

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Realism and Liberalism in the Political Thought of Bernard Williams

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Abstract

This thesis offers the first systematic critical examination of the political thought of Bernard Williams; explains the relation between his political realism and his critical assessment of much modern moral philosophy, and discusses how his work illuminates the debates about the nature and purpose of political theory. I defend Williams's fundamental claim that the central questions of political morality arise within politics and argue accordingly that political theory should not, contrary to the position implicit in much contemporary political theory, in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics. I argue that although Williams's critique of contemporary political theory is mistaken in its claim that contemporary political theorists conventionally endorse a monolithic form of moralism, he convincingly shows that political theory should begin with an understanding of the distinctive character of politics, as this enables us to understand the goods that are internal to it. In this regard, Williams's realism is best read as an attempt to make ethical sense of politics, and as an attempt to explain how we can continue to affirm a kind of liberalism, without recourse to the moralised presuppositions that he insists we must jettison. I go on to argue that by developing the insights of Williams's late work we can articulate a defence of liberalism that has marked advantages over the 'high liberalism' that most contemporary liberal theorists defend. This latter argument illustrates the distinctiveness of Williams's contribution to contemporary debates about realism in political theory as most of the realist thinkers with whom he is grouped endorse a form of realism in order to impugn liberalism.

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Abbreviations of Selected Works by Bernard Williams

D: Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry (London, Routledge, 2005 [1978]).

ELP: Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (London, Fontana, 2007 [1985]).

IBWD: In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument, sel. and ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2005).

M: Morality: An Introduction to Ethics (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1972]).

ML: Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1981]).

MSH: Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1995]).

PHD: Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, sel. and ed. A.W. Moore (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2006).

PS: Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1973]).

SP: The Sense of the Past, sel. and ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2006).

SN: Shame and Necessity (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press, 2008 [1993]).

TT: Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2002).

U: 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007 [1973]).

*Anyone who goes in for worldly politics must, above all, be free of illusions and acknowledge one fundamental fact: to be resigned to the inevitable and eternal struggle of man with man on this earth.*¹

¹ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tubingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1971), p. 29. Translated and cited by Peter Lassman, 'Politics, Power and Legitimation', in Stephen Turner, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 84.

Introduction

‘Like the sun: a lot of light, but very little warmth’ – or so claimed an unnamed acquaintance when ruminating on the nature of Bernard Williams’s contribution to twentieth-century philosophy.² The deliberately piecemeal and unsystematic nature of his work leads many to share this assessment; it is often claimed that although Williams was a brilliant critical thinker he failed to leave behind much in the way of a substantive positive contribution or philosophical legacy.³ Even Martha Nussbaum, a friend, student and serious interlocutor, declared that ‘what energized Bernard, cheered him up, was a kind of elegant assertion of the hopelessness of things against the good-newsmen, a contemptuous yet brilliant scoffing’.⁴

A similar set of reservations has been raised against the recent realist turn in political theory, which I examine Williams’s contribution to in this thesis. Many contemporary political philosophers, purportedly taking as their inspiration John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, consider political philosophy a branch of moral philosophy and accordingly proceed by articulating a set of moral principles which they then apply to politics.⁵ However, in recent years various realist thinkers have set about critiquing this style of normative political theorising, alleging that it and its most celebrated luminaries – thinkers such as G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick and John Rawls –

² Martha Nussbaum reports a mutual friend having made this remark in ‘Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams Remembered’, *Boston Review* (October/November 2003), online at: <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.5/nussbaum.html> (accessed 25 May 2013). As she notes, it ‘showed that the speaker must have spent his days in England’.

³ The only monograph on Williams takes this view: ‘Williams’s most significant contributions involve not as much the formulation of new philosophical positions reflecting some clear advance, however defined, over previous views, as the destabilization of previous views’: Mark Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (Chesham, Acumen, 2006), p. 6. Likewise, R.M. Hare reportedly once challenged Williams by saying: ‘You pull everything down but what do you want to put in its place?’: ‘Bernard Williams: A Mistrustful Animal’, in Alex Voorhees, ed. *Conversations on Ethics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 196.

⁴ Nussbaum, ‘Tragedy and Justice’.

⁵ Throughout this thesis I use ‘political theory’ and ‘political philosophy’ interchangeably following Williams (*IBWD*, p. 1).

misrepresent the nature of the relationship between moral considerations and political practice, and consequently offer a set of normative prescriptions that do not properly apply to the subject matter with which they claim to be concerned. Drawing both explicitly or implicitly on the work of figures as various as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Weber and Berlin, realists accuse much contemporary political philosophy of being excessively abstract, idealistic and parochial, because it fails to appreciate the ways in which the distinctive character of politics changes the nature of the prescriptions we should make about it.⁶ However, as I have said, there is a great deal of disagreement about the importance of the realist critique and some puzzlement about its precise nature, primarily because, as William Galston notes, ‘it isn’t yet clear whether realism is essentially critical and cautionary ... as opposed to a coherent affirmative alternative’ to the style of political theorising to which it objects.⁷

In this thesis I articulate a reply to the former charge against Williams, which, as such, touches on the latter charge against the recent realist turn in political theory. For one thing, such complaints forget that claims about what counts as a positive contribution (or, to employ the unstable metaphor I opened with, ‘warmth’) themselves implicitly rely on a set of assumptions about what philosophy can, or should hope to, achieve, which are not

⁶ Although not all of the philosophers and political theorists who are banded together as realists self-identify as such there are certain ‘family resemblances’ which enable us to group them in these terms. Hence, alongside Williams’s works the most prominent contributions to the new realist position are: Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1993); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London, Verso, 1993); Mark Philp, *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007); Glen Newey, *After Politics: The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001); and Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2008). For two review articles that explain certain facets of the realism/moralist debate, see Marc Stears, ‘Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion’, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2007), pp. 533–53, and William Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2010), pp. 385–411. For other important discussions of realism see the essays collected in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), and the Special Issue on ‘Realism and Political Theory’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2010), pp. 379–512, edited by Richard North.

⁷ William Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, p. 408.

simply given.⁸ Moreover, in his late work Williams is deeply concerned with thinking about how certain values can, as he puts it in *Shame and Necessity*, ‘be something, despite their failures of self-understanding’ (*SN*, p. 11), and for this reason I argue that his political essays are best read as being engaged in the *constructive* or *affirmative* task of considering how we can make ethical sense of politics, and how we can remain committed to a conception of liberalism, without succumbing to the moralism of certain strands of contemporary political philosophy.

Williams was an exceptionally important voice in twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy. His contributions were widespread, including notable work on the history of philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology and above all in ethics, where his ground-breaking discussions of (to name but a few) utilitarianism, the sources of belief and reasons for acting, the relations between luck and moral assessment, and the prospects of moral knowledge, set the agenda for many of the most significant debates of the period.⁹ However, his contributions to the philosophical study of politics were, until recently, thought to be of much less significance,¹⁰ largely because there was not much of a sustained discussion to speak of, with the exception of his early paper ‘The Idea of Equality’ (*IBWD*, pp. 97–115) and his work as a political actor on various policy commissions in Britain.¹¹ Yet since the posthumous publication of *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, containing a number of essays and lectures that he was planning to

⁸ On this it is worth recalling Williams’s response to Hare, ‘Well, in *that* place, I don’t put anything. That isn’t a place anything should be’: ‘Bernard Williams: A Mistrustful Animal’, p. 196.

⁹ For wide-ranging recent discussions of Williams’s work in ethics see the essays contained in Daniel Callcut, ed. *Reading Bernard Williams* (London, Routledge, 2010); Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, eds. *Luck, Value and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison, eds. *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Alan Thomas, ed. *Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ For example, Mark Jenkins remarks that the absence of ‘more in the way of a politics’ is a notable lacuna in his corpus: Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, p. 188.

¹¹ Williams chaired the 1979 Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship and also sat on commissions examining the role of British private schools in 1965–70, drug abuse in 1971, gambling in 1976–78, and social justice in 1993–94.

develop into a book on politics at the time of his death, Williams has come to be seen as a significant voice in contemporary political theory in general and a major (if not the pre-eminent) voice in the burgeoning realist critique of contemporary political theory. The most basic aim of this thesis is to offer the first systematic critical examination of his political thought, to explain the relation between it and his critical assessment of much modern moral philosophy, and, in so doing, to make a contribution to the current debate about the ideal of realism in political philosophy.

1. The Realist Critique of Political Moralism

In the academic study of politics, realism has until recently been most commonly associated with the field of international relations. As Julian Korab-Karpowicz notes, realists in international relations:

consider the principal actors in the international arena to be states, which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power. The negative side of the realists' emphasis on power and self-interest is their skepticism regarding the relevance of ethical norms to relations among states. National politics is the realm of authority and law, whereas international politics, they sometimes claim, is a sphere without justice, characterized by active or potential conflict among states.¹²

There is a some overlap between this doctrinal approach to international politics and the kind of political realism Williams advocates as an alternative to the political moralism espoused in much contemporary political theory (for example, realists in international relations and Williams alike draw on the work of Thucydides and Hobbes). However, there are significant differences that are worth noting. Crucially, rather than stressing the pre-eminence of self-interest or considerations of advantage in politics and condemning

¹² Julian Korab-Karpowicz, 'Political Realism in International Relations', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/realism-intl-relations/> (accessed 1 March 2013).

much contemporary political theory on these grounds, Williams claims that his project is realist in the sense that it refuses to prioritise pre-political moral ideals and principles at the expense of addressing specifically political questions. He alleges that the dominant approach in contemporary political theory, which he calls political moralism (PM), does this in one of two ways. *Enactment models*, like utilitarianism, formulate ‘principles, concepts, ideals, and values’ and seek to ‘express these in political action’, while in *structural models*, like Rawls’s, ‘theory lays down the moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be justly exercised’. Despite their differences both models see political philosophy as a form of applied morality and accordingly represent the ‘priority of the moral over the political’ (*IBWD*, p. 2).

In contrast, Williams pursues a political realism that gives ‘a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought’ (*IBWD*, p. 3). This is not a defence of ‘amoralism’ or ‘realpolitik’ in the way that realism in international relations is often taken to be.¹³ Rather, Williams holds that the normative standards that we employ in politics must be sensitive to the relationship between political practice and moral principle – hence his claim that political philosophy should ‘use distinctively political concepts, such as power, and its normative relative, legitimisation’ (*IBWD*, p. 77). He accordingly does not deny the importance of reflecting on how our political institutions might be better ordered, but, in contrast to the political moralists, insists that we must recognise the distinctive nature of political authority because it affects the judgements that ‘morality first’ philosophers have made and frames the ones that political philosophers should make. His complaint with political moralism is not therefore that it asks moral or evaluative questions, but that by

¹³ However, this reading of realism in international relations may be something of a caricature. For more sophisticated readings see the essays in Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009); David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations: From Thucydides to the Present* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998); and Michael Williams, *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

placing morality outside (or prior to) politics rather than from beginning within it, political moralism asks the wrong kind of normative questions. Accordingly, Williams alleges that the ideals that the political moralists prioritise, and the styles of argument they employ, do not make sense of the subject matter on which they claim to focus. This is why, rather than attempting to shape politics from an external standpoint, Williams urges us to focus on a set of distinctive questions which are internal to politics, and holds that morality is not prior to politics because political morality is not simply an extension, or the application, of the principles of morality. In this sense, as Bernard Yack notes, for Williams, realism ‘does not require that we abandon reflection on how we ought to live in favour of how we actually do live. For what makes political philosophy realistic ... is its focus on the structure of distinctly political relationships, rather than any assumptions about the self-interested motivations of human action’.¹⁴

Williams’s posthumous essays have been influential in heralding the recent realist turn in political theory. While I am somewhat suspicious of the drive to create a school of realism for reasons that will become clear later, papers by William Galston, Mark Philp and Matt Sleat, which draw heavily on Williams’s work, have done an excellent job of setting out the major aspects of the realist critique.¹⁵ Following their readings there are three principal – albeit purposefully underdetermined – correctives to political moralism that realists like Williams endorse. First, as Sleat notes, realists are committed to defending the ‘distinctiveness and autonomy of the political from other spheres’.¹⁶ This is often a consequence of the fact that they endorse the Hobbesian claim that political order

¹⁴ Bernard Yack, review of *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, *Ethics*, vol. 116, no. 3 (2006), p. 615.

¹⁵ Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’; Mark Philp, ‘Realism Without Illusions’, *Political Theory*, vol. 40, no. 5 (2012), pp. 629–49; Matt Sleat, ‘Liberal Realism: A Liberal Response to the Realist Critique’, *The Review of Politics*, vol. 73, no. 3 (2011), pp. 469–96 at pp. 470–7.

¹⁶ Sleat, ‘Liberal Realism’, p. 471.

‘is the *sine qua non* for every other political good’.¹⁷ Realists accordingly object to what Williams calls the moralism of contemporary political theory because they hold that when political theory is conceived as a form of applied ethics, we misunderstand the nature of political goods and values and inappropriately judge politics according to a moral prospectus from the ground up (as in the enactment and structural models).

