

Pure Enquiry, the Absolute Conception, and Convergence: Bernard Williams in Dialogue with Descartes.*

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1. *Why Descartes?*

Bernard Williams published his classic study, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* in 1978, at the age of forty-nine. In many ways Descartes might seem an unlikely philosopher to have attracted his attention. Although Williams's philosophical concerns were wide-ranging, a glance down the list of his publications is enough to show that his predominant interest was in the field of moral philosophy – not an area to which Descartes is normally thought of as a prime contributor. What is more, Williams's general philosophical outlook could scarcely be more at variance with the principles that informed Descartes's worldview. In the first place, Descartes was a committed theist, while Williams was deeply unsympathetic to what he called Descartes's 'religious metaphysics' (D: 147).¹ In the second place, Descartes was *par excellence* a system builder, who aimed to construct a tightly integrated edifice on solid foundations,² whereas Williams's philosophical approach can broadly be described as anti-systematic. And thirdly, Descartes saw his enterprise as regulated by what he called the 'natural light' of reason, a God-given human endowment which, when used properly, could not err. Williams, by contrast, in line with his Nietzsche-inspired attraction to the genealogical perspective, was ever alert to how the supposedly universal voice of reason might turn out to speak in ways that were pervasively conditioned by a particular history and culture.

Nevertheless, Williams chose to devote an intricate full-length study to Descartes, built around what he took to be a central Cartesian concern, namely (as the book's subtitle has it) the 'project of pure enquiry'. In highlighting the character of Descartes's epistemological project in this way, it seems plausible that Williams was aiming to further the goal Nietzsche had articulated in his *The Gay Science*, namely making the familiar strange and vice versa.³ As Williams interprets it, the Cartesian meditator, or 'Pure Enquirer', is one who adopts a very special philosophical perspective, in which 'there is no worth but the worth of truth-pursual' (D: 33). Though it may strike many as perfectly natural and obvious that philosophers should devote themselves exclusively to the pursuit of truth (Descartes himself had used the phrase '*La Recherche de la Vérité*' as the title of a dialogue he wrote to

* This is a typescript of a paper the definitive version of which was published in Marcel Ackeren and Matthieu Queloz (eds), *Bernard Williams on Philosophy and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), ch. 6, pp. 97–113.

¹ 'D' refers throughout to Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*; see Bibliography for details.

² Descartes, *Meditations*, AT VII 17: CSM II 12. An even stronger metaphor, the organic one of a 'tree of philosophy' is found in the Preface to the French translation (1648) of the *Principles of Philosophy* AT IXB 14: CSM I 186. See Bibliography for abbreviations used throughout to refer to standard editions of Descartes.

³ Williams published an edition of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* in 2001; see Nietzsche 2001 [1873-6]: Book 5, §355. See also Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (Nietzsche 1977 [1873-6]: Essay 2, p. 98).

dramatize his philosophical quest),⁴ Williams sets himself to bring out why such a perspective is, by the standards of ordinary human life, actually a rather strange one. Here, as so often in his work on Descartes (as in his discussions of other canonical philosophers such as Plato and Nietzsche), we see Williams's approach to the history of philosophy as profoundly dialectical. He aims not just to expound but to challenge, and to challenge by bringing his own, and our, philosophical concerns into confrontation with those of the author under scrutiny. This is all of a piece with how he conceived of the sort of history of philosophy that he took to be fundamentally worth doing – one that, in contrast with the history of ideas, aims to be (as he put it) 'philosophy before it is history' (D: xv). This does not at all imply a disregard for the historical and cultural context in which a text was composed (in his study of Descartes, Williams pays close attention to Descartes's exchanges with his contemporary critics); but it does require there to be, as Williams put it, 'a cut-off point, where authenticity is replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas' (D: xvi).

It is typical of Williams's philosophical approach here that confronting the Cartesian project of 'pure enquiry' turns out to be a subtle and nuanced undertaking, which criticises while at the same time bringing out the enduring interest of certain aspects of what is criticised. So, while he underlines certain difficulties that beset the notion of pure enquiry (for instance its reliance, in its Cartesian form, on the first-person perspective (D: 54)), Williams also lets us see the potential appeal of the project, in so far as it aims to reach a special kind of truth – the truth about how things are independently of our own local ways of conceiving them. This in turn leads him to articulate one of the most fertile ideas he took from his study of Descartes, that of the 'absolute conception' of reality:

One might say that what God has given us, according to Descartes, is an insight into the world as it seems to God, and the world as it seems to God must be the world as it really is. God is thus, on the Cartesian construction, deeply involved in our having ... an 'absolute conception' of reality – a conception of reality as it is independently of our thought, and to which all representations of reality can be related (D: 196).

