A Humanistic Discipline: Williams' Naturalistic Philosophy

Bernard Williams' ethical philosophy contains an extraordinary wealth of philosophical ideas, both critical and affirmative. Now common-sensical, now intriguing, now exhilaratingly against the grain, a first observation that any reader might make is that it is all expressed in a deceptively conversational style—deceptive insofar as a conversational style creates an impression of simplicity and easy reconstruction by the reader after she has closed the book; and yet Williams' philosophy is not remotely simple, and it is famously difficult to reconstruct. Everything seems to depend on everything else without any single element being conspicuously primary, and when one attempts a summary one invariably finds that one has neglected to factor in some careful form of words that deftly keeps a generalization just this side of a universal claim, or represents a proposition as one worth serious consideration and therefore functioning as a suggestive reason to take the argument in one direction rather than another but without actually committing to the truth of the proposition in question. A conversational style produced with such dialectical precision and intellectual subtlety makes for the most demanding kind of reading; and the most rewarding kind of re-reading.

Certainly my own experience is that when I re-read a Williams text I had previously imagined I'd got the measure of, I find it shifts perspective before my very eyes, so that a feature I had previously seen as a background consideration now appears sharply focussed in the foreground of the argument; or indeed vice-versa. This is partly because Williams deliberately leaves many things unsaid. In 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' he lampoons a certain analytical style of meticulously explicitating not merely those objections that are actually worth addressing but rather every single possible criticism, a style which he describes as trying 'to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection, including those that would occur only to the malicious or the clinically literal-minded. This activity itself is often rather mournfully equated with the

boasted clarity and rigour of analytic philosophy' (183). He goes on to characterize a preferable method of writing philosophy, however, and one that I find casts light on his own style. He says this:

> Now, it is perfectly reasonable that the author should consider the objections and possible misunderstandings, or at least quite a lot of them; the odd thing is that he or she should put them into the text. One might hope that the objections and possible misunderstandings could be considered and no doubt influence the text, and then, except for the most significant, they could be removed, like the scaffolding that shapes a building but does not require you after the building is finished to climb through it in order to gain access (Williams 2006(a); first published 2000; 183).

The preferred kind of philosophical text described here is one whose surface is undisturbed by gratuitous critical eddies but rather flows more smoothly, more conversationally, its course defined as much by what is *not* said as by what is. This is on the whole what Williams' own writing is like; though it must be admitted that he sometimes leaves so much unsaid or inexplicit, that the result can be highly compressed and allusive—with the consequence that it is decidedly tricky to interpret. But, then again, it is partly these very characteristics of his writing that make re-reading his work so rewarding: it takes repeated encounters to at last stabilize one's sense of what the purport of a given argument really is, what the main reasons in favour of it are, and how it figures in his overall picture of things. Reading Williams, one needs to take repeated and different angles of approach for the real shape of any given thought to present itself.

A second observation is that while many philosophers over the span of a distinguished career may change their minds about things, so that interpreting their oeuvre is largely a matter of tracing and explaining the reasons for these changes of view, carefully identifying different phases of thought and approach, so far as I can see Williams didn't change his mind about

anything at all—not his ethical relativism[1], not his cognitivism, not his famous critiques of Utilitarianism and Kantianism, not the internality of reasons, not the misguidedness of the whole enterprise of moral theory, not the idea of moral luck, or retrospective justification, or the destruction of moral knowledge by reflection, or his conception of the limits of Philosophy where it borders with History… Name any of his most central, even controversial, proposals, and one finds his view of it remained pretty consistent throughout; and for the most part even the reasons advanced to support it remain the same. The argument, for instance, that he first put forward in 1974[2] for the distinctive brand of ethical relativism he called the 'relativism of distance'—an argument I find to be seriously compressed in the wrong place, as I shall explain shortly—remained largely unchanged from its first form in the paper 'The Truth In Relativism'[3] through later discussions of it in his 1986 book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and beyond too in the various revisitings of the issue here and there in papers such as 'Subjectivism and Toleration' or 'Human Rights and Relativism' which are from 1992[4] and 2005 respectively. There may be a slight qualification along the way, but no real change of view or argument. I find this unchangingness remarkable in such a dynamic, historically engaged, and expansive thinker whose work displayed such extraordinary range and erudition, and which overflows three decades of philosophy.

As a consequence, the considerable development and expansion of his moral philosophy over time is not best visualized as exhibiting a linear development of twists and turns to be traced and explained by the careful reader. Williams' ethical philosophy, contrary to appearances, turns out to have an unexpectedly *singular conviction* at its root, and I will be proposing that the branching out of his philosophy over time is best seen as the flourishing of different theoretical implications and expressions of that shared root conviction, of which the meta-ethical ramifications are extensive. Re-reading his work, I find, reveals that this basic conviction can be discerned as ever-present in his ethical philosophy, early and late, critical

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[1] There is a slight adjustment in that in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams clarifies his earlier statement by making it explicit that there is no synchronic cross-cultural application of relativism, only a historical one. See his footnote 3 on p. 242.
[2] 'The Truth in Relativism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1974-5 Vol. 75: 215-228.
[3] Reprinted in *Moral Luck* 1981.
[4] Reprinted 2006(a).

and positive, as the very DNA of Williams' philosophy, even while his work obviously gives expression to many other matters into the bargain. While characteristically charged with kinetic argumentative energy on the page, and still more so in personal discussion, Williams' consistency of philosophical vision I believe explains the intriguingly *unchanging* quality at the heart of his work.

