

## **Williams's Style**

I have to admit that when I arrived in England Bernard Williams must have been the philosopher who puzzled me most. Well, it was not Williams himself but rather his status in analytic philosophy.

Let me explain: back in Vienna I was taught philosophy in the frumpy old way of mainly having to read history of philosophy. In Vienna the last thing that would have been expected from a student like me was to “do philosophy” in any way myself. This would have been silly. What would I know! Studying philosophy was more like studying art history than going to art school. It was enough to understand the greats of the past. So, when I came to England and found Williams imploring his readers to engage with the history of ideas, I thought: well that is very strange. I had done my part in learning that the analytic tradition had started off by a throwing out the history of philosophy altogether; by rather brazenly trumpeting the belief that one could start philosophy completely afresh just as if no-one had ever thought about the matters at hand. These authors were showered in praise and considered to be great heroes. And then, abracadabra, this same tradition simply U-turned and threw infinite praise on the one that demanded engagement with history.

You just arrived where we started off, I thought. Be very welcome! I have to admit I expected a bit of a collective apology. An admission of error.

But this was, of course, a grave misunderstanding on my part. After all Williams was not speaking to me at all. He was speaking to his tradition and before I had made the effort to familiarise myself with this tradition, before becoming part of it I could not understand even a bit of it.

My mistake was the following: I erroneously believed that the negation of a negation leads you back to the place where you started. This might be the case in matters of formal logic, but it is certainly not the case in matters of history. Manoeuvring through philosophic traditions is more like walking through the West-End in London than through Manhattan: when you're in the Upper East Side taking four turns to the left always brings you back to where you started. This is certainly not the case anywhere close to Seven Dials! The point is that in historical matters we deal not with abstract negations but with concrete or determinate negations which develop naturally in rather oblique angles. They form traditions of seemingly random walks that can ultimately lead you anywhere. The only place you certainly can never reach is the place you started. You can never return.

Still, there is hardly a line in Williams that I could read without grave internal commotions and adolescent protestation of the kind: but Hegel said all of that long before you and he did so in a much more profound, systematic and less rhapsodic and conversational manner!

But this is, I now accept, entirely futile. Hegel has been ruined for the British mainly through the British Hegelians, the British Idealists. Hegel has been ruined through well-intentioned introductions, promises to unveil the secret of Hegel, which only helped to vulgarise Hegel into a fusty old caricature.

Williams must have been aware that nothing can be gained from aligning oneself with Hegel. Otherwise it is hard to understand why Hegel, despite being mentioned by Williams here and there, received such a stingy treatment. This

very sparse engagement is surprising, given how much both authors have in common. From the intense cross-cutting of the history of philosophy with the philosophy of history to the deeply critical appreciation of Kant's contributions to moral and political philosophy; from a deep philosophic self-reflection of philosophy's own role in society to the re-Aristotleisation of a Christian trajectory that has (again in Kant) pushed the notions of subjectivity to its extreme. One could go on and on. Still, in the end, what we hear from Williams is the worn-out old canard that Hegel can be disregarded as he was appealing to "a teleological conception of history".<sup>1</sup> Given the care and honesty that Williams employs in his engagements with other thinkers, given the interesting new angles he discovers in his treatment with of the authors he engages with, this statement is bordering on the reckless.

I believe Williams's impoverished relation to Hegel explains what must seem his rather excessive treatment of an author that would otherwise be considered a fringe-figure and a mere spleen of Williams: R.G. Collingwood. He is, I believe, something of a Hegel-proxy for Williams. When Williams praises Collingwood for stating that "all history is the history of thought"<sup>2</sup> I cannot believe that Williams did not notice the Hegelian lineage of this claim. Williams must have been aware of Hegel's introduction to the philosophy of history where he discusses exactly these issues in exactly the same terms (the relation of the *res gestae* the *historia rerum gestarum*). Yet all Williams has to say is to insist that Collingwood was not "a very Hegelian thinker".<sup>3</sup>

But, as I have said, Hegel is ruined for the English, and there is no point in crying over spilled milk.

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<sup>1</sup> B Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006), 104.

<sup>2</sup> B Williams, *The Sense of the Past. Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 346.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

Surprisingly, Nietzsche has not been ruined. He might prove unruinable even by whole libraries of polite English engagement. So, it is perfectly right that Williams put much of his focus on him.

This is what it took me two decades to understand: in the end it is all about judgment and balance. And Williams certainly got those right. This is crucial, since philosophic traditions, just like traditions of formal dress, mainly deal in question of style. And the delicate labour of style is the very difficult task of getting the balance oh so perfectly right, of getting ever closer to a sweet spot which comes into existence only by us trying to get ever closer to it. You cannot see it, it's not even there if you're not there trying to find it. Williams certainly was a master in this. He found a sweet balance between sharp analytic clarity and historic breadth, between frugality and pomp and thus rightly has become a classic of English thought.

His motto “avoid -isms” is the external sign of this great inner freedom. It might even be consolidated into a doctrine of “avoidism” that treads a very narrow path on the *via negativa*, on the road of describing the Absolute not in terms of what it is but by carefully excluding all that it is not, by carving it out, so to speak. In Williams this *via negativa*, however, has as its object not God, but it directs its attention at itself, at the “wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and of our activities”.

Fricker's talk does the greatest service to our understanding of Williams in bringing together many of the scattered pieces into a whole, in making visible how the philosophic casting looks like that the negative mould of Williams's philosophy surrounds.

It is indeed *ethical freedom*. This is the same freedom that Williams exhibits in his writing, in his style. This freedom is not the stern moral autonomy of Western enlightenment, but, I believe, better instantiated in the Daoist *Wu Wei*, the art of trying without trying, or Castiglione's *sprezzatura*, a studied carelessness, an artful

artlessness. This is indeed the highest form of life. One can also detect it in the English love of the amateur. Hegel cannot rank highly on this register, because he is always trying so hard! His ambition shows and nothing that is fuelled by ambition is worth much since anyone can achieve nearly everything if he tries hard enough and, finally, nothing which everyone can achieve is worth much!

Fricker's conclusion seems off the mark though. She concludes her wonderful talk by stating: "Williams was surely right: When all is said and done, what matters most, in philosophy as in life, is truthfulness."

There is rarely a sentence I instinctively disagree with more. First, even if Williams was right, I would hesitate to say he was *surely* so. Secondly, even if truthfulness does indeed matter, I do not think it matters most and even if it matters in philosophy, I'm unsure that it equally matters in life. Finally, I'm not sure it matters at all "when all is said and done". It certainly has to matter to a certain degree while we say things and do things, while we perform goal-oriented acts. This simply seems to be the feature of having a language, of manoeuvring in a conceptual universe. In this universe there are vortices, some structural invariances of the kind that produce odd truth-phenomena of the kind "This sentence makes a claim to be true" which you cannot deny without getting into trouble. There just seem to be these self-referential anchor points or blind spots of intentionality where some kind of magic happens.

A lot of philosophical fuss has been made of this, from Plato to Habermas. But, to put myself on thin philosophical ice, it is a feature of languages and not of the world. It is a feature of the conceptual net we cast and not of the fish we are trying to catch. So, when speaking to one another we should not be all too surprised that we simply cannot deny the importance of truthfulness since truthfulness is simply shorthand for speaking to one another. When riding the bike you cannot not ride the bike. But, of course, saying that you cannot not ride a bike when riding a bike sounds less exciting than saying you cannot say

things and deny the value of truthfulness. The point is this: when all things are said and done you're not riding the bike any longer.

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