness" refers to the pursuit of truth while emphasizing the respect for honesty. Williams' truth includes both the endeavor to acquire true beliefs, that is, "accuracy," and the notion that what you say reveals what you believe, that is "sincerity."

At the beginning of Chapter 5, Section 3 of *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams points out that in early and middle English, the initial meaning of the word "truth" was loyalty or reliability. And this loyalty and reliability is related to shame and honor. *Philoctetes* is a play by Sophocles, in which the deception of Neoptolemus is used by Williams to illustrate the important role of shame and honor, both in history and today. Williams describes different cultural phenomena through a genealogical approach, which is a narrative approach, to demonstrate that honesty is an important

part of truth. It is not feasible to demand honesty through moral laws, and people's tendency towards honesty is centered around maintaining and enhancing trust relationships among themselves. The story takes place in the last year of the Trojan War. The Greek army has attacked Troy and is caught in a stalemate. The Greeks are told a prophecy that they need Philoctetes to defeat the Trojans because he possesses the arrow of Heracles. They send Odysseus and Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles, to persuade the old archer Philoctetes to help them. But he was once abandoned by the Greek army on an isolated island due to injuries, so Odysseus feels ashamed to face Philoctetes, and advises Neoptolemos to deceive Philoctetes by telling the lie that Neoptolemos was also betrayed by Greece, causing Philoctetes to show his sympathy and trust. Neoptolemos, out of integrity and nobility, initially does not agree to use this deceitful method, but after repeated persuasion from Odysseus, he reluctantly agrees to do so. In the end, Philoctetes is deceived into going to Troy, and Neoptolemus regrets telling a lie, but it is too late. In this story, Neoptolemos regrets his lies out of shame.

In addition to honesty, there is another important part of truth—accuracy. The virtues of accuracy include dispositions and strategies for sustaining the defenses of belief against wish, and against one of the products of wish, self-deception.[1] When a person tends to believe something, they may ask questions such as "Do I really want to believe this?" "Can I believe it?" People need the virtue of accuracy when answering and responding to these questions. The virtue of accuracy prompts people to put in more effort and make judgments about various things that enter their minds, which can have different effects on the formation of a person's beliefs. However, people always overlook the role of accuracy, so one of the important factors in the virtue of accuracy is that it encourages people to discover these problems. Accurate virtues are crucial in the process of acquiring beliefs. Accuracy is the will to do one's best to obtain true beliefs. "The feature of Accuracy involves two aspects. One of them concerns the investigator's will—his attitudes, desires, and wishes, the spirit of his attempts, the care that he takes. It involves his resistance to wishful thinking, self-deception, and fantasy. The other aspect of Accuracy involves the methods that the investigator uses. The two aspects are, of course, interrelated" (Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* 127).

Williams' discussion of the values of honesty and accuracy reflects issues related to history. Our current thinking about honesty or other moral concepts reflects the accumulation of history, and the relevant understanding in history

1 See Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002, 125.

will subtly influence our understanding today, which in turn reflects "cultural contingency and history" (*Truth and Truthfulness* 39). The focus on truth requires an understanding of the past. In different historical periods, the structure of values varies. Williams uses the concept of genealogy to clarify these different structures, in order to enhance our understanding of ourselves and our community. He compares the different understandings of the King of Minos between Herodotus and Thucydides, two ancient Greek historians and writers. The former believed that Minos was a legendary figure, while the latter regarded him as a possible historical figure. Williams wants to showcase truth through narrative and discussion. Truth is different from mythology. Myth is related to the audience, while truth is not related to the audience, indicating that history and truth are inherently connected.