It used to sometimes be said of Williams (or at any rate, when I was a student I was aware that some people used to *say* that it had sometimes been said) that his contribution was more critical than constructive, more negative than positive. If anyone remained disposed to say this after the publication of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), which certainly does contain a great deal of critical material, I would have already been disposed to argue with them. In that book he asks (roughly speaking), Is the idea of universal human flourishing sufficient to entail a specific moral life? No; for there is a thing called history, which shows there is more than one way to flourish. What about the idea of aggregate Utility? No again; a doomed attempt at moral accountancy that obliterates the shape of an individual life. What about universal reason of a different stripe, construed as delivering categorical moral requirements from bare rationality? No again; a brilliant yet deeply misguided fantasy of moral justice; one that we all recognize and live by to some extent, but which we would do well to leave behind. These invigoratingly negative answers, however, are essential in building to the book's affirmative theses concerning the existence of ethical knowledge achieved through the application of our 'thick' ethical concepts, the preferred epistemic ideal of 'ethical confidence', the fundamentally first-personal nature of ethical reasons that give shape to an individual life, and (most importantly of all for a book with 'the limits of philosophy' in its title) the various ideas he advances there concerning the nature of philosophy's relation to history, and the importance of doing philosophy in a way that is fully conscious of the historical contingency of both ethical philosophy and ethical life.

Be all this as it may, however, no one could in any case seriously cast Williams as a philosopher of principally critical bearing after the publication of *Shame and Necessity* (1993), let alone *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), not to mention the three posthumously

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published collections of papers (2005, 2006a and 2006b); and so I won't further discuss the erstwhile notion that his contribution was more critical than constructive. I will try, however, to show something rather more challenging than its simple falsehood. I'll try to show that the earlier and manifestly critical work that vigorously engaged the dominant mainstays of moral philosophy was in fact already rooted in a positive meta-ethical vision that informed the critiques and animated them from the start. In elaborating this claim I will aim also to show that, contrary to appearances, Williams' moral philosophy is not best interpreted in a merely coherentist manner, where every thesis is seen as supporting the rest more or less, with no single idea constituting a primary commitment. I will try to show, on the contrary, that it is fruitful to read Williams as having just such a primary conviction, and one that expresses his deepest philosophical instinct about the human condition: it is the conviction that we are, in a far-reaching sense, *ethically free*. That is, we are substantively free to set our own ends, generating our own values and correlative practical reasons, because the general requirements of *rationality* (understood chiefly as the avoidance of false belief and deliberative error) are seen to *radically under-determine our ethical values*. The under-determination of ethical value by rationality in this sense *is* our ethical freedom; and I will argue that the central and signature theses of Williams' moral philosophy are best read as one or other affirmation of ethical freedom in this sense. I believe this explains the strangely unchanging quality of his work even as it grew in ever new directions; for it is ethical freedom we find, if we look hard enough, to be expressed again and again in so much of his philosophical writing—now explicitly, now obliquely; now negatively, now positively; in relation to reasons and obligations, or in relation to moral culture, or again regarding philosophy's relation to history.

In order that I might connect this ethical freedom with the chief materials from Williams' later philosophy that I will be invoking, I will sometimes use the throw-away label *dialogical freedom* instead of ethical freedom. But I use them interchangeably. The chief reason to adopt the more specific label from time to time is to make it absolutely clear that we are not here talking about freedom of the will. That Williams was in a profound sense a philosopher of ethical freedom is significantly obscured by the fact that he was a sceptic regarding the so-

called 'problem of free will'. He was sceptical that there was any such problem. This is one of the places where his thought displays a localized but genuine affinity with that of Wittgenstein—for Williams effectively regarded the alleged problem of freewill as a *pseudo-problem*; that is, a mere appearance of a problem, and one that is created by the very process of philosophizing. He says this:

> The traditional metaphysical problem of the freedom of the will…exists only for those who have metaphysical expectations. Just as there is a "problem of evil" only for those who expect the world to be good, there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened. In truth, though it may be extended or contracted in various ways, it can hardly be deepened at all. What threatens it is the attempt to make it profound, and the effect of trying to deepen it is to put it beyond all recognition. The Greeks were not involved in those attempts; this is one of the places at which we encounter their gift for being superficial out of profundity (1993 p. 68).[5]

The idea of the voluntary can reasonably be 'extended or contracted' depending, for instance, on what view one takes of situations of coerced choice. In the archetype of the highwayman who commands 'Your money or your life!' there is room for extension or contraction regarding how far the victim's act of handing over the money is to count as voluntary. One might regard it as voluntary because their action flows from their reasoning about what best to do under the constrained circumstances; or, alternatively, as involuntary on account of the fact that death's being the only alternative rather forces their hand. Be that as it may, for Williams there is, by contrast, very little *deepening* of the idea of the voluntary to be had, and in particular it cannot be deepened sufficiently to resemble the metaphysical idea of freedom that is at stake in the supposed problem of freewill. One reason he puts forward for thinking that the diminishment of the voluntary by constraint is irrelevant to the alleged problem of free will is that the freedom inherent in voluntariness can be diminished by degrees (as it is

