

### A Laughable Book Review: On Hating *Hating Perfection*

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Williams, John F. *Hating Perfection*. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2013. Pp. 7 + 373. Paperback \$19.99. ISBN: 978-1-61614-875-1.

Williams's monograph, revised from 2009, reveals insensitivity to his intended audience's intelligence, philosophical acumen, literary taste, and mood. Evidence of his insensitivity or sheer *hubris* is proved by the fact that not one but two copies were mailed to every unsuspecting APA dues-paying member, which means that it is factually true that there are more distributed copies of *Hating Perfection* in America than John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>1</sup>

The very fact that this is a *revised* edition shows that Williams has had very little, if any, professional philosophical training, has a bit of a wishful thinking syndrome with this pseudo-philosophical text, and has violated the primary principle in western philosophy first articulated by the Greeks, "know thyself." In the *Philebus*, Socrates uses the inscription from Delphi, claiming that the opposite, "by no means know yourself," is an example of what is *to geloion*, "laughable."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the book is laughable and worthy of an *LPS* review.

Not only does Williams not know his own limitations, he often misreads his unsuspecting reader who is reading his text. Throughout the book, Williams annoyingly addresses his reader: "good reader," "gentle reader," "gentle and patient reader."<sup>3</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. I am a hostile and angry reader. I am frustrated with the book review assignment that I took upon myself so that no one else has to read *Hating Perfection* in order to see quite how badly argued this book really is. Yes, I took the bullet for the *Florida Philosophical Review's Special Lighthearted Philosophers' Society* edition and the entire APA.

*Hating Perfection* has several parts containing a series of vignettes. The vignettes include biographical stories, such as the racism he and his wife experienced in China from the mainlanders about their interracial marriage and his search for psychedelic whisky in Laos. These biographical stories were interesting and well-written and for a moment I was concerned that the book might turn out to be decent after all. I was worried that I would not be able to write a review that was *LPS*-worthy. In fact, if Williams had simply written a biography about his misadventures in Laos and then how he became a wealthy businessman it might have been a book worth reading. It would have definitely been a book you could give your misdirected nephew who has been wallowing in junior college for the past twelve years. Yet the fiction narratives and Williams's arguments regarding the subtleties of our experiences did not disappoint. At times the arguments were incoherent, at other

times the arguments were tautologies, but most of the time the arguments were absurd. In fact, what follows will be both a cruel and charitable analysis of his main so-called philosophical ideas.

First, Williams argues for some claims that are obviously true. In this sense and this sense only he is irrefutable. Williams claims that our daily lives are a combination of elusiveness and order. He gives as example the following elucidation of his thought:

Mountains, thunderstorms, sunsets, stars, trees and humans are each alike and each unique.

Our satisfactions are profoundly diverse yet profoundly commensurate.

Events for us are expected and unexpected, intelligible and surprising, orderly and random.<sup>4</sup>

This insight must have sounded incredible after drinking whiskey Lao. Even more incredible was the thought to put it into print. Then the unthinkable: someone read this stuff. One can never get those hours back. Williams says that science cannot account for this system of interconnected balances but seems to think that his account of spiders and subtle human experience can. I'll discuss his view about spiders later in the review. This is where the philosophy gets really bad. The following paragraph betrays Williams's limited knowledge in philosophy and also proves Socrates' point in the *Republic* that no one should attempt to do philosophy until the age of 50, after having 30 years of training in logic and mathematics. Here it comes:

The fact of our Big Bang fails to explain why our world has one. In the realm of logical possibility, people could have existed just fine without evolving from anything. Moreover, the Big Bang evolution accounts for neither consciousness, nor free will, nor the ineffable moments that take us by surprise. Physical law and physical evolution illuminate our lives without explaining why we have them.<sup>5</sup>