The Cartesian project, so understood, is supposed to give us the kind of knowledge that is free from the relativity arising from the preconceptions of the local cultural context in which we operate, and even free from the particular perspective of our human standpoint (for example, our human modes of sensory awareness). The closest one might come to expressing this notion in secular terms might perhaps be as a conception of reality that could be agreed upon by any rational inhabitant of the cosmos if they were able to abstract completely from their own location and culture and perceptual equipment. The conception has affinities with that described by Williams's contemporary Thomas Nagel, namely the conception of a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986: Ch.5).

2. *The absolute conception*

Williams's idea of the 'absolute conception' has a peculiar resonance, since it calls to mind a problem that in one form or another has recurred throughout the history of Western thought. In its broadest shape, it is about the contrast between appearance and reality – a contrast that gets an intuitively clear purchase from all sorts of specific situations in which we are able to

⁴ Descartes, *La Recherche de la Vérité par la lumière naturelle*, AT X 495: CSM II 400. The date of the dialogue is uncertain, but it may well have been composed in Stockholm during the final months of Descartes's life.

escape from local fluctuations and distortions in our perceptual field to a more stable and reliable grasp of some object, but which on reflection rapidly morphs into a general problem about how we are to have any knowledge of the world whatsoever. Williams put it this way:

[I]f knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except for the special case where the reality known happens to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there *anyway* (D: 48, emphasis in original).

But what seems so basic and straightforward, the idea of ‘being there anyway’ – basic and straightforward because we use it in quite ordinary non-philosophical contexts (I know the milk is in the fridge anyway, whether or not I open the door and look at it) – turns out on philosophical reflection to be surprisingly elusive. As Williams sees it, if ‘being there anyway’ refers merely to whatever it is that our various representations represent, it does not provide us with any solid conception of what an independent reality is; on scrutiny, such purportedly independent reality ‘slips out of the picture, leaving us only with a variety of possible representations ...’ Our dilemma is that ‘we have no *independent point of leverage* for raising [any one representation] into the absolute representation of reality’ (D: 50, emphasis added).

The longing for an ‘independent point of leverage’ seems tantalizing because we at once recognize it to be almost by definition out of reach of our human cognitive resources – a line of thought that leads us forward to Kantian conclusions about the unknowability of the ‘thing in itself’. Yet Williams invites us, in effect, to consider what shape the problem takes if we bracket off these later developments and consider the matter from the earlier, in some ways more philosophically naïve, Cartesian perspective. If self-reflection leads directly, as it does for Descartes, to knowledge of God, then can we not help ourselves to precisely the independent point of leverage we looked for? For reality as it is ‘anyway’ is now construed as reality as it is perceived by God, and ‘the world as it seems to God must be the world as it really is’ (D: 196).

Yet in putting the matter this way, Williams seems to have allowed his distaste for ‘religious metaphysics’ to distort his grasp of the nature and role of the deity in Descartes’s system. It is certainly true that Descartes’s God is that which provides the grounding for objective truth, and in this sense underwrites the idea of a reality that is ‘there anyway’. But there is something very *unCartesian* about explicating the idea of reality ‘as it is anyway’ by reference to the idea of reality ‘as it is perceived by God’. The picture this latter phrase conjures up is of God as a kind of spectator of the cosmos, so that what we see is an imperfect view of what is seen perfectly by God. But Descartes was far too steeped in Thomistic metaphysics to be tempted by anything that smacked in this way of an anthropomorphic conception of the divine. When we think of a human being perceiving reality, we think of our perception being dependent on or caused by an ‘external permanency’ (to borrow a phrase from C. S. Peirce’s 1877 essay ‘The Fixation of Belief’; Peirce 1966: 107). Yet in the Cartesian cosmos there can be no ‘external permanency’ in the sense of something independent of the divine power that continuously sustains it in being.⁵ What is more, our notion of a humanly perceived external reality is essentially bound up with the idea of something that *constrains our will* (so that in the case of a real object it is not up to us whether to see it or not when it is there in front of us). But for Descartes’s God, like that of Aquinas, there is no real distinction between perceiving or understanding on the one hand and

⁵ For Descartes, there is no real distinction between creation and conservation – they are only conceptually distinct. See Descartes, *Meditations*, Third Meditation (AT VII 49: CSM II 33).

willing on the other. Descartes explicitly endorses the Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity according to which, as he put it in his magnum opus, the *Principles of Philosophy*, ‘there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which God simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything’ (*Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, art. 23 (AT VIII A 14: CSM I 201)).