The previous view of truth mainly focused on the concept of truth itself, treating truth as an attribute to judge the truth or falsehood of a proposition. Williams, however, did not pay attention to the concept of truth itself, but emphasized the value of the truth as a virtue, showcasing the patterns of truth through the narration of history. The purpose of doing so is to reject any general system to simplify the complexity and diversity of human life. Williams attempts to understand and discuss the value of truth in a narrative way within a broad cultural and historical context, in order to enable members of the community to gain a consensus on moral values. Firstly, Williams' understanding of the past is an objective one. By comparing the differences between Herodotus and Thucydides, he believes that a person can transform distant past events into present events under the same conditions with reliability and possibility, so as to tell the truth of the past. This understanding from partial to objective makes people realize that, in terms of time, our past is someone else's present, and our present is someone else's future. For us, the present belongs to the distant past, and for those of the past, it is the recent past or present. Therefore, the distant past cannot and should not be seen as something uncertain. If certain people or things are considered uncertain, it may be because they do not exist, or because our understanding of these people and things is not sufficient. Secondly, Williams adopts a narrative approach in his understanding of history. Narration is the process of connecting events that span time in chronological order, so that the meaning of past events can be understood. Therefore, narration is a selective interpretation of the past to understand its meaning. "This variation in what makes sense to people in different circumstances, in particular, different cultural circumstances, does not apply only to what it makes sense for them to do or feel; it extends, and necessarily so, to the level of explanation or understanding as well" (Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* 235).

Williams sought truth, showcased the whole life of humans, and emphasized the value of truth and virtue through literary works. Literary works, as an artistic experience, can express truth. He did not pay attention to the concept of truth itself, but emphasized the value of the virtues of truth. Through narrating history, he demonstrated the patterns of truth, inspiring people to adhere to honesty and accuracy. By constantly returning to Plato and Aristotle, as well as Homer, Sophocles, and Aeschylus, readers meet the literary works with their former understanding, and their understanding of literary works is a fusion of their own horizons and textual perspective. What makes us aware of the ethical character of our lives is not a vocabulary of technical truth, but a series of descriptions which convey our beliefs and desires, their impact on each other, and the kinds of human beings we would wish to be.

This kind of truth is not static or fixed, but rather allows people to discover truth in their understanding of things. It is a dynamic, historical, and narrative view of truth. This view of narrative truth shows that Williams' thought has affinities to some of the thought of the phenomenological tradition, which comes down from Martin Heidegger and has been developed by Maurice Merleau Ponty, Han Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Here the phenomenology is in the sense of Aristotle, meaning "describing things we do and the way our lives show up as accurately as possible without forcing the phenomena into prior assumptions drawn from high level theoretical considerations" (Guignon 166). In Martha Nussbaum's words, it is describing "the world as it appears to, as it is experienced by, members of our kind" (245).

This hermeneutical phenomenological truth easily attracts the criticism of relativism. In order to find truth in relativism, Williams looked to the practical dimensions of relativism, which he aimed to capture through his ideal of "a notional confrontation" (*Moral Luck* 195), which is different from "real confrontation" (*Moral Luck* 194). In notional confrontation, we can understand the life of a Greek chieftain living in the Bronze Age, or the life of a Japanese Warrior in the Middle Ages. In this process, we are actually explaining ourselves. In order to understand ourselves, we in turn need to explain literary works. In this way, literary works change the person who experiences them and the subject of understanding, which is the truth of artistic experience.

Conclusion

Bernard Williams held that many philosophies of the past represented an escape from reality, a rationalistic defense against complexity, emotion, and tragedy.

Modern moral theory also underestimated the importance of personal attachments in the ethical life, and similarly, overlooked the valuable role of emotions in good choices. Williams loved both literature and opera, and he demanded that philosophy reach the higher standards of human insight, so he attempted to shift philosophy towards issues of fundamental importance, with a lifelong engagement with ancient Greek literature. Imaginative literature is seen as a source of example by those who understand ethics as the search for clarity about the moral life. For those who think ethics concedes any special moral authority because of its methods of argument, literature is one among a number of powerful descriptions of human moral experience. Literature is seen as a narrative strategy by philosophers who believe that patterns of truth can be revealed through the narration of history. "Philosophy is limited when it comes to the irreducible individuality of people; it is literature that enables us to think of them as irreducible individuals as well as particular collections of universal human virtues and vices" (Goldberg 277). This means that ethics needs to consider people as imaginative literature does—not as types, cases, or examples, but by portraying "human beings immediately in the very activity and flow of life" (Goldberg 173). Literature's particulars—what it reveals of individual joys, sufferings, and attainments—do not simply represent an abstract universal joy, suffering, or attainment. They show us what it is for a unique individual to have such experiences over the course of a whole life.

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