Bernard Williams’ article, replete with provocative and insightful claims, has been extremely influential in Nietzsche scholarship. In the two decades since its publication, much of the most interesting and philosophically sophisticated work on Nietzsche has focused on exactly the topics that Williams addresses: Nietzsche’s moral psychology, his account of action, his naturalistic commitments, and the way in which these topics interact with his critique of traditional morality. While Williams’ pronouncements on these topics are brief and at times oracular, and although many important details are not addressed, he manages to identify some of the richest veins in Nietzsche’s texts.

In this response, I focus on the four central claims in Williams’ article. Sections One and Two address the claim that Nietzsche is a naturalist and an advocates of “minimalist moral psychology,” respectively. Sections Three and Four examine Williams’ interpretations of Nietzsche on the will and agency. Finally, Section Five critiques Williams’ claim that Nietzsche cannot be a source of philosophical theories.
1. Naturalism

Although the secondary literature from the 1950s through the early 1990s tended to ignore or downplay Nietzsche’s naturalistic commitments, more recently the idea that Nietzsche is a naturalist has become very influential. Williams’ article is one of the earliest pieces to give this claim center stage. He writes that Nietzsche is of help in developing a “‘naturalistic’ moral psychology, where this means something to the effect that our view of moral capacities should be consistent with, even perhaps in the spirit of, our understanding of human beings as part of nature.” However, Williams notes that it is extraordinarily difficult to see what, exactly, naturalism involves: “formulations of the position tend to rule out too much or too little.” They rule out too little if they do not give us any substantive constraints. They rule out too much if they try “reductively to ignore culture and convention.” After all, Nietzsche’s explanations and theories make pervasive appeals to values, customs, religious beliefs, and cultural practices; accordingly, his demand for naturalism cannot be interpreted as, for example, the demand that all philosophical theories be couched in the terms of physics. Nietzsche seeks some middle ground, though there are difficulties articulating just what this would be.

Can we say anything more definitive about Nietzsche’s naturalism? While Williams demurs, others have taken up the task. Brian Leiter offers a systematic defense of the idea that Nietzsche is a “Speculative Methodological Naturalist”: Nietzsche constructs theories that are “modeled” on the sciences, in the sense that he offers “speculative
theories of human nature [that] are informed by the sciences and a scientific picture of
how things work." Nietzsche’s naturalism is speculative in that he does not blithely
accept the results of current science, but questions certain aspects of it; his naturalism is
methodological in that it recommends not so much a substantive body of scientific
doctrines, but a way of doing philosophy.

Although Leiter has done more than anyone else to clarify Nietzsche’s naturalism, and
although the push toward naturalistic interpretations has corrected the lamentable
tendency of earlier commentators to ignore Nietzsche’s incorporation of empirical claims
into his philosophical accounts, Leiter’s formulations remain quite capacious. For
example, Leiter takes it as a criterion of adequacy that accounts of naturalism rule out
Hegel as a naturalist, and it’s certainly right that Hegel and Nietzsche pursue different
philosophical projects in different manners. But why wouldn’t Hegel count as a
Speculative Methodological Naturalist—that is as someone whose reflections on human
nature are informed by the sciences? He does, after all, discuss and draw on sciences as
diverse as physics, physiognomy, and phrenology; while he does not stop with them, their
truths are supposedly incorporated in his ultimate theory. To be clear, it doesn’t matter,
for present purposes, whether it’s plausible to regard Hegel as a naturalist; what matters
is that if our account of naturalism is compatible with the projects of philosophers as
diverse as Hegel and Nietzsche, then it rules out very little indeed. There is a question,
then, about whether we can articulate a form of naturalism sufficiently restrictive to do
real philosophical work and sufficiently capacious to capture Nietzsche’s commitments.
A further question—and one often left aside in discussions of naturalism—is how much philosophical and interpretive work can be done by outlining the precise form that Nietzsche’s naturalism takes. An ambitious interpretive proposal would maintain that we should begin by determining what form of naturalism Nietzsche accepts, and then apply this account of naturalism in order to understand Nietzsche’s accounts of willing, freedom, morality, and so forth. But we could also take the opposite approach: we could start by analyzing Nietzsche’s accounts of willing, freedom, and morality, and learn, from them, what form of naturalism he accepts. This strategy seems to me more promising. But notice that if this latter strategy is pursued, then the project of outlining a precise account of Nietzsche’s naturalism becomes idle; all the work is done by the more particular interpretations of willing, freedom, and so on. I’ll return to this point below.