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[5] Here Williams is alluding to Nietzsche's comment 'Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity' (Nietzsche 1974; p. 38).

by the highwayman); but no one thinks freedom of the will comes in degrees. Freewill is all or nothing. For this reason, Williams declares the idea of constraint on the voluntary to be a red herring when it comes to thinking about freewill (1995, p. 5); and yet if the brand of necessitation imposed by the highwayman is irrelevant to freewill, then it becomes unclear what kind of threat to our agential freedom determinism is thought to pose. This, at any rate, is what he argues in 'How Free Does The Will Have To Be?' (1995). No doubt there are other sources of his scepticism about this question, but I won't try to capture them here. For our purposes this evening the point is simply that the kind of freedom I am suggesting Williams was essentially always championing, whether in critical or positive mode, was not our metaphysical freedom from causal determinism, but rather our *ethical freedom* from determination by a fraudulently all-encompassing idea of rationality. In Williams' scheme of things, this freedom needed rescuing from the dungeons of the 'morality system'[6] that denied it, and which he found to dominate so much of moral philosophy.

So how does this most basic conviction that we are ethically free express itself in Williams' work? I will answer by reference to three signature Williams theses: internal reasons; the relativism of distance; and the borders of philosophy and history.

(a) Internal Reasons

Williams argues that nothing can count as a reason of someone's to *phi* without there being a 'sound deliberative route' to *phi*-ing from some motivationally live state—perhaps a desire, perhaps a disposition—that is either already in that person's 'subjective motivational set' *or* would be in it were it not for some false belief or deliberative error. Inasmuch as an apparent reason may turn out to depend on any such false belief or deliberative error, it is not a reason for them after all.[7] Our reasons, then, though conditional on our very own subjective motivational set or 'S' [for short], are by no means readily determined. On the contrary, we

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[6] On the 'morality system', see Williams 1973 and 1985.

[7] We should stipulate that this epistemic and rational idealization be read positively as well as negatively so that it guarantees not only the absence of false beliefs but also the presence of true ones that are deliberatively relevant. Ignorance, just as much as false belief or deliberative error, can present an obstruction, or rather lacuna, between a subject and her reasons.

can easily be mistaken about our reasons owing to at least three areas of epistemic opacity: that of worldly facts; that of our own psychological states; or through the opacity of what constitutes a sound deliberation in a given circumstance. First, as regards the hazard of factual error, we might recall Williams' example of someone thinking they have a reason to drink the stuff in the glass because they believe it to be gin when in fact it's petrol, and so they don't really have a reason to drink it (Williams 1981, p. 102). Second, as regards deliberative error, someone might think they have a reason (in this case, an all things-considered-reason) to quit their job and yet they haven't fully thought through the likely consequences of doing so, and are perhaps forgetting the negative impact on their future prospects in the industry. So far so Humean, for Hume's two caveats to the generalization that our reasons bear a one-to-one correlation with our actual 'passions' or motivating states were: cases of false belief; and bad instrumental reasoning. But Williams adds to Hume's two caveats a further thought concerning the second of these. He emphasized that deliberation can often be less than it should be because of a more amorphous failure than one of picking an insufficient means to one's end. It might involve a failure of the *imagination*.[8] Perhaps the person entertaining quitting their job *has* thought through the impact on their future prospects in the industry, but has not yet vividly imagined the stressful emotional impact on their family. In addition, and in part as a consequence of this point about failures of the imagination, Williams stressed the idea that what someone has reason to do at any given time might often be significantly *less than fully determinate*, since either of the main elements might itself be less than fully determinate—chiefly, the presence or absence of the requisite motivational state, and the existence of the requisite sound deliberative route and sufficiently focussed imagination. Quite possibly, on his picture, a significant indeterminacy in what one has most reason to do is more the norm than the exception.

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[8] 'Reflection may lead the agent to see that some belief is false, and hence to realize that he has in fact no reason to do something he thought he had reason to do. More subtly, he may think he has reason to promote some development because he has not exercised his imagination enough about what it would be like if it came about. In his unaided deliberative reason, or encouraged by the persuasions of others, he may come to have some more concrete sense of what would be involved, and lose his desire for it, just as, positively, the imagination can create new possibilities and new desires. (These are important possibilities for politics as well as for individual action.)' 'Internal and External Reasons' (Williams 1981; pp. 104-5).

This picture of what it is to have a reason to do something, then, involves a substantial but assuredly *incomplete idealization*. On Williams' view, rational idealization reaches as far as ruling out false beliefs and unsound deliberation; but strictly no further, for there is no further idealization to be had. In his view rational idealization simply does not reach beyond these things to settle the question of our ends or value priorities, and any pretence that it does is considered a fantasized piece of rational over-reach—a phantasm of the absolutist conception of ethical life he labelled the 'morality system'. The prioritization of values that in fact determines our ends is a substantive matter and fundamentally *up to us*—again, not in any indeterministic sense, but simply in the sense of sourcing our value priorities in ourselves, in our particular priorities and concerns, and most importantly, in what Williams sometimes called the 'ground projects' that shape and give meaning to our distinctively individual lives.

