



Shame and Necessity (Sather Classical Lectures)

By Bernard Williams

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We tend to suppose that the ancient Greeks had primitive ideas of the self, of responsibility, freedom, and shame, and that now humanity has advanced from these to a more refined moral consciousness. Bernard Williams's original and radical book questions this picture of Western history. While we are in many ways different from the Greeks, Williams claims that the differences are not to be traced to a shift in these basic conceptions of ethical life. We are more like the ancients than we are prepared to acknowledge, and only when this is understood can we properly grasp our most important differences from them, such as our rejection of slavery.

The author is a philosopher, but much of his book is directed to writers such as Homer and the tragedians, whom he discusses as poets and not just as materials for philosophy. At the center of his study is the question of how we can understand Greek tragedy at all, when its world is so far from ours.

Williams explains how it is that when the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves, but about ourselves. In a new foreword A.A. Long explores the impact of this volume in the context of Williams's stunning career.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This book is about ancient Greek ethical ideas, primarily of Homer and the tragedians. Denying that modern ethical understanding is merely a progressive version of Greek thought, Williams contends that the ancients' ideas can illuminate our own. His question is how to respond to a view grounded in supernatural conceptions we have long since discarded. He examines Greek ideas of agency, intention, practical deliberation, akrasia ("weakness of will"), necessity, and so forth, analyzing which motivations the Greeks found admirable and, especially, how shame, guilt, regret, and forgiveness interrelate. Significant contrasts concern whether the moral self is characterless, what warrants self-respect, and how to regard unintentionally caused suffering. Clearly written, well argued, and carefully documented, the book should interest classicists and philosophers alike.

- Robert Hoffman, *York Coll.*,

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Review

"A dazzlingly clever and agile assault. . . . Williams's treatment of shame is brilliant. . . . Mr Williams's mind is subtle, his reasoning complex. In places this is a difficult book, but always because the argument requires it; essentially, it is a model of philosophical lucidity. And though it is deeply serious, we can often catch an ironic inflection in the author's voice." -- *Richard Jenkyns, New York Times Book Review*

"Brilliant, demanding, disturbing." -- *Bernard Knox, The New York Review of Books*

"Clearly written, well argued, and carefully documented." -- *Library Journal*

"Poets often prove to be much better observers of human thought, character and action than philosophers, historians or psychologists, who are apt to launch into theory and generalisation before they have a good description of what they are setting out to explain. This is what Williams's discussions of the ancient texts bring out in every instance, and what makes his book worth reading, not just for those who are interested in the question whether we have made any real moral progress, but also for those who are interested in the Greeks, or in the varieties of ethical experience." -- *Gisela Striker, London Review of Books*

About the Author

Bernard Williams (1929-2003) was one of the most distinguished British philosophers of the twentieth century, White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, and Monroe Deutsch Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Daniel Hanson:

This Shame and Necessity (Sather Classical Lectures) book is not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you obtain by reading this book is information inside this guide incredible fresh, you will get data which is getting deeper you actually read a lot of information you will get. This Shame and Necessity (Sather Classical Lectures) without we comprehend teach the one who examining it

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Rosemary Perez:

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