Mark Philp perspicuously refers to this as the ‘politics-first’ commitment, and explains that it ensures that realists reject ‘the idea that moral philosophy can be the authoritative source for settling questions of politics’ because ‘the demands of politics are seen as distinctive and as compromising of ordinary morality’. It follows that ‘political theory should not be conceived of as grounded in, or as putting into practice, principles and values determined elsewhere’.¹⁸ To this end, realists hold that it is a mistake to think that political recommendations can be exhaustively determined by moral considerations from outside politics even though within politics some of these considerations obviously might have force. Relatedly, realists claim that by articulating purportedly general and abstract moral theories and seeking to apply these to the political domain, political moralists forget that action-guiding political arguments must begin ‘from where a given political community is’ because ‘general principles, however valid, do not specify right answers to practical problems and, if taken literally as guides to practice, are apt to do more harm than good’.¹⁹

Second, realists stress that much contemporary normative political theory has an impoverished, if not fundamentally idealistic, conception of moral and political psychology.²⁰ Realist scepticism about post-Rawlsian political theory on this score is expressed in a myriad of ways. Some realists argue that we should be more pessimistic

¹⁷ Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, p. 408.

¹⁸ Philp, ‘Realism Without Illusions’, p. 631.

¹⁹ Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’, p. 396.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 408.

about political potentialities than many liberal theorists are currently, as they employ excessively moralised conceptions of motivation. Others, notably Stears and Sleat, question the liberal account of agents' motivations as part of a wider critique of the liberal principle of legitimacy, and in so doing align realism with agonism. The pregnant idea here is that by pursuing a deeply moralised consensus on principles of justice, normative political theorists employ unrealistic understandings of moral and political psychology which deny the 'the irreducible antagonistic element present in social relations'²¹ and concurrently fail to recognise that 'ours is a society whose politics are dedicated quite explicitly to grappling with fundamental disagreements about justice'.²² The realist-agonist charge is thus that a certain style of contemporary liberal theory is not appropriately 'political' because it disregards the basic *circumstances of politics*.²³

There are some of affinities between this kind of agonism and Williams's realism, most notably, as we will see in Chapter Four, in Williams's insistence that moralised conceptions of political argument (like Ronald Dworkin's) that see citizens who disagree as right or wrong 'seekers after truth' (*IBWD*, p. 13) rather than as political opponents, can be hostile to the requirements of democratic political life. Yet Williams does not merely apply the doctrine of deep disagreement to rebut contemporary liberal theory, as many agonists do; while he is critical of the prevailing liberal conceptions of legitimacy he does not simply claim that they fail because they do not appreciate the fact of agonism, but

²¹ Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p. 140. Marc Stears explains the crux of the agonist critique when he notes that agonists consider the desire to find shared principles which can mediate such conflicts 'simply misplaced ... [as] contemporary society is far too deeply divided for any form of significant social agreement to be obtained, either through "rational" reflection or through deliberative exchange': 'Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion', p. 541.

²² Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 158.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102. Relatedly, Bonnie Honig claims that liberals seek a consensus which sets out the moral framework from which politics can then take place and in so doing 'confine politics (conceptually and territorially) to the juridical, administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, maintaining agreements or consolidating communities and identities. They assume that the task of political theory is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over, and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangement of political conflict and instability': *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 2.

because they misunderstand the nature of legitimacy itself.²⁴ For this reason, Williams's political realism cannot be subsumed by the recent agonist critiques, and as will be evident by the end of the thesis, is motivated by a different set of philosophical concerns (which are, in my opinion, of deeper philosophical significance) than those which undergird the agonist critique of liberalism.

Third, realists object to the utopianism of much contemporary political theory because it has ensured that political theory has lost sight of that fact that 'preventing the worst is the first duty of political leaders, and striving for far-reaching social improvement makes sense only when doing so does not significantly increase the odds that some previous abated evil will reappear'.²⁵ On these grounds Williams favours what he calls a bottom-up rather than top-down approach and seeks to defend a Shklarian liberalism of fear, which sees politics as a means by which we can defend ourselves from some of the perennial horrors of human life, rather than as a means toward a *summum bonum* (*IBWD*, p. 61).

Certain thinkers have insisted that the realist critique is essentially a variant of what has come to be known as non-ideal theory.²⁶ In most cases this reading rests on a misunderstanding, because although there are certain similarities between realism and non-ideal theory (as we see in Chapter Four) there are significant differences that should not be ignored. The most basic of these is that non-ideal theorists are concerned with the

²⁴ Indeed, some agonist critics have claimed that Williams's position is itself insufficiently agonistic as it presumes some kind of consensus in politics. I refute this charge in Chapter Two.

²⁵ Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', p. 396.

²⁶ For example, Laura Valentini, 'Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 7, no. 9 (2012), p. 659, and Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory', in David Estlund, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 380–2. In 'Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, DOI: 10.1177/1474885113483284 (forthcoming), Alice Baderin avoids this somewhat by distinguishing between 'detachment' and 'displacement' strands in realist thought. However, it seems to me that some of thinkers whom she classes as 'detachment realists', such as Wolff and De-Shalit and David Miller, are better understood as contributing to debates about the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory than realism *per se*.

problem of implementing or applying an ideal theory in non-ideal circumstances whereas realists challenge the basic understanding of the relationship between morality and politics implicit in much contemporary ideal theory.²⁷ This is especially true in Williams's case as he is not, in the first place, discontented with the inability of political moralists to offer straightforward prescriptions about what ought to be done 'now and around here'; his complaint is not simply that political moralism is inadequately prescriptive because it is not directly action-guiding, but that political theory should not in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics as this precludes us from understanding the goods that are internal to politics.

While these three commitments capture the central aspects of the realist critique of political moralism it is imprudent to try to encapsulate Williams's political realism in a number of discrete methodological precepts in the hope that we can extract a *theory* of realism from his political work. Rather, it is more illuminating to view Williams's political work in the same way that Raymond Geuss views his work in ethics in his paper 'Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams', where he argues that Williams, like Nietzsche, is best seen as endorsing a kind of 'Thucydidean realism'. Geuss claims that when confronted with the question 'Who is a better guide to life, Plato or Thucydides?' most philosophers would choose Plato, as they agree that if we are to have a *philosophy* at all we need a 'systematically interconnected, abstract overview and position on *all* the important features of human life which is argued for and justified in (purportedly) absolutely general terms'.²⁸ Geuss explains Nietzsche's reasons for rejecting this and for holding that Thucydides is the more illuminating guide. Firstly, he remarks that Nietzsche believed that

²⁷ This is where Williams and his fellow realists differ from the basic complaints of Colin Farelly, 'Justice in Ideal Theory: A Refutation', *Political Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2007), pp. 844–64, and Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London, Penguin, 2010).

²⁸ Raymond Geuss, 'Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams', in *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 219.

Thucydides had ‘an unprejudiced theoretical sympathy for, and hence understanding of, a much wider spectrum of possible human motivations than Plato’, as is evinced in the way that the Platonic dialogues implausibly show ‘the characters of whom Plato ethically disapproves ... to be confuted by Socrates’ because Plato believes morally reprehensible behaviour ‘*must ... finally be a form of irrationality that is self-defeating*’.²⁹

The second Nietzschean reason for preferring Thucydides concerns the question of whether or not optimism or pessimism is the appropriate human attitude toward the world. Geuss claims that:

Nietzsche correctly diagnosed the philosophical tradition as deeply optimistic. This optimism had several related aspects. First of all, traditional philosophers assumed that the world could be made cognitively accessible to us without remainder ... second, they assumed that when the world was correctly understood, it would make moral sense to us. Third, the kind of ‘moral sense’ which the world made to us would be one that would show it to have *some* orientation toward the satisfaction of some basic, rational human desires or interests, that is, the world was not sheerly indifferent to or perversely frustrating of human happiness. Fourth, the world is set up so that for us to accumulate knowledge and use our reason as vigorously as possible will be good for us, and will contribute to making us happy. Finally, it was assumed that there was a natural fit between the exercise of reason, the conditions of healthy individual human development, the demands of individuals for satisfaction of their needs, interests, and basic desires, and human sociability. Nature, reason, and all human goods, including human virtues, formed a potentially harmonious whole.³⁰

Geuss persuasively argues that Williams ought to be seen to belong to the ‘realist’ tradition of Thucydides and Nietzsche in both these respects, and as we will see in Chapter One this is a compelling interpretive claim. In this sense, Duncan Bell captures the way that for some thinkers like Williams, realism is best seen as a kind of sensibility or disposition which expresses a scepticism about certain aspects of contemporary moral and political philosophy when he remarks that ‘to be a realist ... is to assume a certain attitude towards the world, to focus on the most salient dimensions of a given situation, whether or not they confirm to our preferences or desires. It implies the will, and perhaps even the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 220.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 223.

ability, to grasp that “reality” – however this might be understood – and not to be misled by ephemera’.³¹

Admittedly at this stage it is not clear how this kind of *attitude*, which might be described as the ethical commitment to unmasking the ways in which our hopes and aspirations, our ways of reconciling ourselves to the ‘sheer indifference’ of the world, are often modes of a kind of wishful thinking or self-deception, relates to contemporary debates in political theory which is why one of the aims in this thesis is to show how it does via a close engagement with Williams’s work. However, it is worth noting that the Thucydidean desire to not be misled by ephemera, and the Nietzschean commitment to unmasking the extent to which much philosophy trades on various fictions about how the world is,³² does not ensure that political realists must endorse a cynical conception of politics which emphasises the pursuit of power and interest as the only guiding forces. In fact, as Philip notes, ‘the range of human motivations that can be appealed to and elicited in politics cannot be limited a priori to self-interest and it would be a dramatically impoverished realism that assumed egoism as the sole motivation’.³³ However, the realist *attitude* that Williams favours is suspicious of the more edifying and optimistic tales that have been told about human motivation, while acknowledging that ‘ideas and values can have a place in politics, albeit one that can be heavily historically and causally conditioned’.³⁴

³¹ Duncan Bell, ‘Introduction: Under an Empty Sky – Realism and Political Theory’, in Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations*, p. 1. This is not to say that Williams’s political realism is simply the application of his work in ethics to questions of politics, but his political writings reflect his disquiet with some of the standard assumptions about how we should do philosophy that have come to dominate both avenues of philosophical enquiry.

³² In this regard, in his unpublished manuscript ‘Can There Be a Nietzschean Politics?’ Williams writes that ‘one effect of Nietzsche’s work ... may be to make us question how far the criteria we think we have are actually expressed in anything that actually happens’: pp. 9–10.

³³ Philip, ‘Realism Without Illusions’, p. 636.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

When we choose to view Williams's thought in this light we can give up the misplaced idea that we can construct a theory of political realism from his work and can instead read his work as a set of deeply suggestive musings on how we can philosophically investigate politics once we adopt the kind of attitude I have described. This does not mean that we cannot speak meaningfully of the realist critique of political moralism, but it does mean – at least if we take Williams as our guide – that we should not expect to construct a fully-fledged alternative realist *theory* of politics in the sense of a set of discrete methodological premises and conclusions that we can simply apply to the same set of questions that animate much political moralism and which can be affirmed on doctrinal grounds.³⁵

2. Reading and Writing about Williams

Even Williams's proponents acknowledge that his work poses difficulties for readers and interpreters. Three comments on *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, which is one of his more polished works, make the point. Adrian Moore writes it has 'a kind of clarity. But it does not have the kind of clarity that makes for easy reading. Williams never belabours the obvious; and he rarely makes explicit what he takes to be implicit in something he has already said. His writing is therefore extremely dense. It leaves an enormous amount of work for the reader'.³⁶ Similarly, Susan Wolf notes that 'the casual reader will have difficulty seeing what holds all the parts together' while 'to the close reader many of the arguments will seem clipped or even occasionally left out altogether'.³⁷ H.L.A. Hart avers. 'It is true that Williams writes without unexplained technicalities and often with clarity and wit', he says, but 'nonetheless much that he writes needs, as well as deserves, to be

³⁵ Those who might seek to extract such a theory from Williams's work ignore his fundamental hostility to this sort of philosophy.

³⁶ Adrian Moore, 'Commentary on the Text', in *ELP*, p. 204.

³⁷ Susan Wolf, 'The Deflation of Moral Philosophy', *Ethics*, vol. 97, no. 4 (1987), p. 822.

read more than once. Often this is because the slant of his attention and the insights he offers are novel; sometimes it is because he writes in an extraordinarily condensed, almost epigrammatic, style which leaves important implications to be worked out by the reader'.³⁸

These points are well made. Williams emphatically did not engage in the kind of philosophical writing which 'aims to head off any ambiguity or any implication which some reader, perhaps a very perverse reader, might improperly take up: a style, that is to say, which seeks precision by total mind control, through issuing continuous and rigid interpretative directions' (*SP*, p. 343).³⁹ For this reason, although his work is incredibly rich and suggestive, exegetes and critics of Williams face certain challenges. These are exacerbated when one turns to his political thought due to it being unfinished, as the published essays and lectures would have been more fully expressed in the book on politics that he was working on up until his death in 2003. For this reason, his political writings often strike the reader as being rather fragmentary, sketchy and elliptic, as his arguments are scattered throughout *IBWD* and his others works.

One of the aims of this thesis is to show that in spite of this Williams's political work has important implications for political theory today. Because of the fragmentary nature of his political writings some of my argument necessarily consists in reconstructing his claims, and linking them to other aspects of his corpus, so that they offer more general points than might appear on first reading. While it is reasonable to presume Williams would have gone

³⁸ H.L.A. Hart, 'Who Can Tell Right From Wrong?', *The New York Review of Books* (17 July 1986): www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1986/jul/17/who-can-tell-right-from-wrong/ (accessed 11 January 2012).

