Comments on Fricker's "A Humanistic Discipline: Williams' Naturalistic Philosophy"
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In her thought-provoking interpretation, Miranda Fricker offers three key meta-ethical theses of Bernard Williams that (she holds) all share a root conviction: namely, that it is fruitful to read Williams as having a primary conviction that expresses his deepest philosophical instinct about the human condition, whereby we are in a far-reaching sense ethically free. We are substantively free to set our own ends, and generate our own values and correlative practical reasons. In her paper Fricker asks: "how does this most basic conviction that we are ethically free express itself in Williams' work?" (7). She offers an answer with three signature theses Williams in her view makes that pertain to internal reasons, the relativism of distance, and the borders of philosophy and history.

I won't be challenging Fricker's interpretation of Williams – a task for which she is eminently better qualified than I am. However, given the title of her talk, I could not help but wonder: What precisely is naturalistic about William's philosophy? In what follows, I want to offer some suggestions as to how we might conceive of William' naturalism and invite Fricker to comment on whether my suggestions indeed fit her interpretation of Williams.

In Fricker's discussion of the first thesis, the apparent shape of Williams' naturalism seemingly hinges on the discussion of incomplete idealisation. With my own philosophical sub-area – feminist philosophy – in mind, this discussion reminded me of non-ideal theory. Naturalising approaches in feminist philosophy and philosophy of race are often wedded to the idea that we should focus on actual human conditions rather than on ideal conditions. In so doing, socially engaged philosophers usually explicitly commit themselves to doing non-ideal theory. Although it is oftentimes unclear what this means, at a minimum it is a theoretical commitment to rejecting methodological tools that exclude or marginalise actual states of affairs. One such tool is idealisation prominent in John Rawls's (1971) theory of justice. Onora O'Neill (1987) has characterised this sort of idealisation as follows, which I have modified to fit Rawls. The first step is to posit a description of a just and well-functioning society that is idealised: it is satisfied only by hypothetical human societies, not actual ones. The second step posits such an enhanced version of a just society as the (perhaps unachievable) standard against which actual societies are measured. For O'Neill, the problem with the first step is not that something about actual societies is omitted, but rather that too much of something non-existent and false has been added to our conception of a just society. Moreover, as I see it, the second step is problematic on the following grounds: positions like Rawls's aim to elucidate an idealised just society that can be used to measure actual social arrangements in order to demonstrate their shortcomings. That is, let's first fix what justice amounts to, and then see in which ways extant societies and social relations fall short of justice. Those that do are characterised by social injustice. I contend, by contrast, that the examination of injustice shouldn't proceed in this manner: we should not try to understand injustice via the lens of justice and need different theoretical tools (for more, see my 2016). In other words, we shouldn't try to understand the ideal first in order to say something insightful about the non-ideal cases. As I see it, unless we first understand non-ideal cases and why precisely they are non-ideal, we cannot get to the ideal.

Much of Fricker's Williams and the critical part of his philosophy seemed to be in a similar spirit. Since Williams is opposed to universalism (according to Fricker) his root conviction might be viewed in non-ideal naturalistic manner in a similar fashion to non-ideal theory sketched out above: Williams' view describes more accurately and closely the 'actual' human condition and doesn't appeal to distorting idealisations in grounding his meta-ethical position. Non-ideal theory resonated with me even more with the idea that much of what Williams was concerned with involved "cases of ultimately failed attempts at ethical persuasion" (10), as Fricker put it. In other words, we start from and privilege non-ideal cases in ethical theorising, rather than examine ethical pathologies through the lens of supposedly ideal ethical practices and interactions.

The idea that we are ethically free, does not however make practical reasons and reasoning merely individualistic; rather, Fricker's Williams holds that ethical reasons are "also fundamentally dialogical in their formation … They are generated and discovered through the sorts of trustful conversations through which our psychologies become steadied, our minds perpetually made up" (13). Having said that, Fricker readily admits that

> 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 … 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. (13-4)

This picture of dialogical freedom Williams is committed to (Fricker claims) frames his critique of the 'morality system'. Understanding Williams to be a philosopher of dialogical freedom in this sense affords another way to think about his naturalism. Specifically, the role of social practice in the discussion caught my eye; so let me say something about this.

Practice denotes a *way* of doing something often skilfully. Social practices have, what Sally Haslanger (2018, 244) calls, 'descriptive normativity': practices are normatively structured and hence unified regularities - not 'mere' behavioural regularity. A practice is an activity that is governed by rules or better by norms. With this mind, William Sewell (1992) takes the distinction between a structure and a practice to be like that between *langue* and *parole* for Ferdinand de Saussure. The former denotes abstract rules that enable the production of grammatical sentences, while the latter denotes the production of actual sentences or speech. A social structure is to social practice as *langue* is to *parole*: "structure, like *langue*, is a complex of rules with a 'virtual' existence, while practice, like speech, is an enactment of these rules in space and time" (Sewell 1992, 6).

This way of thinking about social practices prima facie fits and illuminates how Williams' meta-ethics might be naturalistic. It fits his primary conviction that we are ethically free to come to our own values as an *enactment* of our ethical lives in space and time, here and now, while a moral system has 'virtual' existence. It seems then that the morality system is to Williams' meta-ethics like structure is to practice, or as *langue* is to *parole*. This would make the enactment of our ethical lives here and now theoretically and

practically prior to some rules or principles encoded in the morality system, which affords another way to think about Williams' naturalistic philosophy – as an enterprise that is bottom up, rather than top down; practice-based rather than rule-based in an unhelpfully abstracted manner.

So far I have offered two ways to trace a kind of naturalistic stance in Williams. However, in discussing the final central thesis, Fricker brings up Williams' appeals to the State of Nature-genealogy and the virtues of Accuracy and Sincerity relative to the value of truthfulness. In discussing these methodological tools and virtue though, Fricker's Williams begins to look less naturalistic in the above senses, and more idealised in the manner of ideal theory. So how can these appeals and the discussion of the third thesis be incorporated into the idea that Williams' philosophy is naturalistic? More specifically, here in lies my puzzlement. In outlining the central message of Truthfulness, Fricker cites Williams: "*The authority of academics must be rooted in their truthfulness in both these respects: they take care, and they do not lie.*" (20, italics added) She further writes: "An important style of 'taking care' is the self-discipline of resisting philosophical fantasy." (20) This idea of resisting philosophical fantasy would well befit the demands of non-ideal and bottom-up theorising – in addition to being an eminently laudable idea, I contend. But now I am losing my grip on how the different methodological currents in Williams are meant to hang together. This leaves me still wondering, what is naturalistic about Williams' philosophy – if indeed there is some unitary account on offer.

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