Williams offers a positive internal reasons justification for precisely this degree of idealization and no more. He explains:

> The grounds for making this general point about fact and reasoning, as distinct from prudential and moral considerations, are quite simple: any rational deliberative agent has in his S a general interest in being factually and rationally correctly informed ('Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', 1995; 37).

Given that we all, generally, have a motivation to avoid factual and deliberative error, we all thereby have a reason (on the internal interpretation) to avoid these things; but we should not pretend there is a similarly universal motivation towards any particular set of prudential or moral *ends*. On the contrary, even a cursory glance at moral cultural diversity in the now, let alone through history, reveals a noticeably diverse array of ends and value priorities. For this reason, on Williams' scheme of things, any further idealization would represent an outrageous annexation of the ethical by self-styled universal rationality. But what is the difference between the internal and the external theories when it comes to what we should say on the ground, in deliberation, and particularly in cases of disagreement about what to do? Is there any real difference at this level? I think there is an important difference. Not in

the degree of passion of argument, forms of disagreement, or general difficulty in determining what to do and how to live (that all looks exactly the same on either meta-ethical picture); but rather in what we are entitled to say at the end of the day when all arguments have been tried yet without achieving convergence—that is, cases of ultimately failed attempts at ethical persuasion.

In 'Internal and External Reasons' (1981) Williams cites the fictional example of Owen Wingrave, a character he takes from Benjamin Britten's eponymous opera. Owen, whose father died in battle, comes from a proud military family, and is under not only social pressure but additional family pressure, most especially from his military-minded grandfather, to join the army for reasons of family honour and pride. But Owen has pacifist values and staunchly resists the idea that he has an all-things-considered reason to join up. Stipulatively, Owen is making no factual or deliberative errors and has exercised his imagination fully, but simply holds different value priorities from the rest of his family, who are trying to bring him round to their way of seeing things. In such a scenario, the proper conclusion for the internal reasons theorist to draw is that *Owen really doesn't have a sufficient reason to join up*. The reasons of family honour and pride that his grandfather finds conclusive simply turn out not to be conclusive *for Owen*. To insist otherwise is at best 'bluff', as Williams puts it, or worse, coercive 'brow-beating'. It is at this notional endpoint of proper persuasive efforts that one can imagine a wise third party intervening to say 'That's enough! Stop trying to make him someone he isn't.'

I hope it is becoming clear that the internal reasons thesis is a direct expression of what I am urging is Williams' deepest philosophical conviction, namely that we are dialogically free. We engage in discussion about what to do—sometimes disharmonious discussion across interpersonal ethical distances that refuse to close up—and provided there are no errors of fact or deliberative reasoning, including no failures of imagination, in the situation where no consensus is reached, then the proper conclusion is that the differing parties *have different reasons*. On this picture, all the normal deliberating and arguing we go in for in order to decide what to do is simply not the kind of activity that permits of only one right answer;

there is more than one way to live, more than one equally rational range of value priorities. But the external reasons theorist denies this plurality and the rational under-determination that gives rise to it. The external reasons theorist, then, *denies ethical freedom* in our sense. *That* is the key difference between the two interpretations of what it is to have a practical reason. And it means that, at the end of the day, at the point where all reasonable attempts at persuading Owen to join the army are deemed to have failed, any external reasons theorist who is sympathetic with the grandfather's perspective will say Owen is *still not seeing what he has reason to do*; whereas any internal reasons theorist who is sympathetic with the grandfather's perspective will say, Well, I'm very sorry to say it turns out that *Owen really doesn't have reason to do it*. The external reasons theorist regards Owen as failing in relation to rationality—at the very least his deliberation is rationally non-ideal; the internal reasons theorist by contrast thinks nothing of that sort—rather she has learned something important about Owen.

This understanding of internal reasons as directly expressive of Williams' philosophical commitment to the reality of our dialogical freedom is supported if we re-read 'Internal and External Reasons' in the light of later work, most especially the discussion in his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002) concerning the two rival conceptions of self-knowledge that Williams finds in Rousseau and Diderot respectively. Williams there explores the essential role of (what he calls) 'trustful conversation' in the substantive determination of our beliefs. ('Trustful conversation' is dialogue where each party can trust the Accuracy and Sincerity of what the other says, that is, their truthfulness.) Williams exploits Diderot's view of how our psychologies become 'steadied' through 'trustful conversation' with others, so that we may discover what we think not through introspection, let alone the kind of introspective isolationism that Rousseau embraced in his eccentric autobiographical project[9], but rather through a certain kind of ordinary social intercourse. Our minds become 'steadied' through trustful dialogue with others about what is the case, and this dialogical process involves bringing propositions entertained in the first instance *sans* propositional attitude (such as

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[9] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*.

believing or desiring), so that they are brought to settle into one broad attitudinal category or the other. Williams explains the mechanism as follows:

> [The subject] is engaged in trustful conversation with another who relies on him, and the question is whether he can give that person to believe the proposition. In doing that, he may well, in such a case, give himself to believe it as well. *It is the presence and needs of others that help us to construct even our factual beliefs* (*Truth & Truthfulness*, 2002, p. 194; italics added).