2. Minimalism and Reductionism

Williams repeatedly speaks of Nietzsche’s “demand for moral psychological minimalism.” But, like his claims about naturalism, Williams’ pronouncements on minimalism are not analyzed in much depth, making it hard to see what he has in mind.

It’s tempting to interpret minimalism as reductionism, particularly when we associate minimalism with naturalism. After all, there is a famous philosophical naturalist who pursues a reductionist program: David Hume. Hume—or at least contemporary Humeans—attempt to account for human nature and human action in terms of two basic kinds of psychological states: beliefs and desires. Commentators sometimes assume that
Nietzsche is engaged in a similar project. For example, Leiter writes that “Nietzsche’s naturalism bears a striking structural similarity to Hume’s,” and he adopts the term “the Humean Nietzsche” to describe “the Nietzsche who wants to explain morality naturalistically.”

However, there is a problem with interpreting Nietzsche as a Humean. Lanier Anderson perceptively writes that

a full-dress “Humean” interpretation of what “minimalism” requires cannot possibly be true to Nietzsche’s intentions… [Nietzsche’s moral psychology] is populated by an impressive array of attitude-types—drives, affects, instincts, desires, wills, feelings, moods, valuations, sensations, concepts, beliefs, convictions, fictions, imaginings, cognitions, and so on—and Nietzsche liberally appeals to the full range, without evincing any noticeable concern about reducing apparently more complex attitudes (e.g., valuing) to simpler ones (e.g., desiring).

If Nietzsche were a reductionist, we would expect to find him trying to reduce the plurality of distinctive psychological states to some smaller set. But even a cursory reading of the texts shows that this is not the case. As Anderson notes, Nietzsche deploys a vast array of psychological terms, and there is no indication that he thinks we should rid ourselves of some of these terms in favor of others. Moreover, Nietzsche does not attempt to reduce evaluative terms to non-evaluative ones; and his conception of the natural includes culture, value, custom, and convention.
What, then, could Williams mean by the claim that Nietzsche is a minimalist about moral psychology? Here is his most extensive discussion of the term:

to the question ‘how much should our accounts of distinctively moral activity add to our accounts of other human activity” [the minimalist] replies “as little as possible”, and the more that some moral understanding of human beings seems to call on materials that specially serve the purposes of morality—certain conceptions of the will, for instance—the more reason we have to ask whether there may not be a more illuminating account that rests only on conceptions that we use anyway elsewhere… Nietzsche’s approach is to identify an excess of moral content in psychology by appealing first to what an experience, honest, subtle and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behavior elsewhere.11

In claiming that Nietzsche is a minimalist about moral psychology, Williams simply means that Nietzsche avoids appeal to faculties, processes, or psychological states that are involved only in moral cases. For example, some philosophers have appealed to a special faculty of intuition that gives us direct access to moral truths (for example, Reid, Moore, and Ross); others think that morality involves a distinctive type of willing, or a form of self-consciousness not required in other cases of action (Kant, for example). On Williams’ reading, then, Nietzsche wants us to ask whether accounting for human behavior really requires positing these special faculties and states.
While no doubt true, this claim is not especially informative. After all, who disputes the claim that philosophical accounts of human nature should draw on relevant empirical information? And who denies that if we can account for moral behavior without appeal to special faculties, then we should do so? Philosophers who have abstained from empirical inquiry or countenanced special moral faculties typically do so because they believe that their arguments necessitate it. We appeal to a special faculty of intuition because it seems required in order to account for our knowledge of moral truths; we appeal to a special capacity for willing because our experience of freedom seems to necessitate its existence. In the face of these arguments, merely asserting that philosophers should avoid appeal to faculties involved only in distinctively moral cases seems to beg the question.

