

Scholarship and Bricolage

by E. Christian Kopff



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Shame and Necessity
by Bernard Williams
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Suppose it is true that we are living in a post-Christian age. On what basis shall we live our lives, make moral decisions, create and destroy? I suppose that, if Christianity were to disappear as the guiding moral force in the United States, it would be replaced by another religion, probably Islam. People like Ernest Gellner seem to believe that we could proceed onwards from our Enlightenment tradition to formulate and live by a new rational morality. In *Shame and Necessity*, British philosopher Bernard Williams turns to the Greek world of Homer and Attic tragedy to discover the secret behind their way of thought and of life. Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Williams is looking to find what was right in the Greek dawn, and where Western Man took the wrong path in his subsequent long journey.

Williams devotes many pages to attacking “progressivism,” the belief that time improves all things and that therefore the modern world, and our way of viewing reality, is better than the past’s

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way. Much of *Shame and Necessity* is a classical version of Herbert Butterfield’s famous polemic against the “Whig Interpretation of History.” Its victim is the great German scholar, Bruno Snell, whose *Discovery of the Mind* (1948) dominated classical studies for a generation after World War II, in tandem with the Oxfordian Eric Dodds’ *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951). (Dodds’ book, like Williams’, was delivered at Berkeley as part of the Sather Classical Lectures series.) A key date in the assault on progressivism was the publication in 1971 of Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones’ Sather Lectures, *The Justice of Zeus*. To see how much things have changed in the past two decades, one need only compare the outrage which greeted Lloyd-Jones’ brilliant book with the hosannas that have poured down on Williams. The latter’s ridicule of the view that Homer’s great epics are morally primitive will help those who are taken in by the progressivist drivel of Julian Jaynes—whose *Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* assimilates the thinking of Achilles and Odysseus to the psychoses of the Liverpool Strangler—but little in Williams’ book will seem new to professional classicists.

The best chapter, “Shame and Autonomy,” is a masterpiece of moral thinking and careful literary analysis. Williams not only rejects the progressivist argument that shame and guilt represent two different kinds of society and human be-

ing, the latter inherently superior to the former, but shows the importance of shame in any healthy human morality. Moderns wonder why there are so many more manuscripts from antiquity and the medieval world of Sophocles’ *Ajax* than of his *Oedipus* or *Antigone*. A warrior who kills himself rather than suffer humiliation seems to us on a more primitive level than a brave woman who would rather die than betray her duty to family and gods. Williams helps us take *Ajax* seriously again.

“Shame looks to what I am,” Williams points out. His elegant polemic sometimes leads him to argue as though guilt were a bad thing, but he himself reminds us that a healthy society needs guilt, too. Guilt has us look to others as shame has us look to ourselves. The idea that evolution proceeds from a primitive Shame Culture to an advanced Guilt Culture is not demonstrable from the historical record and in fact conflicts with our own feelings and observations. We see others—and if we are introspective we feel ourselves—making decisions at times in deference to what other people will say, and sometimes because of our own internalized moral commitments. The ancient Greeks did the same; evolution has nothing to do with it.

Williams’ important chapter on “Necessary Identities” is much less successful. “Modern liberal thought rejects all necessary social identities. . . . It has given itself the task of constructing a framework

of social justice to control necessity and chance, in the sense both of mitigating their effects on the individual and of showing that what cannot be mitigated is not unjust." The difference between ancient and modern attitudes turns out to hinge on Kant and to culminate in John Rawls, philosophers who have argued for the separation of moral judgment from social context and historical contingency. Williams himself has employed arguments from the ancient world to make good objections to Kant and American neo-Kantianism. His earlier writings, including his classic essay on "Moral Luck," showed that he understood the limitations and errors of Kant's attempt to escape from the morality of "my station and its duties" into one where the individual transcends any social role, and universal human rights take precedence over the traditional and the local. *Shame and Necessity* traces this abstracting vision back to Descartes (correctly) and even to Plato and Aristotle (less persuasively). Nietzsche, he says, "set the problem" of his inquiry. When push comes to shove, though, Williams cannot bear to relinquish the influence of the Enlightenment.