It is, as Descartes later admitted, very hard for us to understand what it would be to understand or perceive something yet simultaneously and in the same mental act to will it to be so (*Conversation with Burman*, AT V 166: CSMK 348). But we can say at any rate that the metaphysical picture suggested here must be utterly removed from the idea of objective reality as something ‘out there’ that God perceives (somewhat after the fashion of the popular caricature sometimes invoked in discussion of Berkeley, of God, keeping an eye on the tree in the quad when there is nobody else there to observe it).⁶ Instead, objective reality is for Descartes a rationally intelligible structure that is permanently held in being by the divine will. And our human grasp of this structure, though limited by the finitude of our minds, is nevertheless accurate as far as it goes, in virtue of the divinely bestowed natural light, which, when properly focused, illuminates so brightly as to constrain our assent (*Meditations*, Fourth Meditation, AT VII 59: CSM II 41). It is this, for Descartes, that allows for, and indeed guarantees, the possibility of human scientific knowledge, knowledge of a reality that is ‘there anyway’ in the sense that it is part of the system of the intelligible structures ordained by God. Or, as Descartes puts it in a well-known passage in the *Discourse on the Method*:

I noticed certain laws which God has so established in nature, and of which he has implanted such notions in our minds, that after adequate reflection we cannot doubt that they are exactly observed in everything which exists or occurs in the world (AT VI 41: CSM I 131).

How does this picture relate to the desire for a ‘point of leverage’, in Williams’s phrase, from which we can catapult ourselves to knowledge of things as they really are? I would suggest that Williams’s formulation, of our having an idea of how things are perceived by God, is less than helpful, for the reasons just explained: we have no real idea of how things are perceived by a being in whom understanding and willing are an identical simple act. What does open the possibility of objective knowledge, for Descartes, is rather that our minds are, to borrow a phrase of Thomas Nagel, ‘instruments of transcendence that can grasp objective reality’ (Nagel 2012: 85). And what this comes down to in Cartesian terms is that the cosmos is a rationally intelligible system, describable in the quantitative language of mathematics, such that when we focus on the mathematical properties of which we have a clear and distinct perception, our will is spontaneously led to assent to the truth so revealed.

Yet it is perhaps worth adding that these elements of the Cartesian system, though they may provide us with an accurate enough picture of how Descartes understood the idea of objective scientific knowledge, still do not quite get us as far as explicating the notion of a reality that is ‘there anyway’. For a conception of something as ‘being there anyway’ must include not just a conception of what it is (independently) *like*, of its essential nature, but also a conception of its really *existing*. Now we might be tempted to say on Descartes’s behalf that the world ‘as it is anyway’ is simply the vast and immensely intricate system of mathematically characterizable properties ordained by God. But it is still not clear what it amounts to for such a complex actually to *exist*, except in the abstract and formal sense in which mathematical structures exist (compare Dummett 2006: 98). In Cartesian terms, what

⁶ The popular caricature is of course a travesty, since, for Berkeley, there is no tree ‘out there’ in the quad, that which God perceives being, for Berkeley, an idea in the divine mind.

‘being there’ amounts to seems rather to be a matter of God’s *actualizing* or making physical the quantitative system of which we have some grasp through our divinely bestowed mathematical intuitions. But the nature of such actualizing – the actualizing of a real extended cosmos by an infinite, non-extended divine mind – remains mysterious, as Descartes himself expressly remarked, when he compared the divine creation of the world to the mystery of the Incarnation (*Early Writings*, AT X 218: CSM I 5). Such mysterianism may not seem to sort very well with the image of Descartes as a ‘rationalist’ committed to a transparent system of clear and distinct ideas; but in fact, for all his appeals to reason, there are many passages in Descartes that emphasise the limits of human comprehension, and it is a fundamental principle in Descartes that the infinity that is God cannot be comprehended by the finite human mind.⁷ Yet this does not preclude God’s having an absolutely central place in the Cartesian system, not just for underwriting the possibility of knowledge, but for accommodating the very idea of a world that is ‘there anyway’ (albeit in a way that falls short of making it fully comprehensible to the human mind). Be that as it may, Bernard Williams’s own reflections in this area led him in a very different direction, one which involved explicating the ideas of objective knowledge and the absolute conception in terms of the notion of *convergence*. To this we will now turn.