³⁹ On this it is worth noting his wonderful complaint that much analytical philosophy 'tries 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 ... 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': *PHD*, p. 183.

some way toward doing in his never-completed book, the challenge is to do so without falsely systematising his thought as this would distort the nature of his contribution given his favoured piecemeal approach to philosophical questions and hostility toward the idea of systematic philosophical theory.⁴⁰

Yet this is not in the *first* instance a historical study as my primary concern is to use Williams's work as a foil for thinking about the ideal of realism in political theory. In this sense, this is an exercise in what Williams himself termed the history of philosophy rather than the history of ideas. As he put it, 'for the history of ideas, the question about a work *what does it mean?* is centrally the question *what did it mean?*' For the history of philosophy this search is 'replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas' by rationally reconstructing the arguments before asking what they have to teach us in the here and now.⁴¹ This does not mean that I am unconcerned with getting Williams right – as we shall see, certain criticisms of his work fail precisely because they do not understand what he was trying to do – but it does mean, as Williams put it in 'Political Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition', that when confronted with his work I am centrally interested in asking: 'What does it mean to me?' or 'What do I get out of it?' so that my questions about Williams's work are 'not so much asked *of* the text, as asked *about* it' (*PHD*, p. 165).

It is also worth noting that given my restricted focus there are various aspects of Williams's oeuvre that I do not discuss in much, or any, sustained manner. For example, I do not address his work on personal identity or his book on Descartes, and do not offer a sustained engagement with his work on epistemology and metaphysics. Furthermore,

⁴⁰ This should not be taken to imply that Williams was unconcerned with the question of whether or not his thought, as a whole, was starkly contradictory. He acknowledges that 'it is a reasonable demand that what one believes in one area of philosophy should make sense in terms of what one believes elsewhere. One's philosophical beliefs, or approaches, or arguments should hang together (like conspirators, perhaps)'. However, he notes that 'this demand falls a long way short of the unity promised by a philosophical system': Bernard Williams, 'Replies', in J.E.J. Altham and Ross Harrison, eds. *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.186.

⁴¹ See the Preface to Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London, Routledge, 2005 [1978]), pp. xiii–xiv.

although I offer a quite broad account of the central aspects and themes of his work in ethics in Chapter One, I am not interested in defending his positions in ethics from his critics in any straightforward sense (although I am sympathetic to his positions). Rather, I am concerned with showing how his political realism relates to, and draws inspiration from, the largely deflationary approach to modern moral philosophy that he endorses: which is to say, appropriately for a work concerned with the idea of political realism, in this thesis politics comes first.

A thoroughgoing critical assessment of Williams's political thought is lacking in both the secondary literature on Williams himself and the contemporary debates about realism in political theory. While Mark Jenkins notes in the only monograph-length treatment of Williams, that his political work is 'undoubtedly important', he admits that his book does 'not take account of it'.⁴² Likewise, none of the contributions in any of the four edited collections devoted to Williams engage with his late political work in any sustained manner. In terms of the current literature on realism in political theory, while some papers on Williams have been published they have tended to either be purely expository⁴³ or focus tightly on a specific set of issues related to Williams's conception of legitimacy (and contain some interpretative errors and unconvincing critiques).⁴⁴ There is consequently a gap in the literature for a sustained exposition and analysis of Williams's political thought which explains how his political realism relates to, and draws inspiration from, his critique

⁴² Mark Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, p. 6.

⁴³ Richard Flathman, 'In and Out of the Ethical: The Realist Liberalism of Bernard Williams', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2010), pp. 77 - 98; Katrina Forrester, 'Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2012), pp. 247 - 272; Elizabeth Frazer, 'What's Real in Political Philosophy?', *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2010), pp. 490 - 507; Susan Mendus, 'Making Sense of our Political Lives', *Political Studies Review*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2007), pp. 365 - 376.

⁴⁴ Alex Bavister-Gould, 'Bernard Williams: Political Realism and the Limits of Legitimacy', *European Journal of Philosophy*, [forthcoming]; Matt Sleat, 'Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2010), pp. 485 - 503.

of morality, and which, in so doing, makes a contribution to the current debate about the ideal of realism in political philosophy.

3. The Argument of the Thesis

In this thesis I defend Williams's fundamental claim that the central questions of political morality arise within politics and argue that, accordingly, and contrary to the position implicit in much contemporary political philosophy, political theory should not in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics. I claim that although Williams's critique of contemporary political theory is compromised somewhat by his falsely-held belief that all contemporary political philosophers conventionally endorse a monolithic form of moralism, he convincingly shows that political theory should begin with an understanding of the distinctive character of politics as this enables us to understand the goods that are internal to it. In this regard, I contend that Williams's realism is best read as an attempt to make ethical sense of politics, and as an attempt to explain how we can continue to affirm a kind of liberalism without recourse to the discredited conceptions of 'morality' that he insists we must jettison. Hence, I argue that his political essays are an important example of his late philosophical concern of thinking about how certain things that we value can be 'something, despite their failures of self-understanding' (*SN*, p. 11). To this end, I argue that by developing the insights of Williams's late work we can articulate a defence of liberalism that has marked advantages over the 'high liberalism' defended by most contemporary liberal theorists. This shows the distinctiveness of Williams's contribution to contemporary debates about realism in political theory as most of the realist thinkers with whom he is grouped endorse a form of realism in order to impugn liberalism.

In Chapter One I offer a critical overview of Williams's work in ethics from his earliest papers on ethical consistency to his posthumously published essays on how we ought to understand philosophy as a 'humanistic discipline'. This serves two purposes. First, it helps us to understand the philosophical underpinnings of his rejection of 'morality', which is imperative as his political thought is premised on the idea that political philosophy cannot simply be a matter of applying 'morality' to politics. Second, despite Williams's aversion to philosophical system-building I argue that we can uncover a certain unity of purpose in his work and, from it, certain commitments as to how we should do philosophy. In particular, I show that toward the end of his life Williams was interested in seeing how we can continue to confidently use and employ various of our commitments without the illusory underpinnings of 'morality'. I conclude by arguing that his political thought should be read in terms of such commitments, and that this makes complaints about the negativity of Williams's project, if meant pejoratively, inappropriate.

In Chapter Two I move on to Williams's political realism by focusing on his conception of legitimacy. I argue that Williams articulates a coherent internal standard of political evaluation which gives us reason to hold that political theory should begin with an understanding of the distinctive character of politics as this enables us to understand the goods that are internal to it. I defend Williams's fundamental claim that the central questions of political morality arise within politics and show why political theory accordingly should not in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics. I then defend his conception of legitimacy from a variety of criticisms that have been articulated in the secondary literature. I focus on four significant lines of complaint and show that they all trade on a series of misinterpretations of Williams's position which render them untenable. To this end, I defend Williams's

characterisation of the ‘basic legitimation demand’ and its centrality to political theory, and conclude that political theorists who are uneasy with the moralism of much contemporary political theory have reason to re-evaluate the possibility of developing an appropriately ‘political’ political theory on Williamsian lines.

However in Chapter Three I argue that in spite of the attractions of Williams’s arguments about the centrality of a realist understanding of legitimacy to political theory, his political realism and the kind of political ethics pursued by some contemporary political philosophers are conceptually closer, and their relation more complicated, than is conceded by many of the realist critics of post-Rawlsian political philosophy. I distinguish between contemporary political philosophers who adopt what I call ‘ethics-first’ approaches and those who pursue a ‘political ethics’, and argue that Williams’s realism is closer to the work of political ethicists than he and his fellow realists acknowledge because political ethicists do not apply an antecedent morality to politics in the way he objects to when criticising the dominant moralism of contemporary political thought. With this in mind, I question the extent to which his *oeuvre* gives us reason to reject the work of political ethicists (like the later Rawls) on other grounds. To do so, I focus on his warnings about wishful thinking, his claim that political moralism ignores the platitudes of politics, and his reminders about the limitations of the role that theory can play in politics. I argue that while these aspects of his thought articulate various qualifications and correctives there are greater similarities between his realism and a certain kind of political ethics than most realists have hitherto noted when they claim that contemporary normative political theorists conventionally endorse a monolithic kind of moralism.

In the Appendix to Chapter Three, I move on to assess an argument that is widely deemed to have significant implications for the issue of realism in political philosophy: G.A. Cohen’s claim that facts do not constrain the truths of political philosophy. Although

Cohen's work was written with Rawlsian constructivism in mind it is relevant to the realist critique because if Cohen is right it is tempting to think that any criticism of contemporary political philosophy on grounds of *unrealism* is misplaced. However, I argue that Cohen does not give us reason to think that the ultimate principles of political philosophy can be uncovered absent the sort of consideration of the platitudes of politics that political realists, like Williams, urge political philosophers to take seriously.

In Chapter Four I focus on Williams's papers on liberty because they offer an illuminating indication of how we can go about the task of *making sense* of the political situation in which we find ourselves as realists. These papers bolster his claim that political theorists must accept the disanalogy that exists between some of the forms of moral enquiry that the political moralists favour, which typically oppose the idea that political philosophy should be *impure* in the way Williams outlines. In light of Williams's argument in these papers I argue that we can extract a constraint to which we must attend when we construct political values, which I dub the 'realism constraint'. I then defend Williams's understanding of this constraint from a variety of criticisms that contemporary political moralists are likely to make against it. Finally, I spell out the implications that Williams's arguments have for our understanding of the demands of democratic co-existence and our reflexive understanding of the role of political argument in democratic settings.

In the final two chapters of this thesis I turn to Williams's endorsement of liberalism. As I have said, in contrast to many of the other theorists who are classed as 'new realists' and whose realism functions as part of a trenchant critique of liberalism, I argue that Williams's late political essays can profitably be read as being guided by the concern to offer a philosophically plausible interpretation and defence of liberalism that avoids the mistakes of political moralism. In Chapter Five, I show that despite his attack of the idea of a universal grounding of our ethical and political practices, Williams thinks that

we can commit to various values, like truthfulness and liberalism, because certain commitments of ours need not rely on a set of illusory philosophical claims.

In Chapter Six, I show how this enables Williams to offer a defence of liberalism that, although ‘offensive to pure Platonic or Kantian reason’⁴⁵ (to borrow a phrase that he uses to describe his defence of truthfulness), is congruent with his adoption of a Nietzschean pessimism of strength. I then defend the liberalism of fear as a cogent first-order approach to liberalism by rebuffing some of the more commonplace criticisms levelled against it.

Accordingly I argue that Williams’s ‘realism’ should be interpreted as a dual commitment to both unmasking the ways in which much contemporary moral and political thought often falls prey to the dangers of wishful thinking, and to considering how we can make sense of ethics and politics without succumbing to these temptations of inappropriate and unhelpful idealisation. In showing why this is so, and in offering the first systematic critical examination of Williams’s political thought and explaining its importance for the realist counter-movement by engaging with his critics, I hope to have made a novel contribution to current debate about the ideal of realism in political thought, and to have illustrated why Williams is a significant voice in contemporary political theory.

⁴⁵ I take this phrase from the transcript of the seminar with Williams that took place in Leuven in 1998. See Bernard Williams, ‘Seminar with Bernard Williams’, *Ethical Perspectives*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1999), p. 258.

Chapter One

The Mistakes of Moralism in Ethics

*This workshop where ideals are fabricated – it seems to me just to stink of lies.*¹

Underlying Williams's claims about the failings of political moralism is his sophisticated critique of 'morality', the unquestioned framework with which most contemporary philosophers approach the study of ethics. Morality 'embraces a range of ethical outlooks' and is 'so much with us that moral philosophy spends much of its time discussing differences between those outlooks, rather than the difference between them and everything else' (*ELP*, p. 174). Williams refers to morality, echoing the euphemism for slavery in the antebellum American south, as the 'peculiar institution' because it distorts ethical life in various pernicious ways. In this chapter I chart the genesis of Williams's rejection of the morality system, which culminates in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, before offering a characterisation of his later work which probes what a more naturalistic, sceptical, and historically inclined approach to ethics can achieve. This later work can profitably be seen as Williams's take on a Nietzschean 'pessimism of strength' which sketches what a 'reflective and nonmythical understanding of our ethical practices' (*ELP*, p. 194) would look like.²

This chapter consequently fulfils two aims. First, by providing an exposition of Williams's work in ethics we can better comprehend the underlying commitments that motivate his political thought. Second, a thorough exegesis of Williams's work in ethics enables us to rebut the suggestion that he authored a wholly deflationary and negative

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 28.

² See Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, pp. 183–91.

corpus that has failed to leave much of a legacy for contemporary ethics. In fact, my reconstruction of Williams's work shows that despite its deliberately unsystematic character, it was motivated by a set of underlying concerns and had a certain unified purpose, which makes complaints about negativity, if meant pejoratively, inappropriate.

The chapter is split into three sections that, very roughly, focus on what we might call the early, middle and late periods of Williams's work. Thus, for the most part the first section focuses on the work that preceded *ELP*, the second section focuses on the *ELP* itself, and the third looks at the work that followed it. Although these divisions are artificial, and there is an inevitable amount of cross-pollination, they seem to capture something of significance. And in any case, any other way of dividing the material in a single chapter would be just as problematic because Williams's work is so deep and multifaceted. To this end, I hope that my favoured approach has distorted Williams's work as little as possible.