He has difficulty dealing with the bizarre view, held by the ancient Greeks and explained by Aristotle, that men and women are different. For one thing, "modern prejudice is to a much vaster extent [than with slavery] the same as ancient." It turns out that this Greek belief is not alien to us, being indeed quite modern. "The idea that gender roles are imposed by nature is alive in 'modern,' scientific forms. In particular, the more crassly unreflective contributions of sociobiology to this subject represent little more than continuations of Aristotelian anthropology by other means." We are supposed to be shocked. E. O. Wilson and Thomas Fleming assert quite brazenly that their work is in the tradition of Aristotle. Williams gives no notes to this section and spends his time denouncing "the assumption that nature has something to tell us, in fairly unambiguous terms, about what social roles should be and how they should be distributed." Aristotle, Wilson, and Fleming observe how roles are distributed and then present theories that would "save the phenomena." Sexual role separation and male political dominance are, after all, cultural universals. They are found in every nonmythical society, including our own. When Williams denounces, with-

out argument or even specific example, attempts to understand these phenomena, he reveals the limitations of abstract philosophizing when it is cut off from philological and historical research.

Williams assures us that the ancient Greeks did not believe that the distribution of social roles reflected nature. Indeed, "in its most complete and comforting form it was almost an Aristotelian specialty." On one page, he attacks Aristotle for his culturally biased defenses of the common beliefs of his society. On the next, he calls his views a personal idiosyncrasy. He does not seriously discuss Greeks who did question traditional sex roles, like Aristophanes (for a lark) and Plato, in the Fifth Book of the Republic. (Just as you cannot use your hands in soccer, Williams is forbidden to use Plato, even when he desperately needs him.) Euripides' *Medea* complains about the sexual double standard, but she explicitly reaffirms the natural differences between men and women. Her famous cry that she would rather fight three battles than give birth once is not an offer to volunteer, but an assessment of relative pain and fear.

Williams' treatment of slavery is especially jejune, being heavily dependent on one book by M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (1980). It is a poor choice. These lively and thought-provoking essays "do not constitute a history of ancient slavery," in Finley's own words, and are often devoted to polemics against other classicists, not analysis of facts. Even so, Williams cannot get his one source straight, arguing that "Greek and Roman slavery was, as Moses Finley stressed, a novel invention." On the contrary, Finley agreed with Fustel de Coulanges that slavery is a cultural universal, "a primordial fact, contemporary with the origin of society." Finley does say that "the Greeks and Romans transformed this 'primordial fact' into something new and wholly original in world history," just as they transformed epic poetry, drama, and history itself. This initial mistake leads the hapless Williams into one blunder after another. He thinks Aristotle's discussion of slavery as "natural" (in opposition to those who call it a social construction based on "violence") is a culturally biased defense of a unique Greek institution, instead of an explanation of a cultural universal. Williams contrasts the concepts of "natural" and "forced" in

Aristotle's *Physics* to show that he was confused by cultural bias in his social thought, forgetting that Aristotle disagreed with the idea that slavery had no basis but violence.

Williams is angered by Aristotle's observation that slaves and free people differ as a rule, somatically and intellectually, "but the opposite often happens, and some people have the bodies of free men and others the souls." "The last sentence is a disaster," Williams crows. Aristotle distinguishes between aspects of the world that are true "always" (*aei*) and aspects that are true "for the most part" (*epi to poly*). His theory admits of, and expects, exceptions. Our science distinguishes between correlations that are statistically significant and those that are not. Does Williams think that only correlations of 100 percent are statistically significant? The statistically significant correlation of intelligence to social status in the United States and Great Britain is in no way refuted by the existence of intelligent poor people and silly rich people.