3. *Convergence*

If we accept Williams’s basic thesis that having a conception of a reality that is ‘there anyway’ is ‘basic to the notion of knowledge itself’ (D: 49), it becomes clear why he was fascinated by Descartes’s attempts to build a ‘religious bridge’ (D: 146) to such an absolute conception via the proofs of the existence of God (proofs which Williams dissects in minute detail in a central chapter of his study of Descartes). While he was in no doubt that the Cartesian strategy fails in this respect, I think it is fair to say that Williams implicitly acknowledges that if the strategy *had* succeeded, it would indeed have secured the desired prize: in a cosmos of the kind envisaged in Descartes’s theistic metaphysics, the possibility of genuine knowledge is in principle secured. But the corollary of this, for Williams, is that the ‘collapse of the religious bridge’ means that philosophy after Descartes is ‘driven to search for alternative ways’ of securing the possibility of knowledge (D: 146-7).

The alternative that Williams set out to develop turns out to be deeply indebted to the pragmatist approach to truth and reality articulated by C. S. Peirce. In a paper of 1871, to which Williams briefly alludes, Peirce had observed that

All human thought and opinion contains an arbitrary, accidental element, dependent on the limitations in circumstances, power and bent of the individual; an element of error, in short. But human opinion universally tends in the long run to a definite form, which is the truth. This final opinion then, is independent, not indeed of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought; is quite independent of how you, or I, or any number of men think. Everything, therefore, which will be thought to exist in the final opinion is real, and nothing else.⁸

There are two main ideas in respect of which Williams seems to have been influenced by Peirce here. The first is in his (Williams’s) idea of the absolute conception as something

⁷ See for example Descartes’s letter to Mersenne of 28 January 1641 (AT III 293: CSMK 172).

⁸ From ‘Critical Review of Berkeley’s Idealism’, published in the *North American Review* of 1871, reprinted in Peirce 1966: 81-82. The first clause of the penultimate sentence is quoted by Williams in D: 229.

independent of the peculiarities arising from local perspectives and particular modes of apprehending the world (what Peirce calls the ‘arbitrary, accidental element’). The second idea, which is rather trickier to unravel, concerns Peirce’s idea of the truth as that to which ‘human opinion universally tends’; in Williams’s terms, the conception of reality as it is anyway is to be understood as a function of the ‘point of convergence’. These two ideas (convergence, and abstraction from local peculiarities) are explicitly linked by Williams as follows:

The scientific representation of the material world can be the point of convergence of the Peircean enquirers precisely because it does not have among its concepts any which reflect merely a local interest, taste or sensory peculiarity (D: 229).

In short, the scientific representation of reality, which in Descartes was the quantitatively describable cosmos ordained by God, is now explicated as the quantitatively describable cosmos on which scientific inquirers tend to converge, once they abstract from the peculiarities of their particular perspectives.

The question of how far Williams’s ‘absolute conception’ is to be interpreted in the pragmatist spirit of Peirce is nevertheless not easy to settle. The correct interpretation of Peirce’s views is itself far from straightforward, but on the standard reading he is to be thought of as giving a deflationary account of truth, so that instead of looking for some metaphysical account of an independent reality to which our theories and beliefs are supposed to correspond, we should simply accept that the term ‘true’ is to be cashed out in terms of what is arrived at by the consensus of scientific inquiry, or what would be so arrived at were such inquiry to continue indefinitely. In practical terms, this means for Peirce that ‘to have a true belief is to have a belief that is dependable in the face of all future challenges’ (Capps 2019). This kind of practically oriented conception of truth, while it may indeed capture a great deal of what we are doing when we describe our beliefs as true, clearly tends to move us firmly away from seeing the scientific enterprise in terms of a realist metaphysics. In the case of Descartes, by contrast, there is, as Williams underlines, a fundamental commitment ‘to realism, and to an absolute conception of the world, which includes a conception of matter given by a realistic physical science’ (D: 232). But what of Williams’s own position?