1. The Early Period

I begin with Williams's first notable contributions to ethics, his papers on ethical consistency, in which he argues that moral theories that deny the possibility of genuine inconsistency in ethical beliefs, and its practical manifestation as agent-regret, cannot make sense of our ethical lives. Williams highlights two forms of moral conflict that are often experienced by agents: 'One is that in which it seems that I ought to do each of two things, but I cannot do both. The other is that in which something which (it seems) I ought to do in respect of certain of its features also has other features in respect of which (it seems) I ought not to do it' (*PS*, p. 171). He holds that in these cases, 'If I eventually choose for one side of the conflict rather than the other, this is a possible ground of regret ... [as] these states of mind do not depend ... on whether I am convinced that in the

choice I made I acted for the best; I can be convinced of this, yet have these regrets, ineffectual or possibly effective, for what I did not do' (*PS*, p. 172). As such regrets are widely experienced Williams contends that it is a 'fundamental criticism of many ethical theories that their accounts of moral conflict and its resolution do not do justice to the facts of regret and related considerations: basically because they eliminate from the scene the ought that is not acted upon' (*PS*, p. 175).

Utilitarianism is structurally engineered to neglect the phenomenon of agent-regret because its insistence that states of affairs are the sole criteria of moral worth means it is incapable of making sense of our feeling that although a course of action is the best thing to do on the whole, 'doing it involves doing something wrong' (*M*, p. 85). There is also a sense in which Kantians must label agent-regret irrational if an action passes the categorical imperative. Both theories consequently imply 'that these reactions were a bad thing, which a fully admirable moral agent (taken, presumably to be rational) would not display'. Williams finds this troubling because 'the notion of an admirable moral agent cannot be all that remote from that of a decent human being, and decent human beings are disposed in some situations of conflict to have the sort of reactions I am talking about' (*PS*, p. 173).

This early work on ethical consistency is important because it shows how Williams considers agent-regret a recurring fact of ethical life which any realistic understanding of moral psychology must acknowledge rather than jettison in the pursuit of theoretical simplicity. In this sense, it exemplifies his belief that 'one's initial responsibilities should be to moral phenomena, as grasped in one's own experience and imagination' (*M*, p. xxi). Two themes go on to play a central role in Williams's thought from this point. First, that moral philosophy needs to make sense of moral psychology as it is, rather than moralised psychology imposed by moralists to allow their moralities to succeed. Second, that an

honest examination of ethics is going to reveal it to be more untidy than many moral theories acknowledge, which leads to the corollary claim that theoretical elegance may stop philosophy from making sense to agents who experience ethical life and who often recognise that ‘moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without remainder’ (*PS*, p. 179).

Excluding his short introductory book *Morality*, which is in many ways best seen as a precursor to *ELP* (and which I leave aside for that reason), Williams’s next major contribution was his famous critique of utilitarianism. Williams’s critique touches on many themes but his examples of George and Jim are especially evocative. George is offered a job in a laboratory that researches chemical and biological warfare; he says he cannot accept the job for principled reasons, but is asked to reconsider when it is pointed out that he needs the money to support his family and that if he declines the job it will go to a contemporary of his not inhibited by his scruples. Jim, during a botanical expedition to South America, comes across a row of twenty Indians awaiting execution. The captain in charge of the imminent executions, Pedro, offers Jim the guest’s privilege of killing of one of the Indians, which will result in the others being saved – but if he declines all twenty will be shot.

The utilitarian would urge George to take the job and Jim to kill the Indian. Although Williams disputes the answer in George’s case, if not Jim’s, numerous commentators have failed to note that this is not the main point of these examples.³ Rather, Williams employs these hypothetical cases to question if utilitarianism can make sense of the ‘sorts of considerations [which] come into finding the answer’ (*U*, p. 99). He claims that utilitarianism looks at these scenarios in an impoverished manner because it ‘attaches value ultimately to states of affairs’ (*U*, p. 95) which fail to grasp the complexity

³ He remarks that ‘if the stories of George and Jim have a resonance, it is not the sound of a principle being denied by an intuition’: ‘Replies’, p. 211.

and nuance of these situations. He develops two points when making this charge: first, he attacks utilitarianism's commitment to a doctrine of negative responsibility; and second, he argues that utilitarianism cannot recognise the importance of integrity.

The negative responsibility charge examines how utilitarian sums are produced. Williams alleges that utilitarianism's end-state impartiality entails that 'all causal connexions are on the same level, and it makes no difference ... whether the causation of a given state of affairs lies through another agent or not' (U, p. 94). It follows that 'if I am ever responsible for anything, then I must be just as much responsible for things that I allow or fail to prevent, as I am for things that I myself, in the more everyday restrictive sense, bring about' (U, p. 95). Yet as Williams's examples show, we do feel that this ignores something of importance, because 'each of us is specially responsible for what *he* does, rather than for what other people do' (U, p. 99). To this end, Williams claims that utilitarianism encourages us to abstract away from the identity of agents to such an extent that they becomes nothing more than 'a locus of causal intervention in the world' (U, p. 96). It is this dehumanising notion of moral agency which he maligns. He claims that utilitarianism encourages us to view agents as nothing more than:

a channel between the input of everyone's projects, including his own, and an output of optimific decision; but this is to neglect the extent to which *his* projects and *his* decisions have to be seen as the actions and decisions which flow from the projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified. It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity. (U, pp. 116–17)

George's case best captures this point. By encouraging George to drop his principled opposition to chemical warfare, utilitarianism considers any personal projects and/or commitments dispensable. Yet as Williams claims in 'Persons, Character and Morality', such projects confer meaning on our lives and are, to a certain degree, 'the condition of my existence, in the sense that unless I am propelled forward by the conatus of desire,

project, and interest, it is unclear why I should go on at all' (*ML*, p. 12).⁴ By impelling us to abandon such projects if they are not consequentially optimific utilitarianism is incapable of grasping this feature of ethical life and cannot make sense of what it is to be a person with a specific character.⁵

Jim's case raises a different point. While we may agree that Jim should kill one to save nineteen we still understand this as a cause of regret, but utilitarianism cannot make sense of this for the reasons we encountered when discussing ethical consistency; according to the utilitarian Jim has done the right thing so it is irrational of him to regret his action (*U*, p. 101). Williams notes that the utilitarian may respond by saying that it will turn out to be for the best if people have these sorts of reactions. However, in *ELP* he explains that we should reject indirect utilitarianism because it can only value certain dispositions instrumentally, even though from the inside those dispositions will 'do the job the theory has given them only if the agent does not see his character purely instrumentally' (*ELP*, p. 108). Historically, utilitarians tried to avoid this difficulty by positing two classes of people, those theorists who could handle the utilitarian justification and the *hoi polloi* who act in light of their unreflective dispositions. Williams pejoratively terms this approach 'Government House Utilitarianism' and claims that its indifference to social transparency renders it unattractive. Because of this, certain philosophers make the distinction intrapersonally, but Williams finds this separation problematic because 'any actual process of theorizing of that sort would have to be part of life ... [and] one cannot

⁴ Williams holds that in general one does not have one separable project which plays this role but a nexus of projects, and to lose all of them would remove meaning: *ML*, p. 13.

⁵ In 'Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence', *ML*, pp. 40–53, Williams denies that such project talk excuses self-indulgence because this allegation presumes that the agent in question must be motivated by integrity, and this ignores the fact that 'integrity is not a virtue at all ... while it is an admirable human property, it is not related to motivation as the virtues are. It is not a disposition which itself yields motivations ... it is rather that one who displays integrity acts from those dispositions and motives which are most deeply his, and has also the virtues that enable him to do that': *ML*, p. 49.

separate, except by an imposed and illusory dissociation, the theorist in oneself from the self whose dispositions are being theorized' (*ELP*, p. 110).

In one of the most significant passages in his corpus Williams declares that the independent perspective promised by the cool hour is a misleading chimera that philosophy should discard:

Difficulties arise from any attempt to see philosophical reflection in ethics as a jump to the universalistic standpoint in search of a justification, which is then brought back to everyday practice ... any such picture makes in some degree a platonic assumption that the reflective agent as theorist can make himself independent from the life and character he is examining. The belief that you can look critically at all your dispositions from the outside, from the point of view of the universe, assumes that you could understand your own and other peoples dispositions from that point of view without tacitly taking for granted a picture of the world more locally familiar than any that would be available from there; but neither the psychology nor the history of ethical reflection gives much reason to believe that the theoretical reasonings of the cool hour can do without a sense of the moral shape of the world, of the kind given in the everyday dispositions. (*ELP*, p. 110)

This is one motivation for his rejection of the suggestion that we should aim to evaluate moral life *sub specie aeternitatis* (of which more shortly). This focus on the embeddedness of ethical life, dispositions, the importance of character, and the resulting hostility to the universal standpoint are all related to Williams's belief that the aim of ethical reflection is practical: 'to help us construct a world that will be our world, one in which we have a social, cultural, and social life' (*ELP*, p. 111). If we are to make good on this, we must pay attention to the local idiosyncrasies and perspectival dispositions of those people who look to ethics for help. This is not to be maligned and, as we will see, Williams thinks that it is only the pretensions of the 'morality system' which encourage us to see this as a shortcoming.

I now turn to Williams's sceptical probing of a key commitment of the morality system, the idea that 'moral value is immune to luck' (*ML*, p. 20). Williams denies that moral value can escape luck, and holds that conceding that judgements of moral value are influenced by contingency has serious implications for our understanding of ethics. Two

examples explore the role of luck in moral assessment: a pseudo-Gauguin debating whether or not to leave his family to pursue his art, and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. While the Gauguin example implicitly shows that while we might wish for a world in which moral demands are not always taken as trumping all others, this is not Williams's main point. Rather, because luck will play a role in any future artistic success of Gauguin's it must play some role in the assessment of the decision itself. As Williams puts it, 'the project in the interests of which the decision was made is one with which the agent is identified in such a way that if it succeeds, his stand-point of assessment will be from a life that derives an important part of its significance for him from that very fact'. On the other hand, 'if he fails, his standpoint will be one for whom the ground project of the decision has proved worthless ... so if he fails, his most basic regrets will attach to his decision, and if he succeeds, they cannot. That is the sense in which his decision can be justified, for him, by success' (*ML*, pp. 35–6). Thus, Gauguin cannot act in way that is said to be central to most conceptions of rationality and moral justification, i.e. to 'apply the justifying considerations at the time of choice and in advance of knowing whether one was right' (*ML*, p. 24). The point is that if the rationality of practical deliberation is not simply a matter of weighing up a variety of factors from the outset but depends on events occurring afterward, it must be subject to luck.

Williams's analysis of Anna Karenina reaffirms this point. As he reads it, circumstances conspire both in regards to Anna's social situation and her state of mind which ensures that her relationship with Vronsky has 'to carry too much weight'. Her eventual suicide relates to her regret about her past actions: 'what she did she now finds insupportable, because she could have been justified only by the life she hoped for, and those hopes were not just negated, but refuted, by what happened' (*ML*, p. 27). The failure of her project, which could not be foreseen, leads her to regret her past choices

because their failure destroys any chance of their vindication. Once again, Williams holds that this shows that determining the reprehensible nature of an action is not simply a matter of weighing various factors *ex ante*; a beautiful love-story or sordid affair may have the same antecedents and ‘it is an illusion to suppose that there had to be at the time of those episodes a particular kind of psychological event that occurred if things turned out one of these ways, and not if they turned out in another’ (*ML*, p. 45).⁶ Although various moral philosophers might be tempted to articulate a set of moral rules or principles in an attempt to accommodate these cases, Williams scoffs at the idea that any such rules could make sense.⁷ Moreover, he does not subscribe to the view, implicit in many contractualist models, that even if Gauguin is a success and can therefore retrospectively justify his decision, he must be able to justify himself to all others (*ML*, pp. 36–7).

Williams extends this point to make a general claim about moral agency by asking us to imagine a lorry driver who through no fault of his own runs over a child. He insists that it is right that he will feel differently to any spectator: ‘We feel sorry for the driver, but that sentiment co-exists with, indeed presupposes, that there is something special about his relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault’ (*ML*, p. 28). It is unclear that many moral theories can make sense of this because the driver’s actions do not relate to the voluntary or invoke a purified conception of blame. Thus, once again Williams questions the extent to which the rational Kantian agent would react to this situation in an admirable way: ‘it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind ... and it would be an insane

⁶ This plays into Williams’s discussion of *akrasia* in *Shame and Necessity* [*SN*], p. 45.