But it is not only beliefs that become steadied through trustful dialogue. Williams adds something, apparently merely in passing, that I would suggest is in fact of enormous significance to his philosophical position; namely that this same process of trustful conversation applies to the construction of our desire-like states. What he says is:

> It is a further implication of Diderot's picture of the mind that similar factors can help us to construct our desires. If we consider what is involved in this, it can give us, also, a deeper insight than we have had so far into the nature of wishful thinking' (*Truth & Truthfulness*, 194).

Now here we simply need to put 2 and 2 together. Not regarding the question that Williams is immediately concerned with here, namely that of explaining the phenomenon of wishful thinking as a piece of steadying gone wrong, so that an item properly destined for the desire category winds up in the belief category. But rather regarding a different question, namely the question of how the construction and discovery of one's desires through the process of trustful dialogue about what is desirable and of value in the world can be put together with the doctrine of internal reasons to produce the result that the process of psychological steadying through trustful conversation is what produces our individual ethical reasons. Recall that Williams' view is that our reasons are a function of motivational states that would be in the agent's 'subjective motivational set' or 'S' once any errors of fact and deliberative reasoning are eliminated. What he delivers through Diderot's model is an account of how

such items in one's S can be properly generated and/or discovered: through dialogue that's truthful (no errors of fact or deliberation, then), we ask ourselves what is of value, which values are more important than others, and of course, what do we find to be important in a non-relative sense—as we might put it, important *simpliciter*.[10] We think, in dialogue with others, about what matters and about what sort of life we want to lead, and that is how our 'ground projects' are first generated; that is how a person like Owen Wingrave comes to know that he really doesn't have an all-things-considered reason to join the army, even though others evidently do.

For Williams, then, our practical reasons are both radically first-personal, as he sometimes puts it by way of emphasizing the individuality of our ethical reasons; and yet also fundamentally dialogical in their formation, and in that sense deeply second-personal too.[11] They are generated and discovered through the sorts of trustful conversations through which our psychologies become steadied, our minds perpetually made up. That dialogical process *is* the most basic interpersonal process through which we exercise our dialogical freedom and thereby come to our own, sometimes distinctively individual, reasons. And we'll come to them dialogically but not necessarily of a kind conducive to convergence. On the contrary, we might—like Owen Wingrave—engage in trustful (perhaps also fraught and impassioned) dialogue that brings us to realize with increasing lucidity that we disagree, and that our interlocutors' reasons are decidedly not our own. This is why Williams at one point alludes to the misguided optimism of a Hegelian outlook on which the social construction of individuals guarantees harmony of some basic kind between the individual and society.[12] No such guaranteed harmony is found in Williams, where trustful conversation might equally lead to the kinds of potentially dramatic *dis*harmony that makes for ethical plurality among individuals within a single moral culture—a culture in which different individuals may each

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[10] Williams introduces the distinction between relative importance and 'something's being, simply, important (important *überhaupt*, as others might have put it, or important *period'* in *Ethics and The Limits of Philosophy* (1985; p. 182).
[11] As opposed to the sense of 'second-personal' that Stephen Darwall has elaborated, which concerns the presuppositions at work in moral address. Williams' second-personal concern here is not with moral address but with the formation of individuals' reasons.
[12] [page ref]

cultivate a distinctive shape to their life. This conviction represents no philosophically adolescent fantasy of individual existential freedom to throw away the moral rulebook; but rather a mature acknowledgement of the thoroughly social practice through which our minds become steadied and the socially ramified conversation settles who we are and how we will live.

From this positive picture of what it is to exercise our dialogical freedom the central criticism in Williams' famous critique of the 'morality system' follows. The forms of objectivist moral theory, such as Kantianism and Utilitarianism, that exemplify the morality system do so essentially because they each embrace an external interpretation of what it is to have an ethical reason. For Kant moral reasons are understood as categorical imperatives, and these are defined precisely as arising in a manner that transcends any desire-like states in the moral subject; for Utilitarians and other consequentialists, proper reasoning about what to do derives from external facts about consequent aggregate happiness or other kinds of wellbeing, which themselves have nothing to do with the subject's own motivational states except insofar as these may contribute to the overall calculus. In this observation I believe we arrive at an essential respect in which Williams' critical philosophy can be seen to be animated by a positive meta-ethical vision; and this illustrates my more general point that his ethical philosophy is best understood as the unfolding of multiple, differently focussed expressions of the single fundamental idea that the constraints of rationality leave us substantially free to determine our own ends.