It would be a clear mistake to construe his appeals to Peirce as implying an endorsement of an anti-realist view of science. As Williams interprets convergence, it implies ‘an ideal limit of certainty as the end of scientific inquiry’ (D: 231). But that there is such an ideal end, and that we have already progressed some way towards it, Williams firmly asserts: ‘theories that have the powers that our theories have ... could not fail to represent in some way how the world really is’ (D: 232). Williams readily admits that convergence may not be as straightforwardly cumulative or inevitable a process as some of Peirce’s formulations suggest (D: 237, note. 17), but to suppose that the idea of convergence is an illusion, or that the notion of an absolute conception is baseless, will, Williams argues, face major difficulties when it comes to explaining the success of our scientific theories. He also argues against the deflationary view that scientific theories are simply a cultural product, which could never be freed from local relativities, pointing out that such a view is going to be hard put to it to establish a stable conception of the natural world ‘in relation to which it can understand cultural phenomena such as science and its own view of science’ (D: 232).

These passages make clear the extent to which Williams, in his conception of scientific inquiry, is committed to a robustly realist view of the world investigated by science, and in so doing, they reveal his philosophical stance as having striking affinities with the Cartesian outlook, despite all the specific points of divergence which we began by noting at

the start of this chapter. Discarding Descartes's theistic framework, Williams nevertheless feels strongly drawn to his absolute conception of reality, and seeks to hold onto it by other means. But is he successful?

4. *Convergence without God?*

Williams's strategy of relying on convergence to defend a realist view of scientific inquiry seems to me vulnerable to a certain kind of difficulty – one that may be approached by comparing his position with that of Descartes. In expounding Descartes's view of the absolute conception, Williams rightly points to the role played by the mathematically describable properties (the so-called 'primary' qualities, though this is not a Cartesian term), as against the secondary properties ascribed on the basis of our sensory faculties. As it emerges in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes's position is that our sensory faculty is, to put it schematically, configured in terms of functional utility for survival, while our intellectual faculty (the one that deals for example with the clear and distinct perceptions of logic and mathematics) is configured in such a way as to track the truth. This crucial difference provides Descartes with his building blocks for the achievement of genuine *scientia*—including knowledge of intellectual essences and also knowledge of the nature and workings of the physical world in so far as it can be described in logical and mathematical language (AT VII 71: CSM II 49). It also enables Descartes to propose a *corrective* in cases where, inevitably, the deliverances of the senses will sometimes lead us astray: as he says in the Sixth Meditation, we can keep in mind that the job of the senses is not to track the truth but simply to deal with matters 'conducive to the preservation of the healthy human being' (AT VII 87: CSM II 60); and, in cases of conflicting sensory evidence, we can invoke considerations of consistency, and in general employ our (reliable and truth-tracking) intellectual faculty to sort out confusions and conflicts in our sensory beliefs (AT VII 90: CSM II 62). In short, the Cartesian inquirer, though certainly not possessed of any easy or guaranteed fast track to the truth, is at least established as *equipped in principle* for the pursuit of truth.

The worldview in terms of which this all makes sense is of course that presupposed in the 'religious metaphysics' – the central core of the Cartesian system which Williams so strongly rejected. By contrast, Williams's own outlook, evidenced in many of his writings, is pervasively informed by what he called the 'first and hardest lesson of Darwinism', according to which there is no divine teleology, no benign 'orchestral score' overseeing our human actions, or guiding our beliefs (Williams 1995: 109-10). Yet this now risks calling into question the basis of Williams's faith in scientific convergence. For what Descartes had argued to be the case with respect to our sensory faculty, namely that it is configured simply in terms of functional utility for survival, will, I take it, be what the Darwinian naturalist has to maintain not just with respect to our sensory faculty, but with respect to *all* our human faculties. And this in turn raises the question of why we have any reason to suppose that any of our cognitive faculties are reliable. Alvin Plantinga, in a series of writings culminating in a paper entitled 'Against Naturalism', has put the point as follows, focusing on the neural structures associated with a given belief content (for example, that there is a predator in the vicinity):

As a result of having that neuronal event ... the creature in whom this event is to be found also believes a certain proposition. But what reason is there to think that proposition is *true*? Granted, the structure in question helps cause adaptive behaviour. But that doesn't so much as slyly suggest that the content that gets associated with the structure is true. As far as its causing the right kind of behaviour is concerned, it simply doesn't matter

whether the content, that associated proposition, is true or false. At this point, as far as the truth or falsehood of the content that arises, natural selection just has to take potluck (Plantinga and Tooley 2008: 40).