⁷ As he puts it, ‘what is reasonable expectation in this case? Should Gauguin consult professors of art?’: *ML*, p. 24.

concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would' (*ML*, p. 29).⁸ The moralistic conception of rationality that closely relates the idea of regret to conceptions of voluntariness is therefore in thrall to the falsehood that we might 'if we conducted ourselves clear-headedly enough, entirely detach ourselves from the unintentional aspects of our actions ... yet still retain our identity and character as agents'. However:

One's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not, in such a way that reflection can only go in one of two directions: either in the direction of saying that responsible agency is a fairly superficial concept, which has limited use in harmonizing what happens, or else that it is not a superficial concept, but that it cannot be ultimately purified – if one attaches importance to the sense of what one is in terms of what one has done and what in the world one is responsible for, one must accept much that makes its claim on that sense solely in virtue of its being actual. (*ML*, pp. 29–30)

For this reason, the solace Kantian justice offers to an unfair world is unsustainable because its pursuit of purified blame comes at the cost of a coherent conception of agency. This fatally affects the morality system because it is 'formed, in part, by the attempt to shape the demands of the ethical to the conceptions of agency. In particular, its notion of guilt, of blame directed to oneself, is the notion of the rational self-criticism of a deliberator', and this supports the 'powerful feeling that morality just is the ethical in rational form'. But this conception cannot be sustained 'because it is using what is in any case an inadequate idea of agency which ... effectively limits one's involvement in what one does to that of an ex ante rational decider' (*MSH*, p. 246). The overall message is clear: regret, remorse, shame, guilt and so on can be independent of the rationality applied in decision-making.⁹ *Moral Luck* thus plays a central role in Williams's attack on Kant's claim that practical reason and morality 'arrive at the same place' (*ELP*, p. 201, n.1).

⁸ Oedipus' case is seen in a similar light, as Williams remarks that it shows that 'in the story of one's life there is an authority exercised by what one has done and not merely by what one has intentionally done': *SN*, p. 69.

⁹ Catherine Wilson, 'Williams', in Christopher Belshaw and Gary Kemp, eds. *12 Modern Philosophers* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 88.

Internal and External Reasons pushes this analysis of rationality in a more Humean direction. Williams notes that sentences such as ‘A has reason to *x*’ are liable to be interpreted in two ways. On the first *internal* reading, ‘A has some motive which will be served of further by his *x*-ing’, so that if this turns out not to be so the sentence is false. On the *external* reading, ‘there is no such condition, and the reason-sentence will not be falsified by the absence of appropriate motive’ (*ML*, p. 101). Williams’s basic thesis is that it only makes sense to say A has reason to *x* ‘if he could reach the conclusion to do *x* by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has’. Conversely, the ‘externalist view is that this is not a necessary condition, and that it can be true of A that he has a reason to do *x* even though A has no motivation in his motivational set that could either directly or through some extension by sound deliberation, lead him to *x*’ (*MSH*, p. 35).¹⁰ This has significant implications for philosophical views that hold that all agents have *reasons* to act in particular way. For example, on the internal reading it does not make sense to tell a Premier League footballer that he has a reason to stop sleeping with prostitutes if he genuinely does not care about his wife’s feelings, or consider fidelity a virtue, or worry about exploiting others, etc. However, Williams avoids Hume’s narrow means-end instrumentalism by referring to an agent’s ‘subjective motivational set’. This enables him to avoid saying that A has a reason to drink petrol if he mistakenly thinks it to be Gin because he insists that ‘agents have a general interest in being rationally correctly informed’ (*MSH*, p. 37). Moreover, we should avoid considering motivational sets ‘statically given’ and include within them ‘dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties and various projects ... embodying commitments of the agent’ (*ML*, p. 105). To this end, we can see that the example of the Premier League footballer is unrealistic because he might (at least) have some other-regarding motivations

¹⁰ This is a conceptual point; Williams insists that the external reasons thesis cannot explain action.

– he might in fact love his wife but just not want to get caught – or, even in egoistic terms, care about not getting negative press or being abused by opposition fans the next time his team plays an away match. The artificiality of the example works to Williams’s advantage because it shows the improbability of the moralist presumption that without objective moral reasons no resources for guiding action exist. The vast majority of the time there will be plenty of resources for saying that A has a reason to do *x* when a liberal understanding of his subjective motivational set is employed; ‘practical reasoning is a heuristic process, and an imaginative one, and there are no fixed boundaries on the continuum from rational thought to inspiration and conversion’ (*ML*, p. 101). Yet moralists who seek various imperatives allegedly applicable to all moral agents will nonetheless consider this a bitter pill precisely because it holds that such demands must be constrained by whatever motivations an agent happens to have.¹¹

In making this argument Williams, once again, expresses his belief that ethics must work within the bounds of the contingently variable particulars of moral psychology and practical reason rather than create its own models which further its antecedent ethical aims. He thus rules out labelling people ‘irrational’ for failing to acknowledge a set of requirements the external theorist claims are rationally binding. There are still many things we can say about people who lack appropriate items in their subjective motivational set, such as calling the man who really does not care about his wife ‘ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal’ (*MSH*, p. 39), but we cannot say that he

¹¹ There has been dispute concerning the extent to which the internal reasons thesis excludes Kantian approaches. Christine Korsgaard forcefully argues that Kant is not an externalist because if ‘we can be motivated by considerations stemming from pure practical reason, then that capacity belongs to the subjective motivational sets of every rational being’: ‘Skepticism about Practical Reason’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 83, no. 1 (1986), p. 21. Williams concedes as much in his ‘replies’ in Altham and Harrison, eds. *World, Mind and Ethics*, p. 220, n. 3, and *MSH*, p. 175. However, he nonetheless denies that universally binding practical reasons exist (*ELP*, pp. 54–70) and stresses that such views must be ‘argued’ (*PHD*, p. 111). Regardless of the Kantian dispute, Williams rules out intuitionist approaches that presume ‘you can directly intuit the demands of morality ... [and] write these demands into every agent’s deliberative route by an intuitive fiat’: John Skorupski, ‘Internal Reasons and the Scope of Blame’, in Alan Thomas, ed. *Bernard Williams* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 84.

has a *reason* to be nicer. This has implications for the phenomenon of blame, ‘the characteristic reaction of the morality system’ (*ELP*, p. 177). As Skorupski notes, one of the things the external reasons theorist wants to do is to pull all people into the domain of morality so morality is universally binding, as this is the method by which punishment is legitimised.¹² However, unlike Kant who, via a transcendental argument, aims to make the capacity for moral agency categorical by insulating it from all empirical characteristics, Williams effectively argues that some people may not have *reasons* to be moral. If we acknowledge that the capacity to respond to moral reasons is not equally shared then the moralistic use of blame must change, because ‘morality’ demands a ‘voluntariness that will be total and will cut through character and psychological or social determination, and allocate blame and responsibility on the ultimately fair basis of the agent’s own contribution’. If all agents do not share reasons to be moral ‘it is’, Williams insists, ‘an illusion to suppose that this demand can be met’ (*ELP*, p. 194).

2. The Middle Period

After an introductory (broadly speaking) chapter, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* moves on to discuss the possibility of offering a justification for ethical life. Williams thinks that there are many things that we can say to people already within ethical life to explain why the amoralist is not an admirable figure, but he is sceptical that there might be a justification that can be given to the amoralist that he will accept on pain of rational inconsistency. However, Williams notes that there are two approaches in the history of

¹² As Skorupski notes, punishment relates to ‘moral blameworthiness, and blameworthiness relates to reasons: the moral notion of punishment presupposes moral transgression and thus presupposes ... that moral reasons are reasons for them’: ‘Internal Reasons and the Scope of Blame’, p. 100. Or, as Williams puts it, ‘someone who had a reason to do the right thing but did not do it’: *MSH*, p. 42. On this score, Williams claims that he finds it ‘hard to resist Nietzsche’s plausible interpretation, that the desire of philosophy to find a way in which morality can be guaranteed to get beyond merely *designating* the vile and recalcitrant, to transfixing them or getting them inside, is only a fantasy of *ressentiment*, a magical project to make a wish and its words into a coercive power’: ‘Replies’, p. 216.

ethics – that of Aristotle and that of Kant – which try to provide such a justification for the ethical life ‘merely because we are rational agents’. This is the search for an ‘Archimedean Point’, ‘to which even the amoralist or skeptic is committed’ (*ELP*, p. 29).

The project of finding such a point in considerations of human nature is, to Williams, ‘a comprehensible project’ which ‘represents the only intelligible form of ethical objectivity at the reflective level’ (*ELP*, p. 153). But he makes clear that Aristotle’s attempt to do so is unlikely to succeed, as it is unlikely that ‘an account of human nature ... will adequately determine one kind of ethical life against others’ (*ELP*, p. 52). By harking back to his claim that modern life is ‘pervasively reflective [with] ... a high degree of self-consciousness’ (*ELP*, p. 2), Williams denies that a specific or concrete kind of ‘ethical, cultural, and indeed political life’ can be seen as a ‘harmonious culmination of human potentialities, recoverable from an absolute understanding of nature’, because any agent’s understanding of ethical life is ‘only one of many that is compatible with human nature’ (*ELP*, p. 52). This worry did not threaten Aristotle because of his teleological commitments, but Williams insists that if we ask, ‘granted human beings need to share a social world, is there anything to be known about their needs and basic motivations that will show us what this world would best be?’, the most we can hope to uncover is various *negative* claims about which constraints may be considered ethically objective as (*ELP*, p. 152) ‘any ethical life is going to contain restraints on such things as killing, injury, and lying’ yet ‘those restraints can take very different forms’.) For this reason he concludes that the Aristotelian search for an Archimedean point fails.¹³

The Kantian alternative fares no better because Williams argues that it wrongly conflates theoretical deliberation and practical reasoning. While it is true that when we think factually about the world we can and should adopt a standpoint outside of our

¹³ For more on Williams’s discussion of Aristotle see Paul Sagar, ‘Minding the Gap: Bernard Williams and David Hume on Living an Ethical Life’, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (forthcoming).

desires, Kant's account 'fails to apply to practical deliberation, and to impose a necessary impartiality on it, because practical deliberation is first-personal, radically so, and involves an *I* that must be more intimately the *I* of my desires' (*ELP*, p. 67). Williams's point is that when we are deliberating about how to act, reason itself does not demand that I ask questions about the world rather than about me.¹⁴ Therefore, contra Kant, 'the *I* of the reflective practical deliberation is not required to take the result of anyone else's properly conducted deliberation as a datum, nor be committed from the outset to a harmony of everyone's deliberations – that is to say, to making a rule from the standpoint of equality' (*ELP*, p. 69). If rationality itself does not demand that I take up this perspective, we should accept that 'the *I* that stands back in rational reflection from my desires is still the *I* that has those desires and will, empirically and concretely, act; and it is not, simply by standing back in reflection, converted into a being whose fundamental interests lies in the harmony of all interests. It cannot, just by taking this step, acquire the motivations of justice' (*ELP*, p. 69). For these reasons Williams denies that the search for an Archimedean Point succeeds.

Throughout *ELP* Williams also criticises the suggestion that ethical reflection should issue a 'theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which ... either implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles or else implies that there cannot be such a test' (*ELP*, p. 72).¹⁵ Various ideas motivate this complaint. For one thing, given that Williams considers the main responsibility to be that of making sense of moral phenomena as they occur in lived ethical experience, he thinks that the fact that we often experience situations in which we are confronted by multiple

¹⁴ Thus Williams denies that the key question is 'What rules must I make?' because we do not have to see ourselves as being in the business of prescribing rules at all (*ELP*, pp. 62–3). Unless you were already disposed to take an impartial view, 'you will see as highly unreasonable the proposal that the way to decide what to do is to ask what rules you would make if you had none of your actual advantages' (*ELP*, p. 64).

¹⁵ See also *M*, pp. xx, xxi, and *ML*, pp. ix, x.

sources of value should lead us to endorse a kind of pluralist intuitionism.¹⁶ In ‘Conflicts of Values’ he writes that the claim that values are incommensurable can be read as making four important points:

- (1) There is no one currency in terms of which each conflict of values can be resolved.
- (2) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value, independent of any of the conflicting values, which can be appealed to in order to resolve that conflict.
- (3) It is not true that for each conflict of values, there is some value which can be appealed to (independent or not) in order rationally to resolve that conflict.
- (4) No conflict of values can ever be rationally resolved. (ML, p. 77)

Williams insists that of these only (4) is false because certain considerations can be brought to bear on particular occasions when values conflict, even if there is no one way to resolve all conflicts of value. He thus sees no reason to reject plural intuitionism, ‘on the ground of the incompleteness of orderings that it might yield’.¹⁷ If I am in a situation where competing values make claims on me, Williams questions why theoretical tidiness or simplicity are supposed to have any weight at all,¹⁸ and insists that the pursuit of ethical theory is a prejudice requiring justification which ‘a good deal of moral philosophy engages [in] unblinkingly ... for no obvious reason except that it has been going on for a long time’ (ELP, p. 17). For Williams, all ethical theories fail because they could never succeed in ‘answering the question, by what right does it legislate the moral sentiments?’ (ML, p. x).

Moreover, given that every moral theory is going to bottom out with some unjustified reason-giving practice or principle, Williams asks why ‘we should not end up with several’, because ‘once we see that it is impossible to rationalize everything, the

¹⁶ He sees Berlin’s analysis of incommensurability as capturing a truth about value ‘revealed in the only way in which it could be revealed, historically ... a truthfulness to that historical experience of human nature’: Bernard Williams, ‘Introduction’, in Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (London, Pimlico, 1978), p. xviii.

¹⁷ Bernard Williams and Amartya Sen, ‘Introduction’, in *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 18. Williams acknowledges that the ethical theorist may say that her account is ‘much more elegant, or it’s simpler, or with fewer principles or it has a certain rational structure. I say: so what? I’m not living my life in order to exemplify a mathematical theory. Why are those properties of any interest whatsoever?’: ‘Seminar with Bernard Williams’, p. 245.