What’s needed, instead, is a detailed critique of the arguments on the basis of which philosophers have been led to posit distinctively moral states, faculties, and processes. For example, in Human, All-too-Human, Nietzsche engages in the by now familiar attempt to account for purportedly unegoistic behavior in egoistic terms; if successful, such a project would show that there is no need to posit unegoistic motivation. This is the kind of project that can lead to minimalism; but minimalism is the end result, rather than a premise in an argument.

3. The nature of willing
The problem that we’ve encountered, above, is that Williams’ calls for naturalism and minimalism are vague and diffuse. These slogans seem compatible with any number of philosophical theories, including the ones that Nietzsche rejects. In light of this, I suggest that both naturalism and minimalism are best viewed as regulating ideals or conclusions of arguments, rather than as substantive commitments or premises in arguments. They provide us with some loose guidelines for interpreting Nietzsche’s texts, but do not by themselves resolve disputes about the nature of willing, morality, and other topics of central concern.

Let’s turn, then, to the topic that Williams does treat with somewhat more depth and precision: Nietzsche’s account of the will. I’ll begin by stating Williams’ interpretation; I’ll then discuss the ways in which these points have been taken up in the literature.

According to Williams, Nietzsche argues that traditional pictures of the will make two mistakes. First, “the will seems to be something simple when it is not.” In other words, although we interpret willing as a single state or process, willing is in fact “a complex of sensations, thinking, and affect of command.” Second, the will “seems to be a peculiar, imperative, kind of cause.” In particular,

the experience seems to reveal … that the cause does not lie in any event or state of affairs…but in something that I refer to as ‘I’. Such a cause…stands in no relation to any causal set of events [and] can seem to bring about its outcome ex nihilo.
This is clearest in libertarian theories of freedom, which maintain that human beings have a causally undetermined capacity for choice. For example, Kant writes that the will “can indeed be affected but not determined by impulses... Freedom of choice is this independence from being determined by sensible impulses.”\(^{16}\) This is the kind of account that Nietzsche is rejecting.\(^{17}\)

While it’s obvious that Nietzsche rejects libertarian accounts, it’s much harder to see what he puts in its place. Several central questions arise: does Nietzsche have a positive account of willing, or does he abandon the very concept? Given that willing is traditionally pictured as the capacity to actuate oneself via self-conscious thought, does Nietzsche mean to deny the possibility of conscious thought’s having a causal impact on action, or are his goals more modest? And, more generally, what is Nietzsche’s theory of action? In the past two decades, there has been an explosion of work on these questions. I’ll outline the interpretive options and then offer my own proposed resolution.

Nietzsche is skeptical about the extent and efficacy of conscious mental processes; he notes that most of our activities occur without consciousness. Consciousness, he claims, is “basically superfluous,” for “all of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in the mirror; and still today, the predominant part of our lives actually unfolds without this mirroring.”\(^{18}\) For this reason, “states of consciousness… are (as every psychologist knows) trivial matters of fifth rate importance.”\(^{19}\) These remarks have led some commentators to interpret Nietzsche as claiming that all conscious thought is
epiphenomenal. For example, Brian Leiter argues that for Nietzsche, “conscious states are only causally efficacious in virtue of type-facts about the person,” where ‘type-facts’ are “either physiological facts about the person, or facts about the person’s unconscious drives and affects.”20 Put simply, whenever an action seems to be caused by a conscious state, it was actually caused by some non-conscious state (such as a drive or a physiological state).