Against this, one might argue that the beliefs of organisms such as ourselves about the environment cannot be isolated states, but must form a complex interlocking web that enables us to map our place in the world; and if too many of these beliefs turn out to be false, the whole structure of the web is likely to unravel, with disastrous effects for the organism's success in the struggle for survival. Nevertheless, Plantinga's worry does, it seems to me, succeed in highlighting something disquieting about the naturalistic picture of our human cognitive predicament: on the naturalist picture, there is no systematic and principled linkage between our possession of equipment that has turned out to be beneficial in the evolutionary struggle for survival and our supposed capacity to track the truth with respect to the most evident intuitions of our intellects, or what Descartes calls the 'clear and distinct' perceptions of the mind.⁹

For Descartes, hasty judgements and perceptual errors can be corrected by the carefully focused intuitions of the intellect, which are the touchstone for assessing and, if necessary, revising judgments depending on the use of the less reliable faculties. So, the whole sense of ourselves as in principle equipped to inquire into the truth depends on faith in the reliability of our most basic and fundamental logical intuitions. This is exactly the situation as described by Descartes in his replies to his critics:

In the case of our clearest and most careful judgements ... if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgement or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases, I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived (*Meditations*, Second Replies, AT VII 144: CSM II 103).

Descartes's reason for making this confident pronouncement rests on the view that God cannot ultimately be a deceiver when it comes to our simplest and most basic intellectual intuitions; in other words, it depends ultimately on the theistic worldview that undergirds his entire philosophy. By contrast, anyone who, like Williams, subscribes to a Darwinian account of how our human faculties developed seems to have no reason for any principled confidence that our scientific inquiries will tend to converge on the truth, or that the mathematical reasoning that figures in the resulting 'absolute conception' will be reliable.

The underlying point is that it seems impossible for any philosopher to characterize our human situation with respect to the truth – the ways in which we have fallen short, the ways in which we are able to correct our mistakes – without implicitly taking a stance which assumes that we are indeed, when the chips are down, creatures who are in principle equipped to undertake the search for truth, so that the human mind is, in Nagel's phrase, an 'instrument of transcendence, able to grasp objective reality' (Nagel 2012: 85). And as Nagel – himself no theist, to say the least – concludes, it is not clear that this is an assumption that can be underwritten via the resources of evolutionary naturalism.

5. *Science and Ethics*

Williams returned to the idea of convergence some seven years after the publication of *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, in one of his most brilliant and widely admired works, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). In this later work, he deploys the idea of

⁹ The argument in this section draws on material from Cottingham 2013.

convergence in order to make a sharp distinction between the scientific and the ethical domains:

In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical ... there is no such coherent hope (Williams 1985: 136).

The optimistic view of the prospects for convergence in the scientific sphere and the pessimistic view of such prospects in the ethical sphere are, on Williams's view, closely linked. For, in the scientific case, he argues, convergence is 'guided by the way things actually are' (1985: 136). Williams describes this as a 'compelling' picture of the world as 'already there', 'helping to control our descriptions of it' (1985: 137) – something for which he insists there is no plausible corresponding picture in ethics.

This conception of reality as it is anyway, 'guiding' or 'helping to control' our descriptions of it, is a striking one. It presents a picture of reality such that our proper relation to it is in an important sense passive: authentic science is not a matter of our being autonomous controllers or determiners of the truth, but rather of our being responsive to something beyond ourselves that constrains our choice. For anyone familiar with the Cartesian picture of our relation to the truth, this will strike an immediate chord. To be sure, the Cartesian spirit of inquiry often seems to emphasise the independence and autonomy of the inquiring mind, and we see this especially in Descartes's own method of doubt, his determination to 'bend his will in the opposite direction', as he puts it in the First Meditation (AT VII 22: CSM II 15), so as to cautiously withhold assent from anything that might lead him astray. But as the *Meditations* progress, and the meditator learns to 'gaze in wonder' at the 'immense light' irradiating the mind on its journey towards God (Third Meditation, final paragraph), the stance shifts decisively, from one of detached scrutiny to one of submissive assent. As Descartes observes in the Fourth Meditation, the clarity of certain evident truths produces a spontaneous and irresistible assent in the will: *ex magna luce in intellectu magna consequuta est propensio in voluntate* ('from a great light in the intellect there followed a great propensity in the will'; AT VII 59: CSM II 41).

In his study of Descartes, Williams had drawn attention to this famous phrase in the Fourth Meditation in order to discuss Descartes's account of the will and his theory of mental assent. But it is significant that the examples Williams gives of the will's assent following the perceptions of the intellect are all drawn from the theoretical propositions of mathematics. What Williams fails to see, or at any rate to comment on, is that Descartes's doctrine of the assent of the will following the clear perceptions of the intellect applies equally to the domain of ethics. For Descartes, whether you focus on a transparent mathematical truth or a transparent moral truth, you have no choice but spontaneously to declare 'yes, it's true – to be affirmed!' or 'Yes, it's good – to be pursued!'