(b) Relativism of distance
Let me now turn to my second signature Williams thesis: the relativism of distance. We see the same affirmation of dialogical freedom expressed again in this connection, only here it is applied at the cultural level rather than at the intersubjective level. The main arguments he explicitly sets out for this kind of relativism apparently hinge on a psychological condition relating to the possibility of a group from one moral culture being able to convert to the alternative moral culture without losing their grip on reality, and without losing the ability to

make retrospective sense of the conversion. This broadly psychological condition[13] is offered as marking the boundary between what Williams calls 'real confrontations' and merely 'notional confrontations' between different moral cultures. Here is how he introduces that distinction:

> A relativist view of a given type of outlook can be understood as saying that for such outlooks it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal—good, bad, right, wrong, and so on—can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made (1985; p. 161).

And yet it seems to me now that the psychological condition actually does next to no work in the real structure of the view. Why, after all, would anyone think that the psychological and practical possibility of converting to live according to the relevant alternative values poses a proper limit to moral appraisal? The possibility of conversion *per se* seems neither here nor there as regards the propriety of moral appraisal, not least because it is clear that there are other moral cultures in the present to which a group of us would surely not be able to convert, and yet Williams quite rightly insists that relativism finds no application in such cross-cultural cases. He says, for instance: 'Relativism over merely spatial distance is of no interest or application in the modern world. Today all confrontations between cultures must be real confrontations…' (Williams 1985, p. 163). This asymmetry in his view between cultural distance and historical distance, though in itself a sound one, does not cohere with the criterion of moral conversion.

It is fortunate, then, that an alternative interpretation of Williams' line of thought recommends itself. I contend that the idea that is really doing the work in Williams' relativism is something not psychological but rather functional, regarding the ability to exercise our basic dialogical freedom to construct the ethical values we live by. This

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[13] It is actually a strongly practical condition too, as the counterfactual he spelled out really involved actually being able to make sufficient social arrangements to live according to the alien values. I have discussed this point more fully in Fricker 2010.

essential motivating idea for the relativism of distance flies by in a sentence or two pretty early in the original paper, so one has to catch it on the wing. The idea is this: any moral appraisals delivered across merely notional confrontations would contain 'so little of what gives content to the appraisals in the context of real confrontation' that they 'lack the relation to our concerns which alone gives any point or substance to appraisal' (Williams 1981; p. 141 & 142).[14]

In effect Williams is saying that the deliberative point of moral appraisal goes missing across merely notional confrontation, inasmuch as the alien moral culture cannot represent a partner in the sort of imagined dialogue that informs our own deliberations about how to live. The implied conclusion is that any such moral appraisal could only constitute an exercise in idle moral grading, which petty moralism is bound to detract from alternative, more instructive, attitudes we might take towards distant ethical cultures. Williams modelled for us just what such an alternative, non-moralistic stance could be in his study of ancient Greek ethical thought presented in *Shame and Necessity* (1993). Here his project was to counter a certain progressivist orthodoxy to the effect that our characteristic modern phenomenology of wrongdoing, namely guilt, is superior to its allegedly simpler ancient counterpart, namely shame. Williams argued that the Greek notion *aidos*, translated as shame, in fact already incorporated the desirable complexity found in modern guilt, namely the internalization of the shaming gaze, so that this form of moral compunction is revealed as not dependent after all on actually being caught in a shameful state by others, since the agent's own internalized sense of apt reaction is already sufficient. Oedipus's dreadful act of dashing out his own eyes gruesomely dramatizes exactly this point about internalization, for in blinding himself physically he still cannot make himself blind to the horrifying fact that, through no fault of his own, he had married his mother and killed his father. There is no hiding from internalized shame any more than there is from the post-Christian phenomenon of a guilty conscience.

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[14] The quotation is from 'The Truth in Relativism'.

In revealing the psychological complexity of *aidos*, Williams embarrasses the progressivist reflex concerning the superiority of modern moral psychology; and he simultaneously models the historically reflective kind of philosophy he always promoted, and came later to label 'impure philosophy'—that is, philosophy that mixes itself with history. Acknowledging, if not in so many words, at the outset of *Shame and Necessity*, that we are in merely notional confrontation with the ancient world, he observes:

> We cannot live with the ancient Greeks or to any substantial degree imagine ourselves doing so. Much of their life is hidden from us, and just because of that, it is important for us to keep a sense of their otherness, a sense which the methods of cultural anthropology help us to sustain (1993 pp. 1-2).

What we *can* do, through the study of ancient Greek ethical thought, is learn something about our own ethical life and our own philosophical conceptions of it—our blindspots, and philosophical fantasies, perhaps also some distinctive strengths. And so, later, in 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', he laments that on the whole philosophers tend not to think much about history of philosophy 'because it is not part of a philosophical undertaking, as locally understood, to attend to any such history. But—and this is the point I want to stress— we must attend to it, if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions' (p. 191). Indeed the alternative positive vision of ethical life that Williams surely gained from studying Greats as an undergraduate equipped him with a clear-eyed vision of the self-deceived aspirations of 'the morality system' that he regarded as inflated with objectivist and ahistoricist fantasy. That the morality system itself partly constituted a historically contingent formation of ethical life was, I believe, simply manifest to Williams from the start because he greeted its philosophical expressions already primed with a rich sense of the ancient outlook that long preceded it. His acquaintance with ancient styles of ethical thought, and especially the Greek sensibility's capacity to confront the role of luck in ethical life, put the hyper-reflective, absolutist predilections of the dominant strand in modern moral philosophy in revealing critical relief.