¹⁸ Williams, ‘Introduction’, *Concepts and Categories*, p. xvii.

project of rationalizing as much as possible need not be understood as doing the next best thing' (*ELP*, p. 113). He raises the example of the statement 'You can't kill that child', and insists that ethical theory often cannot make sense of the fact that this assertion 'is more convincing as a reason than any reason which might be advanced for it being a reason' (*ML*, p. 81). Certain reactions or commitments simply strike us as more compelling than any edicts or rationalisations that theory will offer to either explain or condemn them. This relates to the famous charge that ethical theory neglects the fact that 'some situations lie beyond justifications' (*ML*, p. 18), and mistakenly offers *one thought too many*.¹⁹ Williams invokes the example of a sinking ship where a man has a choice to make about which person he can save, one of whom is his wife. While the utilitarian may invoke the maximising consequences of a preference for spouses, and the Kantian would claim that this action passes the categorical imperative, Williams insists that this takes reflection too far because 'it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife' (*ML*, p. 18).

The main problem with the theorisation of ethics is that it is likely to lead us to forget that 'the only serious enterprise is living' (*ELP*, p. 117). To counter this Williams advocates a focus on the reality and nuance of ethical situations, and the competing claims that they may make on us (*ELP*, p. 115). Although he endorses Aristotle's view of ethics as a set of internalised dispositions precisely because these dispositions consist of a complex and fractious historical deposit, shaped by a plethora of conflicting contingent developments, the chances of it containing a unified theoretical structure are limited

¹⁹ For a recent discussion see Susan Wolf, 'One Thought Too Many: Love, Morality, and the Ordering of Commitment', in Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, eds. *Value, Luck and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 71–94.

(*MSH*, p. 189). While this rules out constructing abstract moral theories in order to criticise existing practice, Williams insists such a historical recognition demonstrates that there will be ample grounds for immanent critique because these practices are unlikely to hang together coherently.

Unresolved conflict and recourse to intuition are inevitable in personal life, but Williams admits that this can (on occasion) be politically problematic – a conclusion congruent with his view that the morality system mistakenly politicises ethics and assumes the existence of a divine lawgiver. A modern liberal society faces these problems because its functions ‘are performed by public agencies and, if the society is relatively open, this requires that they are governed by an explicable order which allows those agencies to be answerable. In a public, large and impersonal forum, “intuition” will not serve, though it will serve (and nothing else could serve) in personal life’. Williams refers to these demands, rather cryptically, as ‘imperfect rationalisations’ (*ML*, p. 81), the idea being that in cases of genuine conflict some appeal to rationalisation will be necessary, but that such a move will still have to chime with the private sentiments of the citizens in question. This suggests that there is unlikely to be a theoretical resolution to these problems and we must instead exercise political and practical judgement. Further, Williams notes that ‘the public order, if it is to carry conviction, and also not flatten human experience, has to find ways in which it can be adequately related to private sentiment, which remains more intuitive and open to conflict than public rules can be’ (*ML*, p. 82). For this reason, one of the key tasks for social philosophy here is to seek equilibrium, not between intuition and theory as Rawls has it, but ‘one to be achieved in practice – between private and public’ (*ML*, p. 82). In sum, Williams claims that abstract moral theories are likely to ignore the fact that the aim of ethics is not that of constructing a set of elegant theoretical models but of

helping us to answer Socrates' question, 'How should I live?' Once we accept this, it is not obviously true that conflicting sentiments must be overcome.²⁰

This relates nicely to his distinction between thick and thin ethical concepts. Thick concepts, such as 'chastity', 'brutality' and 'cowardliness', express a union of fact and value (Williams refers to them as being world-guided and action-guiding: *ELP*, p. 129). For example, if in the nineteenth century an individual were identified as chaste, the identifiers would be making a factual claim about their sexual history while simultaneously condoning it. Due to the nature of thick concepts their evaluative aspect is capable of revision in terms of the factual circumstances, and to master their use we need to take up 'the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has its point' (*ELP*, p. 141). As Charles Guignon notes, 'this undercuts the picture, built into the theoretical model, of the self as a neutral spectator encountering a world of intrinsically meaningless objects'.²¹ Thin concepts, such as 'good', 'right' and 'wrong', must be understood differently. Williams insists that they cannot be said to report anything in the sense that thick concepts can, and are inadequate to provide any great substance to personal ethical experience (*IBWD*, p. 49). For this reason he holds that thin concepts are incapable of helping us *make sense of our lives*. But for various complicated reasons modern moral philosophy has become exclusively concerned with a few concepts, such as duty and obligation, which solely attempt to regulate interpersonal relations. Williams maligns this trend and states that ethical reflection should:

go in a direction opposite to that encouraged by ethical theory. Theory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize ... but critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical

²⁰ Williams considers his anti-theoretical position compatible with Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium. However because we do not consider all our conflicting intuitions capable of revision, he denies that reflective equilibrium will end with up an ambitious ethical theory, 'Seminar with Bernard Williams', p. 245.

²¹ Charles Guignon, 'Williams and the Phenomenological Tradition', in Daniel Calcutt, ed. *Reading Bernard Williams* (London, Routledge, 2009), p. 172.

material that, in the context of the reflective discussion, makes some sense and commands some loyalty. Of course that will take things for granted, but serious reflection must know that it will do that. The only serious enterprise is living, and we have to live after the reflection; moreover (though the distinction between theory and practice encourages us to forget it), we have to live during it as well. Theory typically uses the assumption that we probably have too many ethical ideas, some of which may well turn out to be mere prejudices. Our problem now is that we have not too many but too few, and we need to cherish as many as we can. (ELP, pp. 116–17)

This distinction between thick and thin concepts shapes his understanding of the possibility of ethical knowledge. He claims that (ELP, p. 135) ‘science has some chance of being more or less what it seems, a systematised account of how the world really is, while ethical thought has no chance of being everything that it seems’ because there is no ‘convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of ethical thought on ethical reality’ (ELP, p. 152) as there is no reason to think that convergence on a set of ethical beliefs can adequately be explained as generated by the fact that they are objective truths. The difference between science and ethics here relates to the question of *how* a convergence of opinion can be explained within them. The idea is (supposedly) ‘very simple’. As Williams sees it, ‘in a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence in an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are; in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope’. The distinction does not ‘turn’ on whether or not a convergence may occur. Rather, ‘the point of the contrast is that, even if this happens, it will not be correct to think it has come about because convergence has been guided by how things actually are, whereas convergence in the sciences might be explained in that way if it does happen (ELP, p. 136).

This requires some unpacking.²² Williams insists that there can be knowledge in ethics because thick concepts are world-guided. He creates a fiction, the ‘hypertraditional

²² Here I draw heavily on Adrian Moore’s reconstruction of Williams’s argument in the Introduction to *PHD*, pp. xvi–xvii.

society', where people have mastered these concepts, and can perceive the personal and social happenings to which the concepts apply. For example, members of the hypertraditional society can straightforwardly know that an individual is chaste because of the world-guided nature of thick concepts; the circumstances of their social world and shared internalised dispositions make the application capable of being a knowledge claim (of an anti-realist sort) because it can be true or false depending on the facts at hand. In this respect Williams holds that 'the question of whether there can be ethical knowledge is not the same as the question whether ethical outlooks can be objective' (*MSH*, p. 203). The knowledge available in this case will be local because it relates to the hypertraditional society's members living in the particular social setting in which the claims are made. However, this is merely one of many such settings, and any good reflective explanation for why people converge in their beliefs about a thick concept must include a social-scientific explanation of why they embrace the concept at all. As Moore notes, 'this explanation cannot itself invoke the [thick] concept ... because it must be from a vantage of reflection outside the social world in question. So it cannot conform to the schema "These people converge in their beliefs about x because they are suitably sensitive to truths about x "'.²³ Scientific convergence, on the other hand, can invoke the concepts at hand, because its discoveries can be sensitive to such explanations. We therefore have reason to believe that science converges on how things are 'because it can show how the perceptions are related to physical reality and how they give knowledge of that reality' (*ELP*, p. 150). The scientific approach can thus 'claim to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities' (*ELP*, p. 138).

Williams calls the resulting picture painted by science the *absolute conception of the world*, the idea being that this conception could be arrived at by any investigators, even if

²³ Moore in *PHD*, p. xvii.

they differed greatly from us (*ELP*, p. 139).²⁴ He insists that because of their enclosed character, ethical claims ‘could not do something that explanations of perception can do, which is generate an adequate theory of error and to account generally for the tendency of people to have what, according to its principles, are wrong beliefs’ (*ELP*, p. 151). Williams thus proposes two different models of ethical practice which best fit this understanding of ethical knowledge. One, the *Objectivist Model*, sees members of various societies as attempting, in their local way, to find out the truth about values, an activity in which we and other human beings are engaged. The other, the *Nonobjectivist Model*, sees ethical claims as part of a way of living, a cultural artefact that people come to inhabit.

There can be ethical knowledge, says Williams,

if we take the nonobjectivist view of their ethical activities: various members of the society will have knowledge, when they deploy their concepts carefully, use the appropriate criteria, and so on. But on the objectivist view they do not have knowledge, or at least it is most unlikely that they do, since their judgments have extensive implications, which they have never considered, at a reflective level, and we have every reason to believe that, when those implications are considered, the traditional use of ethical concepts will be seriously affected.²⁵ (*ELP*, p. 148)

This paves the way for one of his most heretical exhortations: that *reflection can destroy knowledge* (*ELP*, p. 148). The idea is that we may query the epistemic warrant of our thick concepts and the conditions for confidently applying them. Due to the nonobjectivist character of this knowledge the results of this reflection are often disturbing, and for this reason people start employing thin concepts: ‘a judgment using a very general concept – is essentially a product of reflection, and it comes into question when someone stands back

²⁴ The absolute conception is not pre-Kantian realism. Williams claims that his ‘aim introducing the notion of the absolute conception was precisely to get round the point that one cannot describe the world without describing it ... the idea was that when we reflect on our conceptualization of the world, we might be able to recognize from inside it that some of our concepts and ways of representing the world are more dependent than others on our own perspective, our peculiar and local ways of apprehending things. In contrast, we might be able to identify some concepts and styles of representation which are minimally dependent on our own or any other creature’s peculiar ways of apprehending the world’: *PHD*, p. 185.

²⁵ See *ELP*, p. 148, where Williams writes that ‘no doubt there are some ethical beliefs, universally held and usually vague (“one has to have a special reason to kill someone”), that we can be sure will survive at the reflective level. But they fall far short of any adequate, still less systematic, body of ethical knowledge at that level’.

from the practices of the society and its use of these concepts [thick] and asks whether this is the right way to go on' (*ELP*, p. 146).²⁶ Williams thus envisages a 'space' that opens up when we reflect on our practices using thick concepts, because there is no transcendental justification for their use: the use of 'chastity' shows that certain 'thick' concepts cease to have force for reasons peripheral to philosophy but due to 'shifting social forces'. In consequence, explaining why we continue to employ our thick concepts is problematic because 'unlike the inhabitants of the fictionally pre-reflective society, we do have the thought that other people have had different concepts, and that people may come to do so in the future. So we are aware, when we come to think of it, of something that less reflective people were not aware of, that these concepts are not simply given'.²⁷

Williams elliptically introduces his notion of *confidence* here. As reflection plays a discouraging role, if we are to continue to use some ethical concepts we need to have *confidence* in them, as we cannot have the certainty that comes with objectivist accounts of ethical knowledge.²⁸ However, he does not spell out the role of confidence in much detail. Although it is a good, it is merely 'one good among others' (*ELP*, p. 170), the implication being that goods such as transparency should compete with it. He also claims that confidence is 'a basically social phenomenon' which philosophy alone cannot tell us how to bring about, because it is 'a social and psychological question what kinds of institutions, upbringing and public discourse help to foster it' (*ELP*, pp. 170–1). The question we must answer 'is how people, or enough people, can come to possess a practical confidence that, particularly granted both the need for reflection and its pervasive presence in our world,

²⁶ Alan Gibbard uses the example of Oscar Wilde neither agreeing nor disagreeing that a passage of his was blasphemy, because it is not one of 'my words': 'Reasons Thick and Thin', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 100, no. 6 (2003), pp. 288–9.

²⁷ Williams, 'Replies', p. 208.