Page after page is consumed by the sort of liberal self-righteousness which disgusted Friedrich Engels, Karl Marx's best friend. In his *Anti-Duhring*, Engels wrote, "It is very easy to inveigh against slavery and similar things in general terms, and to give vent to high moral indignation at such infamies. Unfortunately all that this conveys is what everyone knows, namely, that these institutions of antiquity are no longer in accord with our present conditions and our sentiments, which these conditions determine. . . . We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development presupposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognized." Williams knows that among the ancients "slavery, in most people's eyes, was not just, but necessary. Because it was necessary, it was not, as an institution, seen as unjust either." What he finds objectionable is "Aristotle's attempt to justify the institution." In *Politics I* Aristotle says that, until the day comes when machines can replace human labor, slavery will be necessary for human society. He objects to those who call slavery "contrary to nature and unjust," arguing that it is not rational to use such terms about a universal and necessary social institution. Williams' contrast between "not unjust" and "just" is an unworthy linguistic quibble. In Greek idiom, *litotes* ("not un-

just”) is an emphatic form of the positive (“just”).

This is the way Williams treats his own field, philosophy. In dealing with Classical Greek literature his ignorance of the scholarly problems of the texts he deals with, and especially of the German bibliography on these problems, is appalling. His occasional *obiter dicta* on problems he knows nothing about are an embarrassment. His one comment on textual criticism combines arrogance with ignorance in a footnote that will remain a permanent blot on the Sather series. What provoked him to attempt such a work? His apologia near the end of the book gives a hint. “We are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies. . . . We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities. . . . I am not denying that the modern world is through and through different from the ancient world. . . . If we find things of special beauty and power in what has survived from that world, it is encouraging to think that we might move beyond marveling at them, to putting them, or bits of them, to modern uses.”

This is the scholarship of bricolage. Williams is a tourist who wanders out of the Holiday Inn in downtown Rome, photographs Bernini’s baroque elephant, and stops for a cappuccino near the Pantheon. He then strolls down an ancient Roman road until he comes to a modern thoroughfare. He makes his way through the busy traffic, walks into the Piazza Navona and sits down to enjoy a delicious gelato. As a civilized and liberal person, he reminds himself that his appreciation for this ice cream does not in itself prove the superiority of our society to other or earlier cultures. He is rummaging through the past looking for hints to solve specific problems and to pass his leisure time. For him, history is the ultimate Old Curiosity Shop.

Williams mentions Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory that human beings think and create in traditions. He approves of MacIntyre’s rejection of progressivism, but not of his reasons for doing so. For MacIntyre, the liberal tradition that comes from the Enlightenment is an intellectual mess because it is the “tradition of anti-traditionalism” (just as

Gadamer saw, it embodies the “prejudice against prejudice”). It is, therefore, constantly pulling out the rug from under its own intellectual feet. It confuses and misuses ideas and methods that make sense in one tradition, but cannot be transferred *ad lib.*, anymore than life forms can be transported from one environment to another without great danger to them or to the environment, or both.

Williams has a problem with the historical observation that creativity takes place in conscious traditions, and that men and women in all societies have different roles. Such observations rest on historical and philological research whose methods have been practiced for millennia; they cannot be defended by the techniques of British analytical philosophy, which are less than a century old. Williams can fiddle with bric-a-brac, but he cannot deal with coherent traditions, no matter how long lived and creative. Finally, he has nowhere else to go, and by the end of the book he is openly describing Enlightenment ideals (as opposed to those of earlier traditions) as “social and political ideals in favor of truthfulness and the criticism of arbitrary and merely traditional power,” even as “social and political honesty.” Thus Bernard Williams ends his own Sather Lectures as a progressivist.