To sum up these remarks about Williams' ethical relativism, my suggestion has been that the real, if fleeting and unhelpfully backgrounded, argument for the relativism of distance—and the marker between real and notional confrontations on which it depends—does not rest, after all, on the psychological possibility of conversion but rather the deliberative possibility of engaging in real or imagined dialogue as a means to adjusting our own values. *That* is the line that moral appraisal cannot appropriately cross, and the impossibility of conversion, though sometimes a by-product, is not in fact what marks it. Certain kinds of historical distance are simply too great to sustain imagined conversation of a kind that could help us answer the fundamental Socratic question with which *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* opens—namely, How should one live? (1985, p. 1). The relativism of distance is really (and despite appearances) a direct implication of the idea of dialogical freedom that I am endeavouring to reveal as Williams' foundational meta-ethical conviction.

Moreover this interpretation is supported by the fact that it helps vindicate the otherwise distinctly under-motivated asymmetry in Williams' view, as I mentioned earlier, between historical distance and merely cultural distance in the now. For when we have to negotiate alien moral cultures in the present, we are always already engaged in the practice of dialogical freedom—thinking through how to relate to the alien values, perhaps challenging them, perhaps being somewhat changed in the light of them, and so on. This provides an excellent reason why relativism simply finds no application in such cases: the ethical conversation is already up and running, for once the question of another culture's moral otherness has arisen for us, we are already in the deliberative business of deciding what to think and do about their values in relation to our own. This is the sense in which, as Williams sometimes put it, it is always *too late* for relativism across cultures in the now.[15]

(c) The Borders of Philosophy and History

My third signature thesis from Williams that I wish to relate to his belief in our ethical freedom is more of a limiting case; for Williams' work was also deeply about the relation

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[15] For more discussion of this issue see Fricker 2013.

between ethical freedom and various kinds of necessitation. His abiding fascination with the limits of philosophy and its relationship with history just *was* a fascination with the relation between one kind of necessity—those generated by a priori inquiry from the armchair—and the kind of contingency displayed by us as we exercise ethical freedom in real-time and social space, to create moral culture. Thus we come to his work in State of Nature genealogical explanation, which was the method he explored in his final book in order to incorporate both necessity *and* contingency in a single framework. This method, or rather the State of Nature part of it that depicted 'origins', delivered certain constraints on ethical freedom by revealing that some values—notably, truthfulness, and elsewhere he made a similar argument in relation to (political) freedom[16]—are necessary in the sense that they will inevitably arise in any human society, for the excellent reason that they arise out of absolutely basic human needs. In the case of truthfulness, a compound of the proto-virtues Accuracy and Sincerity, the basic epistemic need to pool information means that any society is bound to have a proto-virtue of truthfulness. So far so necessary. But then, history kicks in, and everything that follows is contingent. The specific form that a culturally specific virtue of truthfulness may take will be many and various—perhaps as a value that is profoundly related to ideas about the authentic self, or perhaps a value that is conceived primarily in relation to a notion of honour, or perhaps a value whose role in society is far more bureaucratically conceived, being thought of principally as serving efficiency in reliable information sharing. Necessity and then contingency; philosophy and then history. The State of Nature genealogical method posits original necessities and then lets go, making room for all the historical contingency in the world. On this picture, our basic human nature and social needs as we begin to form a proto-society do constrain what form a human ethical life might take; but not much, for there is so much room for cultural-historical difference, and within that, individual difference too. That is why Williams embraced the State of Nature genealogical method, and (as I would now like to put it) the deliverances of the State of

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[16] 'This contingent historical deposit, which makes freedom what it now is, cannot be contained in or anticipated by anything that could be called a definition. It is the same here as it is with other values: philosophy, or as we might say a priori anthropology, can construct a core or skeleton or basic structure for the value, but both what it has variously become, and what we now need it to be, must be a function of actual history' ('From Freedom To Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value' in Williams 2005; pp. 75-76).

Nature story specify the limiting conditions on our exercise of ethical freedom. We start with basic societal needs that mean we must have some proto-virtue of truthfulness, or some proto-value of political freedom, and then our ethical freedom takes over and we are in the everyday business of making history by setting our ends by way of ramified dialogical engagements that steady our minds and thus our subjective motivational sets.

There is a special connection between Williams' late concern to vindicate and explain the utterly fundamental value of truthfulness and his early critical work deconstructing the morality system. In a sense his critique was always centred on the idea that the morality system was insufficiently truthful, and indeed riven with objectivist fantasies—a word he often uses in that connection. Accordingly, a central first-order normative message for our profession that comprises a significant part of the initial rationale of *Truth and Truthfulness* is precisely that we should *resist fantasy in intellectual life*—we have an ordinary but important responsibility to be truthful. Williams said, for instance:

> Truthfulness implies a respect for the truth. This relates to both of the virtues that…are the two basic virtues of truth… Accuracy and Sincerity: you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe. *The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie* (Williams 2002; p.11—emphasis added).