Elsewhere, I’ve argued that this is a mistake: there are a number of passages in which Nietzsche explicitly attributes a causal role to conscious thought.21 In response, Leiter conceded that Nietzsche does not argue for “the epiphenomenality of consciousness per se,” but does argue for “the epiphenomenal character of those experiences related to willing.”22 In particular, “the conscious mental states that precede the action and whose propositional contents would make them appear to be causally connected to the action are, in fact, epiphenomenal.”23 Mattias Risse argues for a similar reading of Nietzsche, claiming that “according to Nietzsche’s attack on the Kantian notion of will, we are deceived” about our own “decision making process”; in particular, “outcomes that we perceive as obtained from a standpoint of deliberative detachment really emerge from a struggle of desires.”24

So, while commentators have mostly backed off from the dubious claim that Nietzsche views all conscious thought as epiphenomenal, some still endorse the idea that conscious willing is epiphenomenal. I doubt that even this more modest claim can be sustained. While some of Nietzsche’s early works do argue for the irrelevance and causal inertness
of conscious willing, by 1883 Nietzsche develops a more substantive conception of willing. For example, in the *Genealogy* Nietzsche discusses the “sovereign individual,” whose defining characteristic is that he possesses “his own protracted, independent will.” The sovereign individual is able to commit himself to a course of action and carry through with his commitment. He is “strong enough to maintain [his commitments] even in the face of accidents, even ‘in the face of fate’.” By contrast, a non-sovereign individual is “short-willed and unreliable,” incapable of holding himself to a course of action in the face of contrary pressures.\(^{25}\)

Similar characterizations occur in *Twilight*, where Nietzsche identifies willing with the power “not to react at once to a stimulus, but to gain control of all the inhibiting, excluding instincts... the essential feature is precisely not to ‘will’, to be able to suspend decision. All unspirituality, all vulgar commonness, depend on an inability to resist a stimulus: one must react, one follows every impulse.”\(^{26}\) He goes on to define weakness as the “inability *not* to respond to a stimulus.”\(^{27}\) The weak individual’s actions are determined by whatever impulse or stimulus happens to arise; he possesses no capacity to direct his own behavior. By contrast, the strong individual is able to check his impulses and resist environmental stimuli.

In these passages, Nietzsche maintains that some individuals have the capacity to control their behavior consciously. So, in his later works, Nietzsche ceases to engage in flatfooted denials of the efficacy of conscious willing, and instead offers a subtle critique of particular aspects of our assumptions about willing. In particular, I’ve argued that he is best understood as critiquing a model of agency indebted to Kant. Suppose we see
Kant as making three claims about reflective agency. First, reflection suspends the effects of motives: I can step back, pause, and consider my motives without being driven to act by them. Second, motives do not determine choice: motives incline me to act in certain ways, but I can override these inclinations with an act of will. Third, choice determines action: in typical circumstances, I have the capacity to act as I choose to act.

Elsewhere, I’ve argued that Nietzsche endorses a complex account of motivation, which entails that reflection is not capable of suspending the influence of motives. When we appear to step back from our motives, these motives often drive the course of reflective thought, coloring our perceptions and deliberations. Thus, Nietzsche rejects the first aspect of Kant’s account. Nonetheless, Nietzsche does suggest that in certain circumstances conscious deliberations can shift the balance of motives: our conscious thoughts and deliberations not only provide new motives, but can gradually transform existing motives. Thus, he accepts a version of the second claim. He also accepts a version of the third claim: while he rejects the idea of a will that issues in punctual moments of choice, he does treat conscious thoughts and episodes of willing as one component in the vector of forces determining action. If this is right, Nietzsche does not simply reject all accounts of willing; rather, he aspires to develop a psychologically richer account, which does justice to the diversity and complexity of human motivation, including the host of interactions between conscious and unconscious states.

4. Actions and mere events
We’ve discussed the connection between action, willing, and conscious thought. But what can we say about Nietzsche’s theory of action itself? What, on his account, is an action?