His proclamations of honesty and truthfulness are soon belied. He continually misrepresents Aristotle. He cannot mention Plato without equating him with (usually) Kant, and sometimes with Descartes. The reason eventually slips out. Plato “is manifestly and professedly offensive to liberal and democratic opinion.” If there was ever a philosopher who was in favor of truth and “the criticism of . . . merely traditional power,” even to the extent of questioning private property, and role division between the sexes and within the family, it was Plato. It does him no good, however, because he also criticized democracy. So in the fever swamps of the analytical philosophers, Plato is *a priori* wrong, and any stick is good enough to beat him with, even the worm cudgel of Kantianism.

Hot on the heels of *suggestio falsi* comes her sister, *suppressio veri*. The 20th-century philosopher who spent his life reading the pre-Socratic Greeks in search of a way out of our contemporary malaise is Heidegger. Williams never mentions him by name, although there is at least one sneering reference to “our

relations to Being,” and there may be other hints that I missed. Heidegger is blackballed, like Plato, for his politics. Williams spends pages trying to invent a game where he can choose Sophocles, Thucydides, and Nietzsche for his team, and leave Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel on the other. In doing so, he suppresses the profound differences between Kant and the earlier figures, and the similarity of his own enterprise to Heidegger’s. It is not only implausible; it is dishonest.

But Williams ends up on the same side as his old bugbear, Kant, in their common mission of salvaging the Enlightenment. Williams differs from Neo-Kantians like John Rawls regarding the best way to do so, and such internecine feuds are often fiercer than the slow wars of attrition that take place between traditions. Rawls thinks a defense of the liberal regime means going back to Kant, and he has made an impressive case for that strategy. The moral and philosophical problems that this involves have led many to seek other ways out of the dilemma. Alasdair MacIntyre understood that the rejection of Kant means the rejection of the Enlightenment, and of the liberal regime. Bernard Williams is trying another possible escape route, one suggested by Nietzsche and Heidegger: the careful investigation of a great, creative non-Christian civilization, such as Greece from the eighth to the fifth century, B.C., as represented by writers from Homer to Thucydides. What the Greeks of this period have to tell us—and it is much—does not lead directly, or even probably, to the liberal regime. Of course, this last sentence rests on historical observation, not on proofs acceptable to analytical philosophy.

As the work of a talented amateur, *Shame and Necessity* is marked by brilliant insights but also by naiveté—which is not all bad—and by ignorance, which is. The worst problem, however, is the author’s unwillingness to admit to himself what he is doing. Like Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, he is seeking a defense of the regime that rules his country and ours. He misrepresents his mission, and he misrepresents the intellectual and political context of the tools he is using for his rescue operation. He frequently talks about what the ancient Greeks can mean for “us” in “our” post-Christian situation. The careful reader will eventually discover that by “us” Bernard Williams means “them.”

Out of Whole Cloth

by Philip Jenkins

**Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse
and the Making of a Modern
American Witch Hunt**

by Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker

New York: Basic Books;

317 pp., \$25.00



Satan's *Silence* is critical for understanding current debates over issues as diverse as feminism, the social position of children, the growth of therapeutic values and beliefs, and the status of American civil liberties. This might seem hyperbolic, but only to those who have escaped the recent clamor over the supposed epidemic of ritual and Satanic abuse and violence to which American children are said to be subjected. According to these tales, countless thousands of children have from their earliest years been repeatedly raped and violated by satanic cults, in appalling rituals that often involve the consumption of blood, urine, and feces, and the murder of humans and animals. Though seemingly *outré*, notions of "Satanic Ritual Abuse" have become widespread among groups as disparate as feminist theorists, child protection advocates, psychotherapists, and Christian fundamentalists. Indeed, the acceptance of SRA has for some years been an ideological touchstone in such circles: proof that one takes sides with the victims—with women and children—against the incessant terrorism waged by the diabolical hosts inspired by an oppressive patriarchal society. To express skepticism is tacitly to acquiesce in the crimes, even to become a vicarious participant. If we suggest that children are lying or mistaken in their claims, we are seeking to reverse a generation of progress in the direction of "believing the victim," of taking children's rights seriously. We are also rejecting a cardinal precept of modern therapy. The current equivalent of the 17th-century phrase, "No bishop, no king," seems to be "No satanist, no therapist"; or, "No satanic abuse, no child protection."