An important aspect of 'taking care' is the self-discipline of resisting philosophical fantasy. I believe a sense of this general intellectual responsibility was always the impetus driving the early critiques of the morality system—the responsibility to resist moralistic and universalistic fictions, to debunk the implied external interpretation of what it is to have a reason, to critique how the associated 'institution of blame' functions to perpetually recruit others into shared reasons under the truthless idea that all ethical reasons were already and

necessarily shared.[17] It was only in *Truth and Truthfulness* that he gave the full elaboration of this idea, but the method in the earlier critical work was precisely that of resisting philosophical fantasy in favour of a naturalistic realism about where our values come from. Where they come from is, in some cases, the basic necessities of human beings living together—this is so with truthfulness and freedom—but thereafter they come contingently from what I'm inclined to call our *practice of ethical freedom*. We might say the practice of ethical freedom consists in our substantive and socially embedded trustful conversations about different kinds of value, including those related to our 'ground projects', which provide the sense of purpose that makes a person's life distinctively their own.

Let me end with a final note of explanation regarding my own interpretive methodology in relation to these themes. In my partly strict, partly experimental exegesis of three pillars of Williams' meta-ethics, I would not for one moment pretend to have given you the truth, singularly conceived, about what Williams thought or intended in his writings. For any idea of serving up a single true interpretation would involve a basic misconception, not only of my own purposes but, more interestingly, a misconception of the character of Williams' highly distinctive philosophical texts. His philosophical writings, though disciplined, subtle and purposeful, are generally what one might call *resistant texts* in the sense that they actively resist attempts to rigidly fix their significance. This is facilitated by their often compressed and allusive quality that I noted at the outset; but that is not the whole explanation. What creates their resistant nature is also that many of his ideas resonate in strikingly different ways depending on what other ideas within his philosophy one considers them in relation to. I have mainly put two cardinal early ideas in relation with later ideas, critiques in relation with positive philosophical proposals, and I hope to have thereby substantiated my interpretive claim that we should understand Williams' meta-ethical oeuvre as the gradual expansion and elaboration of one core commitment, namely that how we should live is *under-determined by rationality*, a conviction he elaborates now by reference

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[17] In this connection see, for instance, his comment about blame as it functions in the morality system as a 'continuous attempt…to recruit people into a deliberative community that shares ethical reasons' ('How Free Does The Will Need To Be?', 1995, p. 16).

to reasons, now by reference to the contingency of moral culture, now by reference to the idea that philosophy should be aware of its borders with history in order that it may trespass intelligently and self-reflectively in the manner of 'impure philosophy'.

There is no question, then, of offering any singular exegetical truth; but instead—and in keeping with Williams' own view of the place of truth in historical interpretations where a 'chronicle' of epistemically manifest 'plain truths' might receive a plurality of equally reasonable interpretations[18]—I have drawn upon some fairly plain truths concerning ideas he manifestly committed to on the page at various times, while adding some new interpretive notes sounded by putting those ideas into explicit relation with one another. These new relations exemplify the changeability of philosophical resonance that I find so remarkable in Williams' writing, and deeply characteristic of his philosophical style. It is perfectly possible that some of it may simply be a matter of inadvertent unclarity or vagueness; but mostly I believe his philosophical texts have this resistant quality because Williams himself was resistant—resistant to allowing the reader, or indeed the writer, to let the philosophy slide into deadening readymade boxes. 'Avoid –isms!' he used to say, explicitly echoing the advice given to him by his 'teacher and mentor' Gilbert Ryle. Williams passed on this seemingly innocuous advice to his own students, in what now strikes me as a new moment of being superficial out of profundity. Avoiding –isms may sound innocuous, but it goes deep. Deep enough in Williams, I believe, to be expressed in his resistance to the readymade –isms of his philosophical time, because they are not well-shaped to commit him to exactly what he intended and nothing else. He wanted moral truth without *one* moral truth; moral cognitivism without objective moral knowledge; historicism without 'standard relativism', practical necessity without the categorical; naturalism without reduction; individualism but always in social dialogue.

I have read three of Williams' key meta-ethical theses as sourcing their first energy in an affirmation of our freedom to set our own ends, under-determined as they are by the bare

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[18] See Williams 2002, ch. 10.

strictures of rationality. This freedom, and (even more so) *its* philosophical affirmation—already present, if off-stage, in the early critiques of the 'morality system'—expresses an irreverent energy that Williams surely recognized and relished in Nietzsche. But in Williams the deconstructive spirit is already infused with the positive vision in which the ideal of truthfulness, and resistance to philosophical fantasy is advanced as a cardinal virtue. And in Williams, Nietzschean scorn is transformed into the distinctively socialized, dialogical form that brings it to maturity, and civility, through the interpersonal tutelage of 'trustful conversation'. This practice of dialogical freedom is what I have been proposing determines our reasons and our selves in Williams' vision of ethical life. My aim, then, in offering you the foregoing interpretive proposal, is to have produced not something anyone might sensibly describe as *true*; but rather something *truthful*. At least I do hope so; for in this connection Williams was surely right: When all is said and done, what matters most, in philosophy as in life, is truthfulness.

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