It is striking, especially perhaps for the modern reader, to see Descartes explicitly asserting that the scope of the 'great light' in the intellect encompasses the domain of ethical as well as of mathematical truth: in the Fourth Meditation, Descartes considers the *ratio veri* ('reason of truth') and the *ratio boni* ('reason of goodness') both together in the same breath (AT VII 58: CSM II 40). A common assumption of much philosophical inquiry in the aftermath of David Hume has been that the domains of fact and of value are sharply separated; but in Descartes's metaphysical worldview, they are part of one and the same objective, divinely grounded reality. (To avoid misunderstanding, it should perhaps be added that we are speaking here of the simplest and clearest ethical truths that are manifest to the natural light – perhaps truths such as 'generosity is good', or 'cruelty is bad' – truths analogous in their simplicity and clarity to a simple mathematical truth such as 'two plus

three makes five'. Descartes's thesis about the role of the natural light in ethics does not commit him to the idea that the answer to every detailed practical question about the ordinary conduct of life can be deduced from first principles, any more than he is committed to holding a deductivist view of all scientific truth (see further Cottingham 2017).)

One fairly obvious upshot of this parallelism between the theoretical and the moral domains in Descartes is that, in a Cartesian picture of reality, one may expect the same kind of convergence in the ethical sphere as in the scientific. Ethical properties, if we were to express it in Williams's terminology, would turn out to be just as much a part of the reality that is 'there anyway' as the physical properties that are the object of scientific inquiry. It is perhaps a pity that, in discussing the Fourth Meditation in his book on Descartes, Williams seems to have overlooked the Cartesian parallelism between reasons of truth and of goodness, since attending to it might have led him to explain how deeply uncongenial such a view was to his own philosophical stance. For a core tenet of Williams's view of ethics, expressed in a famous paper published three years after his *Descartes*, was the insistence that there can be no 'external' reasons requiring us to act – that is, no reasons that are not derivable in principle from the motives, the internal motivational set, of the agent (Williams 1980). And this in effect makes the whole idea of responding to a reality that is 'there anyway', irrespective of the motivational stance of the agent, something of a non-starter.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams went so far as to consider the possibility of a more objectivist account of ethical reality. For this to be plausible, he reasoned, one would have to be able to give some account of what it would be for us to have propositional knowledge of ethical truths, which in turn would require some account of what it would be for our beliefs to 'track the truth', or be responsive to ethical reality. But reflecting on such notions leads Williams to a swift and uncompromising conclusion that it could not work: 'I cannot see any convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of reflective ethical thought on ethical reality in even a distant analogy to the scientific case' (Williams 1985: 152).

Ruling out any return to a theistic worldview, in which reasons of truth and reasons of goodness are equally grounded in the nature of an ultimate divine reality, the only possible kind of ethical objectivism Williams could envisage was one based on some agreed idea of the most satisfactory life for human beings, given certain general features of human nature. But here, again influenced by a Darwinistic perspective on the highly contingent nature of our origins and development as a species, Williams was inclined, when reflecting on these matters some ten years later, in his *Making Sense of Humanity*, to see human nature as disparate amalgam of genetically determined and culturally inherited propensities and dispositions, with no reason to think that there is one clearly right way of living for any given individual, let alone one that will suit everyone:

[The] most plausible stories now available about [human] evolution, including its very recent date and also certain considerations about the physical characteristics of the species, suggest that human beings are *to some degree a mess*, and that the rapid and immense development of symbolic and cultural capacities has left humans as beings for which no form of life is likely to prove entirely satisfactory, either individually or socially (Williams 1995: 109, emphasis supplied).

Convergence becomes highly unlikely on this distinctly pessimistic conception of the human predicament, and indeed the seeds of such pessimism are already present in *Ethics and the Limits*, where Williams emphasised the widely disparate character of the various projects and goals that a human being may adopt, with no reason to think they will all 'fit together into one harmonious whole' (1985: 153).