Action theory begins with an attempt to separate actions, or things that I do, from mere events, or things that I undergo. My walking to the store seems to differ from my growing hair or my aging, although these are all events that involve me. The most common way of marking this distinction between actions and events is by appealing to a special cause of action that isn’t present in mere events. For example, perhaps actions are events that are caused by intentions or belief/desire pairs. Or, to use an older model, perhaps an act of conscious willing causes action, but not mere events.

Although we might initially think that Nietzsche rejects the very distinction between actions and mere events, Williams rightly notes that this is implausible: many of Nietzsche’s arguments rely on just this distinction. It’s plain, though, that Nietzsche would reject traditional ways of drawing the distinction. For example, he is skeptical about conscious willing’s connection to action, so he certainly can’t accept the model that identifies action with events brought about by episodes of conscious willing.

It’s possible that Nietzsche embraces an alternative causal account. For example, we could distinguish action from mere event by claiming that anything caused by a drive counts as an action, regardless of whether the agent is cognizant of it; certainly, there are passages that suggest such a view. Another possibility is that Nietzsche endorses a non-
causal account. Robert Pippin and Aaron Ridley argue for this later possibility, claiming that Nietzsche adopts an *expressive* theory of action. Let me explain.

Williams prefaces his discussion of Nietzsche on willing by quoting a famous passage:

> For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash, and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was *free* to express strength or not to do so. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.\(^{31}\)

While most of the debate on Nietzsche’s theory of action centers on the questions described in Section 3, there is an alternative tradition that, taking these remarks about doers and deeds quite seriously, sees Nietzsche as engaged in a more radical project: developing an expressive theory of action.

The expressive theory was originally attributed to Hegel by Charles Taylor. In essence, the theory maintains that actions, but not mere events, are *expressive* of the agent’s self. As Pippin puts it, Nietzsche is “asking us to relocate our attention when trying to understand an action…from attention to a prior event or mental state” to “‘what lies *deeper* in the deed itself’ and is expressed in it.”\(^{32}\) Pippin argues that the causal model
“distorts what is necessary for a full explanation of an action,” for it isolates the action’s cause (whether it be a conscious intention or a belief/desire pair or something more complex) from broader facets of the person’s situation, such as “the person’s character,” “life history,” “community,” and “tradition,” all of which, Pippin claims, are needed “before the adoption of a specific intention can itself make sense.” Moreover—so Pippin argues—the causal model is incapable of recognizing that “intention formation and articulation are always temporally fluid, altering and transforming ‘on the go’”. The expressive model, on the other hand, is supposed to handle these cases with ease. If so, it would fit better with Nietzsche’s emphasis on the provisional nature of our own intentions, the incomplete and distorted knowledge that we have of our own action, and the necessity of examining broader social forces in order to understand particular actions (all of which are on display in the Genealogy, for example).

Of course, to give the expressive theory content, we need to explain what expression is. Unfortunately, it is just here that we run into trouble. Although Pippin has offered the most extensive treatment of these issues, his formulations are undeniably vague. For example, his claim that action is “a continuous . . . everywhere mutable translation or expression of inner into outer,” so that “what I end up with, what I actually did, is all that can count fully as my intention realized or expressed”, seems to identify expression with “mutable translation” and then “realization,” without specifying what these notions are. So a serious difficulty with the expressive theory, as presently formulated, is that it asks us to replace a well understood, familiar notion of causality with a hazy, undefined concept of expression. While identifying certain weaknesses in causal theories, the
expressive theory offers only promissory notes about how it will resolve them. In light of this, it’s not obvious why we should replace a relatively clear set of terms (desire, intention, drive, cause, etc.) with vague, arguably metaphorical terms like “expression”. What is gained thereby?