²⁸ As Maximilian de Gaynesford notes, to base living well on external conviction would eventually bankrupt ethical reflection because it is untenable: 'Thucydides of the Cool Hour', *Ratio*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2008), p. 365. Once again, this shows how Williams attempts to circumvent the threat of nihilism to which the morality system is prone by disputing its unstable presuppositions.

will come from strength and not from the weakness of self-deception and dogmatism. (Confidence is not the same as optimism; it could rest on what Nietzsche called the pessimism of strength)' (*ELP*, p. 171).²⁹

We will examine Williams's conception of confidence in greater detail in Chapter Five, but it is worth noting, as de Gaynesford does, that confidence may only seem inadequate to the task of helping us to continue to use various ethical concepts 'if we assume that, when the negative project has had its effect, it is *replacement* that is called for'. In fact, 'what the negative enterprise calls for, and what philosophy can provide, is *explanation* of a certain sort. Namely, a historically informed and psychologically-sensitive effort to understand our current position by appeal to the overt and hidden paths which brought us to it'.³⁰ As Callcut observes, the cumulative implication of Williams's analysis is that 'the traditional moral theories seemed made for a world that had the kind of metaphysical and moral order that ... it lacked'.³¹ Williams consequently rejects morality's focus on abstraction and rationalistic conceptions of rationality and claims that ethical reflection must focus on history, varieties of social explanation, and psychology. To this end, we should cease to see its primary role as that of providing justificatory reasons and look for any shared understanding of 'our motives, [and] psychological or social insight into our ethical practices' (*ELP*, p. 112). This is not a conservative exercise because it can reveal that 'certain practices and sentiments are not what they are taken to be' (*ELP*, p. 112). Williams claims that this is likely to be just as critically effective as any other approach precisely because the most efficacious styles of critique rely, 'as they

²⁹ The relevant passage from Nietzsche is thus: 'Is pessimism necessarily the sign of collapse, destruction, of disaster, of the exhausted and enfeebled instincts – as it was with the Indians, as it is now, to all appearances, among us, the "modern" peoples and Europeans? Is there a pessimism of strength? An intellectual inclination for what in existence is hard, dreadful, evil, problematic, emerging from what is healthy, from overflowing well being, from living existence to the full?' Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speers (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), Section 1, p. 4.

³⁰ De Gaynesford, 'Thucydides of the Cool Hour', p. 367.

³¹ Callcut, 'Introduction', *Reading Bernard Williams*, p. 4.

always have, not so much on philosophical arguments as on showing these attitudes as resting in myths, falsehoods about what people are like' (*ELP*, p. 71). He consequently paves the way for a kind of critical theory to replace moralistic legislation in which 'social explanation' can play a role in our normative discourse because it may reveal 'how a given practice hangs together with other practices in a way that makes social and psychological sense', even if 'we may not be able to find anything that will meet a demand for justification made by someone standing outside those practices' (*ELP*, p. 114).

This, as Williams notes, is 'an outlook that embodies a scepticism about philosophical ethics, but a scepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics' (*ELP*, p. 74); there is still a role for asking 'what understandings of human nature, society and history are presupposed by a given shared practice, such as the use of some thick concepts rather than others, and those understandings may be open to criticism' (*MSH*, p. 118). For this reason, there is the possibility of offering a critique of lived ethical experience, even when we accept that philosophy alone cannot 'determine, either positively or negatively, how we should think in ethics' (*ELP*, p. 74).

Williams's analysis of the prospects of ethical objectivity has implications for relativism. Although a recognition of the non-objective grounding of ethics cannot immediately unseat our internalised dispositions, it ought to 'affect the way in which you see the application or extent of your ethical outlook' because 'it is incredible that this consciousness should just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought itself'. Thus, while we can go on 'simply saying that we are right and everyone else is wrong ... if we have arrived at this stage of reflection, it seems a remarkably inadequate response' (*ELP*, p. 159–60). He differentiates non-objectivism, a position about the metaphysical status of moral claims, from relativism which he sees as a position that expresses the attitude we should have to moral conflict. Standard relativism is the 'most

absurd view' in moral philosophy (*M*, p. 20) because it conjures a claim about what it is right to do in our dealings with other people and societies – being 'equally well disposed to everyone else's ethical beliefs' (*ELP*, p. 159) – from the proposition that right is relative to a given society, a proposition that disallows its seemingly tolerant conclusion. Moreover, declaring that *x* is right for one group of people but wrong for another is useless because as soon as one group is confronted with another 'neither can think of itself as "we" and the other as "they". It is too late ... [as] there is a new "we" to be negotiated' (*IBWD*, p. 69). This is why Williams thinks that relativism cannot affect our discussions in the modern globalised world: 'relativism over merely spatial distance is of no interest or application in the real world [as] today all confrontations must be real confrontations' (*ELP*, p. 163).

Yet Williams asks what room can be made for thinking coherently in a relativistic manner and endorses the *relativism of distance*. This tells people about judgements they need not make by distinguishing between *real* and *notional* confrontations. Real confrontations occur when a group is presented with a real option of acting differently. A real option is a largely social notion; if a group of people can go 'over to it ... they could live inside it in their actual historical circumstances and maintain their hold on reality, [and] not engage in extensive self-deception' (*ELP*, p. 160). The life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai, therefore, are not real options and instead fall into the notional category (*ELP*, p. 161). In these *notional* confrontations, Williams insists, 'the question of appraisal does not genuinely arise' (*ML*, p. 141). In consequence he claims that pushing our normative claims backward, and condemning past societies in their light, is foolish because assessments of the past, unlike synchronic conflicts, do not require action on our part, unlike contemporaneous conflicts in which we must use our ethical convictions when deciding how to interact with others.

ELP culminates with Williams dubbing morality 'the peculiar institution'. The important thing about 'morality' is 'its spirit, its underlying aims, and the general picture of ethical life it implies' (*ELP*, p. 174). Morality endorses a number of philosophical mistakes which are challenged by Williams. In particular, he opposes the role that it gives to the ideas of moral obligation and blame at the expense of other things that give life meaning and purpose. For Williams, obligations have a limited role to play in ethical life, and should be seen as a force for reliability as they are 'based ultimately on one conception, that each person has a life to lead. People need help but (unless they are very young, very old or severely handicapped) not all the time. All the time they need not to be killed, assaulted, or arbitrarily interfered with' (*ELP*, p. 186). The idea of a distinctively 'moral obligation' is only one of many ways to foster this reliability. In this sense, Williams does not oppose all ideas of moral obligation but is concerned about the domineering role it plays in the morality system (*ELP*, p. 181–2).

He insists that 'almost all worthwhile life lies between the extremes that morality puts before us'. Morality emphasises a series of contrasts 'between force and reason, persuasion and rational convictions, shame and guilt, dislike and disapproval, mere rejection and blame. The attitude that leads it to emphasize all these contrasts can be labeled its *purity*' (*ELP*, p. 194–5). Williams rejects the possibility of such a pure ethical system for the reasons we have already outlined. In particular, he notes that morality's notions of obligation, duty and pure moral value are 'in some ways like a religious conception' (*ELP*, p. 195). But by basing moral value on these fabrications Williams insists that *morality* has pernicious implications for ethical life; it encourages the idea that 'when these illusions have gone there can be no coherent ideas of social justice' because it '*makes people think that without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice*' (*ELP*, p.

196, emphasis added). The morality system invites the threat of nihilism because these notions are illusory.

Williams acknowledges that his account may invite the suggestion that he leaves us with no resources to critique our ethical practices. However, he is adamant that although ‘a respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions may be no easier to achieve than they have been in the past ... we need not suppose that we have no ideas to give them a basis. We should not concede to abstract ethical theory its claim to provide the only intellectual surroundings for such ideas’. He argues that his commitments can be expressed in a ‘belief in three things: in truth, in truthfulness, and in the meaning of an individual life’ (*ELP*, p. 198). The first relates to the idea that our intellectual inquiries can continue to be responsive to various truths about the world. The second, that ‘ethical thought should stand up to reflection, and that its institutions and practices should be capable of becoming transparent’ (*ELP*, p. 199). The third is that we can continue to live meaningful lives without the various misconceptions about the ethical that he claims to have unmasked.

3. The Late Period

In the Postscript to *ELP* Williams proclaims that the ethical thought of the ancient world is in many ways better than that of the present because of the distorting influence of morality on the latter (*ELP*, p. 197). In his paper ‘The Legacy of Greek Philosophy’ he explains his point thus:

It has, and needs, no God: though references to God or gods occur in these writers, they play no important role. It takes as central and primary questions of character, and of how moral considerations are grounded in human nature: it asks what life is rational for the individual to live. It makes no use of the blank categorical imperative ... this system of ideas basically lacks the concept of morality altogether, in the sense of a class of reasons or demands which are vitally different from other kinds of reason or demand ... in all these respects the ethical thought of the Greeks was not only different from most modern thought, particularly modern thought influenced by Christianity, but was also in much better shape. (*SP*, p. 44)

In *Shame and Necessity* he develops this line of thought by looking beyond Plato and Aristotle to Homer and the tragedians in order to rebut the *progressivist* view, according to which the ancient Greeks had ‘primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical motivation, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions’ (SN, p. 5). Even when there are significant differences between us and the Greeks this ‘is properly measured not by the standards of some new structural conception called “morality”, but by considerations that can themselves be traced to the Greek world – considerations of power, fortune, and very elementary forms of justice’ (SN, p. 8). With this in mind, he acknowledges a similarity between his inquiries into the ancient world and Nietzsche’s view that such an enquiry must be ‘untimely’.³² Yet Williams is insistent that his work not be read as a condemnation of Enlightenment ideas, *à la* MacIntyre, ‘inasmuch as they are identified with the pursuit of social and political honesty, rather than with a rationalistic metaphysics of morality’ (SN, p. 159).

In contrast to the progressivists Williams insists that most of our most basic ethical materials were present in Homer and those that were not – notions of a peculiarly moral will or Kantian conceptions of moral duty – we are better off without. In particular, he claims that the idea that an account of what human beings are like must be expressed in ethical terms was invented by Plato, and has unfortunately been with us ever since; Plato defined the functions of the mind in terms of categories that get their significance from ethics, as it is ‘only in the light of ethical considerations, and certain ethically significant distinctions of character and motive, that Plato’s schema is intelligible’ (SN, p. 43). Williams follows Nietzsche in favouring Thucydides’ less moralised realistic

³² Thus he approvingly quotes Nietzsche’s claim that ‘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 benefits of a future age’ (SN, p. 4).

psychology. Although the idea of Thucydidean impartiality is an exaggeration, Thucydides' psychology 'is not at the service of his ethical beliefs' because 'his aim is to make sense of social events, and that involves relating them intelligibly to human motivations, and to ways in which situations appear to agents' (*SN*, p. 161).

The other major claim that Williams makes is that shame is more ethically sophisticated than modern moral philosophers suppose. He insists that the idea that individuals who inhabited shame cultures 'were overwhelmingly concerned with their own success at the expense of other people is wrong at the level of principle: the structures ... are essentially interactive between people, and they serve to bond as much as to divide' (*SN*, p. 81). For such structures to work the various reciprocal attitudes that sustain them must have a more complex content than is often appreciated: 'some kinds of behaviour are admired, others accepted, others despised, and it is those attitudes that are internalised, not simply the prospect of hostile reactions. If that were not so, there would be, once more, no shame culture, no shared ethical attitudes at all' (*SN*, pp. 83–4). This explains why 'the other' on whom shame focuses 'need not be a particular individual or merely the representative of some socially defined group'. In fact, they may 'be identified in ethical terms ... as one whose reactions I respect ... [and] who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed to him' (*SN*, p. 84). To this end, the internalised other 'can provide the focus of real social expectations of how I should live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me' (*SN*, p. 84). The central conclusion that Williams draws from this is that the Greek understanding of shame transcends both 'assertive egoism' and 'a conventional concern for public opinion' (*SN*, p. 88).

Like Nietzsche, Williams claims that guilt is closely related to conceptions of the morality system that we should reject. In contrast to shame, guilt relates to the idea of an

‘act or omission of a sort that typically elicits from other people anger, resentment or indignation’. To make amends, Williams notes that the agent must offer some reparation and thus fear punishment; by contrast because ‘what arouses shame ... is something that typically elicits from others contempt or derision or avoidance. This may equally be an act or omission, but it need not be: it may be some failing or defect’, shame thus lowers ‘the agent’s self-respect and diminishes him in his own eyes’, but more positively ‘may be expressed in attempts to reconstruct or improve oneself’ (*SN*, p. 90). This does not lead Williams to claim that guilt should play no role in ethical life but rather that we should challenge the suggestion that it is morally self-sufficient. This has implications for morality because it insists ‘at once on the primacy of guilt, its significance in turning us towards victims, and its rational restriction to the voluntary. It is under considerable strain in insisting on all these things at once’ (*SN*, p. 94). As the Greeks avoided ‘isolating a privileged conception of moral guilt’, and placed ‘under a broader conception of shame the social and psychological structures that were near to what we call guilt’, they ‘displayed realism, and truthfulness, and a beneficent neglect’ (*SN*, p. 95).