To set in perspective Williams's dismissal of the prospects for convergence in ethics, it may help to contrast it with the position arrived at by a fairly close contemporary, the equally distinguished moral philosopher Derek Parfit, whose magnum opus, *On What Matters*, argued for a clear convergence in their practical implications between two seemingly radically different ethical theories, Kantianism and Consequentialism.¹⁰ Parfit's ethical outlook differed from that of Williams not only in respect of convergence, but also, and partly connectedly, as regards meta-ethics, where he took a strongly objectivist view of ethical truth. In line with the title of his book, Parfit maintains that some things really, objectively *matter*. How we treat people really matters; whether we look after our planet so that humanity survives really matters. These are genuine moral truths. As Parfit puts it, 'In believing that some things matter, I am believing that there are some *irreducibly normative truths*' (2011, Vol 2: 464, emphasis added). In other words, such moral truths have objective authority over us and give us decisive reasons to act in certain ways. But what grounds this objectivity? What makes the truths true?

The Cartesian answer to such questions would be, as we have seen, that there is an objective moral order, grounded ultimately in the nature of God, independent of our mere contingent inclinations and desires, and that this order exerts a normative power or authority over us, providing us with 'reasons of goodness', conclusive and compelling reasons to behave in certain ways. But, along with Williams and the majority of contemporary philosophers, Parfit rejects the theistic answer: he cannot accept God as the reality underlying the objective moral order. And, again like Williams, he subscribes to the standard materialist-naturalist paradigm: only the natural world exists, or, as Parfit puts it, there are no 'strange' parts of reality (2011, Vol 2: 487). So what grounds the objective truths of morality? The arguably baffling answer that Parfit offers is: *nothing*. Although he insists they are true, 'as true as any truth could be,' he holds that there is no underlying reality that makes them true: they have '*no ontological status.*' According to his view, 'for such claims to be true, the reason-involving properties need not exist either as natural properties in the spatio-temporal world, or in some non-spatio temporal part of reality' (2011, Vol 2: 486).

As we have seen, a principal reason for Williams's scepticism about objectivity and convergence in the ethical sphere was his assumption that there could be no coherent account of an 'ethical reality' analogous to the reality studied by science. Parfit's position could be seen as trying to cut this gordian knot by denying that objective ethical truths need be made true by any ethical reality. Though there is no space to argue the point in any detail here, it is possible to see the respective positions of Williams and Parfit as illustrating the dilemma that arises once a theistic underpinning for ethics is abandoned. In the case of Williams, there is no recourse but to abandon the hope of objectivism in the ethical sphere. In the case of Parfit, objectivism is retained, but at the cost of baldly asserting that there can be irreducible ethical truths without any truthmakers. Many may feel that the two positions are, in different ways, equally unsatisfactory (see Cottingham 2014: Ch. 4).

6. Conclusion

Whatever one's stance on these difficult questions of objectivity in science and in ethics (and clearly, in both domains, there are many more aspects to these questions than can be touched on here), there is little doubt that Williams's encounter with the Cartesian system was extraordinarily fruitful. In unravelling Descartes's 'project of pure inquiry', he was able to articulate the idea of an 'absolute conception of reality', the idea of a reality that is 'there

¹⁰ Derek Parfit was born 13 years after Williams; the first two volumes of his mammoth *On What Matters* appeared in 2011, the third in 2017.

anyway’, in so fertile a manner that those addressing many of the enduring problems in contemporary philosophy seem likely sooner or later to have to confront this idea in ways that will be indebted to how Williams formulated it. To take one example, the intractable problems of consciousness (including the so-called ‘hard’ problem, which so much exercises today’s philosophers and cognitive scientists) seem partly to hinge, as Williams put it, on ‘what kind of thing is added to the physical picture of things when consciousness is added to it’, and ‘what sort of facts, from an objective or absolute standpoint, can psychological facts be?’ (D: 231). Another example concerns the still unresolved question of the status of ethical inquiry, and how far it can coherently be seen in terms of a search for ethical knowledge; and how far, in turn, such knowledge can be understood in terms of a reality that guides and helps shape our ethical conceptions. And finally, by choosing to study the ‘father of modern philosophy’ who was at the same time a committed theist, Williams often seems implicitly to be setting himself the task of seeing how much of the Cartesian system can shed light on the philosophical concerns of a secularist epistemology and metaphysics, thereby setting up challenges that the protagonists of our contemporary naturalist worldview still wrestle with. By raising such questions in the context of expounding and criticising the work of one of the world’s great canonical philosophers, Bernard Williams succeeded in bringing the history of philosophy vividly to life, and showed with consummate skill how what he called the ‘humanistic’ discipline of philosophy can itself be significantly enriched by bringing the ideas of the great thinkers of the past into confrontation with our present-day perspectives.¹¹

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¹¹ See one of the last essays that Williams published, his ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’ [2000], in Williams 2005: 180-199.

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