Nathan and Snedeker have proved be-

yond any doubt that the whole ritual abuse scenario is utterly fictitious, founded on a sickening mixture of gullibility, avarice, self-promotion, and personal malice. It is often tempting to pursue a moderate course, to argue that while most such charges might be false, there is obviously a core of fact: surely there could not be such abundant smoke without a little fire? But as with the anti-Jewish blood libel of past years, from which the legend partly derives, ritual abuse offers a classic example of a slander cut from whole cloth. In reality, the number of children victimized by satanic gangs is equal to the number of Christian infants butchered by Jews at Passover: zero. Reciting either myth as factual should earn the culprit public ostracism.

Satan's Silence shows brilliantly and persuasively how the SRA theory originated in the 1970's with speculations by the "anti-cult" movement, notions that were focused and magnified by *Michelle Remembers*, published in 1980, in which a woman purported to recall abuse by her mother's cult many years previously. The book initiated a boom in the therapeutic recollection of early trauma that has made fortunes for snake-oil psychiatrists with the ethical standards of Ted Bundy. Incidentally, the authors fail to note that the *Michelle* story apparently derived from tales of the doings of West African leopard cults in the colonial era, an exotic mythology lovingly transplanted to North America, where it has blossomed splendidly: as in ancient times, *ex Africa semper aliquid novi*. The various strands of the legend merged in 1984-85 with the case of the McMartin preschool in Southern California, in which a group of seven innocent teachers were subjected to years of hell at the sadistic pleasure of the Los Angeles media and prosecutor's office on charges of inflicting bizarre sexual rituals on hundreds of toddlers. The McMartin affair was the model for hundreds of later incidents, in which teachers and caregivers were identified as the Special Forces in Satan's endless horde.

Case by case, Nathan and Snedeker show painstakingly how such witch hunts are generated: how minor physical oddities in a child patient are taken as proof of the "witch's mark" of abuse;

how child "victims" are subsequently interrogated at terrifying length until they seek escape by accusing anyone put forward by the inquisitors; and how unscrupulous prosecutors drive home these charges by the use of jailhouse snitches and media leaks. The chief problem is what might be called the "overkill" phenomenon; ever-willing child witnesses seeking their elders' approval by constant embroidery of their tales, which expand into wondrous realms of sacrifices and massacres, hidden tunnels, Nazi mind-control, satanically mobilized killer bees, and CIA atrocities (every item in this list derives from an authentic SRA case, including the bees and the tunnels). Such rococo fabrications, though usually excluded from court, still fuel the fantasies of conspiracy theorists, among whom the creators of quirky television series like *The X-Files* are presumably viewed as skeptics.

When SRA theory originated in the early 1980's, critics were remarkably scarce, few people being willing to express their doubts in print for fear of attracting public obloquy. Worse, the therapists and prosecutors who nurtured this monstrous creation were swift to allege that the defenders of accused ritual abusers were themselves clandestine diabolists, so that to be seen as a member of "the backlash" was an unenviable position. While I am proud to say that my first contribution to the literature of dissent dates from 1985, I claim no merit comparable to the authors of *Satan's Silence*. Michael Snedeker belongs to that elite corps of attorneys who had the courage to defend parents and teachers accused in such cases, despite the risk of being stigmatized for "defending the Devil." And Debbie Nathan is the sort of investigative journalist one would not dare invent in fiction, at a time when so few people believe in the image of the heroic crusading press. She has written on the most outrageous witch hunts, incidents deemed untouchable by local media hacks, and has fought tirelessly to free the thousands of falsely accused and imprisoned. Knowing the power and lack of scruple of those she is denouncing, she provides meticulous documentation of her charges against therapists and SRA true believers; charges of malfeasance and obscene greed that