Why do we read the works of the ancient Greeks? One answer is that we do so because they provide us with eternal truths about the human condition. This is the answer given by Allan Bloom in his cult book *The Closing of the American Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). Bloom writes: 'Men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and forgetting their accidental lives' (p.380).

A second answer is that we read them because they contain the origins (albeit primitive and half-formed) of our own understanding of the moral and political world. On this 'progressivist' account the history of moral philosophy is the history of the development of concepts such as responsibility, justice, and agency from their beginnings in Plato and Aristotle to their present, late twentieth century perfection. A third answer is that we read them as pieces of intellectual and moral nostalgia: cast adrift in a moral world which is confused and fragmented, we return to the ancient Greeks as to a Golden Age of wholeness and moral certainty. This comes close to the view expressed by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981): 'the failure [of the Enlightenment project] was nothing other than an historical sequel to the rejection of the Aristotelian tradition. And thus the key question does indeed become: can Aristotle's ethics, or something very like it, after all be vindicated?' (p.111). And, of course, MacIntyre concludes that it can.

To these three answers Bernard Williams adds a fourth: we read the ancient Greeks in order to understand who we are. We need not, and indeed should not, judge ourselves better or worse than them, but through studying them we may come to see our own nature more clearly. Thus,
when the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us. They do that in every case in which they can be made to speak, because they tell us who we are. That is, of course, the most general point of our attempts to make them speak. They can tell us not just who we are, but who we are not: they can denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves. (pp.19-20)

But who are 'we' in this paragraph? And who, indeed, are 'they'? 'We' usually refers to modern moral philosophers in the Kantian tradition, and it quickly becomes clear that Williams has precious little time for them or their arguments. 'They', on the other hand, refers primarily to Homer and the tragedians. Thus, the comparisons and contrasts are not drawn between two groups of philosophers, but between philosophers on the one hand and poets on the other. This is significant because it hints at Williams' belief that many of the malaises of modernity are traceable to bad philosophy (specifically to Kantian philosophy), and it also signals his contention that the very distinction between philosophy and tragedy, or more generally between philosophy and literature, is potentially distorting and misleading.

Williams takes his cue from Nietzsche: 'I cannot imagine what would be the meaning of classical philology in our own age, if it is not to be untimely - that is, to act against the age, and by so doing, to have an effect on the age, and, let us hope, to the benefit of a future age'. By studying the ancient Greeks we may come to see where we ourselves have gone wrong, and how their moral understanding captures features of the human condition which are ignored or denied or distorted by our own, post-Kantian, understanding. However, Williams insists that this enquiry is not an attempt to revive the past; 'it is not a question of reviving anything. What is dead is dead, and in many important respects we would not want to revive it even if we knew what that could mean' (p.7).

The argument of the book therefore treads a precarious path: on the one hand, the ancient Greeks show us what is false or partial in our own moral