Although Pippin rightly notes some reasons for skepticism about causal accounts of action, we can reject these accounts without committing ourselves to expressivism. I’ve argued that Nietzsche employs the notion of *agential unity* in order to distinguish actions and mere events. Briefly, his idea is that when the agent acts, she exhibits a form of unity that is absent in cases of mere behavior. Although commentators often take the relevant type of unity to be a unity among the agent’s drives, I’ve argued that Nietzsche is actually interested in a kind of unity between the agent’s conscious conception of the action and the forces that motivate the action. In particular, an agent exhibits Nietzschean unity iff (1) he approves of his action, and (2) this approval is stable in the face of further information about the action’s etiology. For example, the priests of the *Genealogy* are disunified because, were they to recognize the way in which their own *ressentiment* is motivating their conflicts with the ancient nobility, they would disapprove of their actions. It is in cases of this sort—cases in which the agent experiences an inner disharmony or conflict—that it seems appropriate to judge that the agent is not acting in the fullest sense. These cases are pervasive, which is why Nietzsche writes that “Nothing is rarer than a *personal* action. A class, a rank, a race, an environment, an accident—everything expresses itself sooner in a work or deed, than a ‘person’.”35 The advantage of
this account of unity is not only its greater textual fidelity, but also its ability to sidestep both the murky notions of expression and the pervasive problems with causal accounts.

5. Systematicity

Let’s conclude with a more general point. Williams opens his article by announcing that “Nietzsche is not a source of philosophical theories.” He claims that Nietzsche’s texts are “booby-trapped, not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory.” This claim has influenced some readers, with Pippin, for example, defending it at length.

However, this strikes me as the weakest point of Williams’ article. Depending on how we interpret Williams’ claim, it is either trivial or false. If we take Williams to be claiming that Nietzsche’s texts do not present arguments in a premise-conclusion form, then his claim is true but obvious; Nietzsche adopts a more literary, impassioned style. There are good questions about why he does so, but surely the mere fact that a philosopher writes in an unsystematic fashion does not entail that the philosopher has no theories, no substantive accounts of the phenomena he discusses.

If, on the other hand, Williams is claiming that Nietzsche does not offer substantive, positive accounts of willing, motivation, selfhood, and so forth, then he is simply wrong; as I’ve indicated in the prior sections, Nietzsche does offer constructive proposals. Work published in the past few decades demonstrate that we can, indeed, extract from
Nietzsche’s texts substantive accounts of topics ranging from the psychology of

ressentiment, to the structure of drives, the internal tensions of Judeo-Christian morality,
the nature of willing, the decadence of culture, the possibility of affirming life, and so on.
Doing so merely requires a kind of interpretive care that, at the time Williams wrote his
article, was often absent in Nietzsche scholarship.

6. Conclusion

Williams’ article served as a corrective to the dubious and philosophically
unsophisticated interpretations of Nietzsche that were rampant in the 1980s and early
1990s. It helpfully nudged commentators toward issues of enduring philosophical
concern, and, in focusing on Nietzsche’s philosophical psychology, turned attention
toward one of the richest areas in Nietzsche’s texts. However, most of the claims in
Williams’ piece are sketched rather than fully developed. Given their brevity, it’s not
surprising that these discussions have been superseded by the more careful work that has
appeared in the two decades since the original publication of Williams’ piece.
Nonetheless, there is much of enduring value here.
References


--- *The Nietzschean Self: Agency and the Unconscious*, in progress.


2 Williams, 5.

3 Williams, 6.


6 Williams, 6.


8 Leiter, “Nietzsche’s Naturalism Reconsidered”, 582.


10 Elsewhere, I’ve argued that concepts such as drive (Trieb), affect, value, and perspective play ineliminable roles in Nietzsche’s moral psychology. See Paul Katsafanas, *The Nietzschean Self: Agency and the Unconscious* (in progress).

The question whether Kant is best interpreted as a libertarian is beyond the scope of this paper. What matters, for our purposes, is that Nietzsche interprets him in that way.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 354


Leiter, Nietzsche on Morality, 91.


Nietzsche, *Twilight*, v.2

See, for example, Daybreak 38.

30 Williams, 8.

31 Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morality, I.13.


33 Pippin, 78.

34 Pippin, 78.

35 (KSA 12:10[59]).

36 Williams, 4.

37 Williams, 4.

38 Pippin, xv-xvii.