Williams appears to make the fallacious inference from "p is not the only possible explanation of the fact that q" to "p is not the actual explanation of q." For example, the explanation of why the United States stinks at soccer is that most of our best athletes go into more popular sports like football or basketball. In some other possible world, the explanation might have been that some freak disease wiped out every American citizen that would have otherwise made for a good soccer player. But the truth of this explanation in that possible world has nothing to do with what explains our soccer ineptitude in the real one.<sup>6</sup>

As for Williams's claim that "the Big Bang evolution" doesn't explain consciousness or free will, it's simply another instance of what I call the "college freshman argument": Make a really

sweeping, controversial claim, pass it off as gospel in one sentence and don't bother to provide any defense of it whatsoever. If you're lucky, your gentle reader will be glazing through your writing too quickly to notice what the hell happened; for added effectiveness, make your prose especially dull.<sup>7</sup> To say that Williams fails to touch on the rich philosophical and scientific literature on how consciousness and free will might arise in a purely physical world would be an understatement.

Williams proposes to address the two main issues his monograph is all about: (1) What ought to exist? What would be the best possible state of existence? (2) What evidence do you and I have, that what ought to exist does exist?<sup>8</sup> Here is where the book gets really, really weird. Here is also where the modicum of my patience runs out.

The best possible world, Williams claims, is what subtle agents want.<sup>9</sup> Subtle agents are distinguished from spider-style agents. The former are human beings, chimps, cats, and dolphins, while the spider-style agents are all other beings.<sup>10</sup> Spider-style agents do not compare themselves to other creatures. They are happy with what they do, such as building big webs and catching and eating flies. In contrast, subtle agents like us make comparisons to their experiences all the time. W explains that, "a cat might turn up his nose at kibble, if he usually gets herring or salmon. The cat regards the kibble as substandard, because the cat makes comparisons."<sup>11</sup> A subtle agent always makes comparisons, according to preconceived standards, by which the subtle agent interprets her world – this is what W calls making 'fluid comparisons.'<sup>12</sup> Williams's description and analysis (as if analysis were really needed here) regarding fluid comparisons gets quite tedious. For example, human beings make lots of comparisons. "We compare the comparisons, and compare those comparisons."<sup>13</sup> Williams is just a few comparing sentences away from making comparing sentences to those that might be found in Monty-Python or from John Oliver: And those comparisons, are compared to the comparing comparisons, which are compared to the comparisons made prior to the previous comparisons, which, then, are compared to the comparisons made currently, and formerly, with the comparisons made before and after.

Williams never answers his own question, "what ought to exist?" He does answer his second question, that the best possible state of existence is our current one, which I quite frankly, remain unconvinced. One night on a whisky-bender shows to me that there are better states of existence than the one I am currently experiencing right now.

According to Williams, "spiders can go to heaven."<sup>14</sup> I'm not even going to explain this claim because I don't understand it. In the section which bears this title, Williams anthropomorphizes spider happiness and says that spiders do not have any opinions about the world (maybe because they are spiders?!). Further, spiders do not have any opinions about possible worlds, and therefore, they do not have opinions about the best possible world. Given this account of spiders, Williams discounts their opinions. Williams writes, "the lights are on but nobody's home, as it were."<sup>15</sup> *Indeed*. It is a mystery then why spiders can go to heaven as they don't value their own

satisfaction. If they don't value their own satisfaction, if they are just happy spinning webs and eating flies, then they could not have a sense of good and evil and then whether spiders can go to heaven or not would be pointless.<sup>16</sup> Besides the fact that the argument is incoherent, Williams relies upon a distinction as mentioned earlier between subtle and non-subtle agents. We (you, good reader, and I) are subtle agents because we have desires and preferences and are 'addicted' to "what will happen next."<sup>17</sup> Non-subtle agents are the so-called spider like agents (not to be confused with the spiders aforementioned who can go to heaven, though the spiders are too, spider like) and spider like agents can be cockroaches, plants, cars, etc. Here is an elusive passage that seeks to expand on the subtlety of our experience:

We often take the subtlety of our experience for granted, and neither strive for it, nor care explicitly what size it has, nor care explicitly that it obtains at all. In that respect, subtlety differs from happiness. We cannot be happy unless we know we are happy. We know by making comparisons. But our lives can be subtle whether or not we know they are subtle, and whether or not we actually compare that subtlety to alternatives. Even without comparison of one subtlety to another, all our other comparisons remain, and give size to our subtlety. A perception of beauty can be subtle, whether or not the perceiver knows it is subtle.<sup>18</sup>

What I find problematic about Williams's use of subtle agents and subtlety is that he does not bother to define the terms. Williams claims that subtlety "is a coherent concept" but also that we cannot define what subtlety is.<sup>19</sup> He says that "[t]he familiar terms "knowledge," "belief," "justice," and "love" have a similar status. We can't define them, but we know they refer to coherent features in our lives." Now, it is untrue that we can't define these terms. Philosophers over the millennia have defined "knowledge," "belief," "justice," and "love," and while it is true that the definitions and accounts keep changing, that fact alone does not entail that the terms cannot be defined (unless W is using a different notion of define which itself he feels cannot be defined). It is one of the greatest sins of both philosophical writing and pseudo-philosophical writing that W is committing—not to define or give an account of one's terms—especially when one is using them in such a unique way as W is doing.

I suggest that some of the claims Williams makes would sound better in French, with music composed by Philip Glass playing in the background. In his "Exploiting the Human Style," Williams writes:

We understand our world and it mystifies us.  
We control events and events control us.

We are vital and we decay.

We know what the next sunset will be like and we do not know.

We know what will happen this day and we do not know.

We can protect ourselves and we can never be safe.

We know how best to conduct our lives and we do not know.

We can change the world and we cannot change it.

We have answers to our problems and we do not have answers.<sup>20</sup>

Sigh.

There is, and remains, one big giant mystery about this book. How is it possible that the book garnered so much praise by famous philosophers? Hubert Dreyfus – “Astonishing!...An electrifying achievement.” Michael Tooley, “Very clearly stated arguments.” And by some philosophers who are not so famous: John Barker – “Clear and Remarkable.” Bruce Waller – “Subtle and deep.”

Now...never, never-ever, not ever, in my experience as a reader reading philosophy, or taking classes from philosophers or going to philosophy conferences, have I ever heard professional philosophers talk this way about any philosophical work. Nope. Nada. None. Not in the United States, at least. France, perhaps, but the scholars are more congenial and collaborative there. One would think these quotes come from the kinds of film critic quote whores who provide glowingly positive reviews to awful movies so the studios can have some sound bites to tout their substandard products.<sup>21</sup> There is only one possible solution to this mystery. My conclusion is that the two examination copies, which also included pamphlets explaining why this book should be considered to be an important contribution to philosophy, which were sent to every member of the American Philosophical Association, was a big and expensive practical joke.

Good reader – you do not need to read this book. You can put it in the recycle bin, use it as kindling for campfires, or pass it along as a Secret Santa gift to the in-law you hate. While it may be the most widely distributed philosophy book in the history of western philosophy, it definitely is also the most widely discarded philosophy book, as it should be.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Christopher Rice for this point.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, 48c-d.

<sup>3</sup> Williams 2013, 37, 42, 56, 131, 135, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Williams 2013, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Williams 2013, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Philip Osborne for this point.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Philip Osborne for this point.

<sup>8</sup> Williams 2013, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Williams 2013, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Williams 2013, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Williams 2013, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Williams 2013, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Williams 2013, 111.

<sup>14</sup> Williams 2013, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Williams 2013, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Williams 2013, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Williams 2013, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Williams 2013, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Williams 2013, 314.

<sup>20</sup> Williams 2013, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Philip Osborne for this point.

### Bibliography

Plato. "Philebus." *Plato Complete Works*. John M. Cooper, ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

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