Williams developed his interest in Nietzsche in a number of articles and papers, the most significant of which is ‘Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology’, in which he develops his take on a naturalist moral psychology which ‘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’ (*SP*, p. 301). There are difficulties inherent in this approach; it ‘rules out too much if it tries reductively to ignore culture and convention ... it rules out too little if it includes many things that have been part of the self-image of morality, such as certain conceptions of moral cognition; a theory will scarcely further the cause of naturalism in this sense if it accepts as a basic feature of human nature the capacity to intuit the structure of moral reality’ (*SP*, p. 301). The key

point is that in response to the question, ‘How much should our accounts of distinctively moral activity add to our accounts of other human activity?’ it replies ‘As little as possible’, because ‘the more that some moral understanding of human beings seems to call on materials that specifically 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 may use anyway elsewhere’ (*SP*, p. 302). As Raymond Geuss surmises, this is not a plea for a value-free psychology but a commitment to develop an alternative ‘to the deceitful, hypermoralized views of Plato, Aristotle, [and] Kant’.³³ The structure of Nietzsche’s analysis of moral psychology is particularly important. For Williams, we begin with a psychological phenomenon that is recognisable in everyday experience, and then ask where it comes from and what it does. In many cases ‘the fit between the special psychological conception and the demands of morality enables us to see that this piece of psychology is itself a moral conception, and one that shares notably doubtful features of that particular morality itself’ (*SP*, p. 310). Precisely because we cannot appeal to a supreme source of moral value, a psychological-cultural-historical account of how it came about is required. In this sense Callcut is correct to note that Williams ‘became increasingly occupied with the question of which existing ethical concepts could (in some form) emerge from genealogical and social critique’.³⁴

‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’ is perhaps the best explication of Williams’s insistence on the need for historical understanding. Williams argues that philosophy’s distinctive merit lies in its ability to help us ‘make sense’ of being human, and rallies against the latent scientism which assumes that philosophy should look for ‘a system of political and ethical ideals which would be best from an absolute point of view, a point of view free from contingent historical perspective’ (*PHD*, p. 186). In doing so, he rejects

³³ Raymond Geuss, ‘Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams’, p. 230.

³⁴ Callcut, ‘Introduction’, *Reading Bernard Williams*, p. 5.

the claim that the search for absolute knowledge is a desirable philosophical objective, and argues this greater authority ‘would follow only on the assumption that if there is an independent philosophical enterprise, its aim is to describe the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective’ (*PHD*, p. 184). Any interesting philosophical account of the world which helped us make sense of our predicament as living human beings would require an appreciation of what lived experience was actually like, and this relies on ‘concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history’ (*PHD*, p.186–7). The implication is clear: we should not necessarily assume that all philosophical enquiry should aim to issue in absolute knowledge claims because its aim is not always that of describing the world independent of perspective, but of helping us live in it.

However, historical understanding can allow us to ask questions about those practices and values we endorse which, in a Wittgensteinian sense, appear to be ‘simply there’ (*PHD*, p. 195), which goes beyond straightforward philosophical analysis that has to stop when the giving of grounds terminates. For these reasons Williams claims that ‘philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life ... are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry’ (*PHD*, p. 192). To this end, there is no conflict between the first-order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them, and the historical activity of understanding where they came from (*PHD*, p. 193–4). Indeed, if ethical reflection is to be pushed far enough, this tripartite analysis is required.

In *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams adopts a historical approach in order to make sense of the value of truthfulness and to vindicate and defend it from the ‘pervasive suspicion’ about the idea of truth in (post)modern thought (*TT*, p. 2). He constructs a genealogical account of truthfulness ‘that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing the way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about’ (*TT*, p. 20) and relates this account to Hume’s analysis of justice.³⁵ This vindication is ‘offensive to pure Platonic or Kantian reason’,³⁶ but because of this ought to be seen as a form of justification congruent with a Nietzschean pessimism of strength.

But what kind of historical vindication can we offer for our ideals and practices? Given that ‘our ethical ideas are a complex deposit of many different traditions and social forces’ Williams notes that ‘truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them in any way that vindicates them against possible rivals’ (*TT*, pp. 20–1). We cannot view history as a succession of arguments that have been won because if we wonder why we use some ethical and political concepts, while we can ‘deploy arguments which claim to justify our ideas against those of others’, when we ‘reflect on the relation of this story to the arguments that we deploy against the earlier conceptions ... we realize that the story is the history of those forms of argument themselves: the forms of argument, call them liberal forms of argument, are a central part of the outlook that we accept’ (*PHD*, p. 190). For this reason we cannot say that a set of ideas, such as liberal ideas, have won an argument. In fact, for that to have happened,

³⁵ As Williams puts it, one might accept Hume’s account of justice ‘and still give justice, its motivations, and reasons for action, much the same respect as one did before one encountered the explanation’: *TT*, p. 36.

³⁶ Williams, ‘Seminar with Bernard Williams’, p. 258.

the representatives of the *ancien regime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society ... they would have had to agree that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as that, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the process ... the relevant ideas of freedom, reason, and so on were themselves involved in the change. If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail – that is to say, among other things, how these came to be our ideas – are not vindicatory.

(*PHD*, pp. 190–1)

This has profound implications because it makes a difference to saying that the earlier conceptions were false; ‘in the absence of vindicatory explanations, while you can say that they were wrong ... the content of this is likely to be pretty thin: it conveys only the message that the earlier outlook fails by arguments the point of which is that such outlooks should fail by them’. It is, Williams insists, ‘a good question whether a tune as thin as this is worth whistling at all’ (*PHD*, p. 191).³⁷

The fictional genealogy developed in *Truth and Truthfulness* aims at bypassing some of these problems. Williams claims that a fictional account is useful because ‘going straight to our actual society with the apparatus of functional explanation would distort our understanding of our own cultural situation, debar us from seeing what is peculiar to it as opposed to others, and lead us to stupid reductionism. It also enables us to avoid constructing pictures of very early societies on the basis of functional ideas and suppose that this was actual hominid prehistory’ (*TT*, p. 35). Williams’s fictional state of nature invokes some basic human needs and motivations, in particular the need for cooperation, with the aim of deriving social virtues of truth. Williams consequently adopts and refines the twin virtues of truth – Accuracy (acquiring true beliefs) and Sincerity (saying what one believes) – with the intention of outlining how ‘every society not only needs there to be dispositions of this kind but needs them to have value which is not purely functional’ (*TT*,

³⁷ I return to this statement in Chapter Six where I argue that, at least with regards to our continued endorsement of liberalism, the issue is more complicated than Williams suggests here.

p. 42). He sees this as a mark against those *deniers* who reject the significance of truth and urge philosophy to dispense with it. *Truth and Truthfulness* then reflects on the twin virtues via examination of some of their myriad manifestations throughout history. Williams insists that this shows that the concrete manifestation of these virtues results from a ‘complex set of real historical contingencies’ (*TT*, p. 172), which tells against seeing the particular manifestations of the virtues in an essentialist fashion. If philosophy is properly to understand truthfulness it therefore ‘needs to make way for history, or ... involve itself in it’ (*TT*, p. 93). More often than not, as Williams recognises when he probes the relationship between Sincerity and Authenticity, the development of the virtues ‘cannot be seen as a development of human needs, concerns, and interests which was inevitable, or even particularly probable’ (*TT*, p. 172). In Chapter Five I argue that the model of vindictory genealogy can help us to understand Williams’s liberalism, as it gives him a way to celebrate and defend certain liberal ideals and practices – those associated with Shklar’s ‘Liberalism of Fear’ – while recognising the historical specificity of the particular liberal forms that our legitimate political regimes may take at a moment in history. The basic idea is that although a rationalistic vindication of liberalism cannot be offered, the minimal materials that the Liberalism of Fear works with can help us to justify our commitment to liberalism in a normatively acceptable and metaethically defensible manner.

Conclusion

Our sketch of Williams’s understanding of the pitfalls of moralism in ethics is now complete, and we can summarise its core features. First, Williams’s work on ethical consistency, moral luck, the primacy of dispositions, and his critique of theories that neglect character, warn against the view that we can insulate the ethical from the

exigencies of the empirical domain and the fact of value pluralism. Second, Williams emphasises the need for ethics to operate with a realistic understanding of moral psychology that makes sense of our lives as we experience them as living agents. Third, his work on internal reasons and rationality problematises the moralistic pretension to prescribe rationally binding universal principles equally applicable to all agents. Fourth, his analysis of thick and thin concepts, ethical knowledge, the absolute conception of the world, and relativism, leads him to be suspicious of the desire to free ethics from the local contingencies and idiosyncrasies of its subjects, and to search for the justification of ethics from the point of view of the universe. This further problematises the moralistic aspiration to legislate morality by providing universally binding justificatory reasons. Fifth, although Williams recognises that so-called thick concepts can properly be the subject of moral and political philosophy – as ‘think[ing] critically and imaginatively’ with them can satisfy his commitment to philosophy contributing to the ‘serious enterprise of living’ – philosophy must work with a correct reflexive understanding and realise the contingency of the conceptual tools it employs.³⁸ On these grounds Williams advocates an explanatory stance which seeks to uncover the social bases for our practices, paving the way for a critical theory and making room for immanent critique. This leads to the sixth feature: the insistence on the importance of a historical understanding of our ethical practices. For Williams, the particular way life is arranged in any epoch will be the result of a number of contingent developments and if we are to properly understand our ethical predicament we must understand the historical processes which have led to it.

The overall picture Williams offers rebukes the morality system for being ‘deeply attached to giving good news’ (*SP*, p. 49). He diagnoses our ethical predicament without any such optimism:

³⁸ Moore, ‘Introduction’, *PHD*, p. xviii.

We are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies. We have an ambivalent sense of what human beings have achieved, and have hopes for how they might live (in particular, in the form of a still powerful ideal that they should live without lies). We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells us no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities. We have to acknowledge the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value, including this reflective sense itself, and recognize that there is no redemptive Hegelian history or universal Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show that it will come out well enough in the end. In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible. (SN, p. 166)

Williams's political thought is deeply influenced by this assessment of the limits of philosophical reflection in ethics and the dangers of the morality system. Although the papers from *In the Beginning was the Deed* which I focus on for the most part can strike the reader as being incomplete, fragmentary and elliptic, Williams's arguments in favour of a 'political realism' paint a suggestive and original picture of what a philosophically sceptical political theory can achieve and how it must relate to, and be constrained by, the exigencies of politics and history. In *Shame and Necessity* he remarks that we need to ask if and how some modern values – namely Enlightenment and liberal values – 'can be something, despite their failures of self-understanding' (SN, p. 11). As we will see, his defence of a political realism that rejects the illusions of political moralism shares this aim. It is to this that we now turn.

Chapter Two

Political Realism and the Basic Legitimation Demand

There is no escaping that politics is about power and there is consequently no escaping that good political theory needs to give plausible accounts of what is entailed, in the broadest sense, by political thinking relevant to power.¹

Having charted the genesis of Williams's critique of 'morality' we can now move to his arguments in favour of a political realism. In this chapter I begin to do so by focusing on his work on legitimacy, the main intention of which is to call into question the 'moralism' of contemporary political philosophy and, more particularly, the suggestion that morality prescribes various values and principles which should be taken as normative for the political realm. In contrast to such a view, which sees political theory as a type of 'applied moral philosophy', Williams proposes a way of thinking about politics which utilises a distinctively political standard of evaluation. In this chapter I defend Williams's fundamental claim that the central questions of political morality arise within politics, and by focusing on his understanding of legitimacy, argue that, accordingly, political theory should not in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics. This is central to Williams's attempt to make ethical sense of politics because it enables us to appreciate the normativity inherent to politics without recourse to the discredited conceptions of 'morality' that he insists we must jettison.

In the first section I set out the nature of Williams's conception of legitimacy and in the light of it explain why he criticises political moralism. I then defend Williams from a number of criticisms that have been raised against his understanding of legitimacy, as the majority of commentators on Williams's work have hitherto disputed the claim that he

¹ Michael Freedman, 'What Should the "Political" in Political Theory Explore?', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2005), p. 116.

offers a coherent alternative to the moralistic approaches that he rejects. Some critics claim that Williams tacitly incorporates various moral claims (which precludes him from offering a coherent alternative to the political moralism he opposes), commits to a philosophically suspect consensus view of politics, and endorses an unrealistic and moralised conception of politics itself. One critic therefore concludes that Williams's work 'shares significant features with liberal theory ... which means that it is vulnerable to the same critique that other realists have made of liberalism',² while another insists that the by claiming that the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) could be answered, Williams offers an 'unfeasible return to an ideal-type expectation'.³ I focus on four influential and representative criticisms that have been made, because by engaging with his critics we can better understand the power of Williams's conception of legitimacy and the attractions of thinking about politics in the terms it encourages. I argue that Williams's critics mischaracterise the nature of the BLD and the judgements about the acceptability of the state at its core, and conclude that political theorists who are uneasy with the moralism of much contemporary political theory have reason to re-evaluate the possibility of developing an appropriately 'political' political theory on Williamsian lines. In the Appendix I focus on Williams's critical theory principle.

1. The First Political Question

Williams claims that two forms of political moralism (PM) dominate political philosophy. *Enactment models*, like utilitarianism, formulate 'principles, concepts, ideals, and values' and seek to 'express these in political action', while *structural models*, like Rawls's, spell out the 'moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be

² Matt Sleat, 'Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2010), p. 486.

³ Michael Freeden, 'Interpretative Realism and Prescriptive Realism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2012), p. 6.

justly exercised'. Despite their differences both models see political philosophy as a form of applied morality and accordingly represent the 'priority of the moral over the political' (*IBWD*, p. 2). In contrast Williams pursues a political realism that gives 'a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (*IBWD*, p. 3). This is not 'realpolitik'. Rather, Williams argues that the normative standards employed in politics must be sensitive to the relationship between political practice and moral principle, and political philosophy should consequently 'use distinctively political concepts, such as power, and its normative relative, legitimation' (*IBWD*, p. 77).

He identifies the first political question – first because solving it 'is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others' – with the securing of 'order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation' (*IBWD*, p. 3).⁴ It is a necessary condition of legitimacy (LEG) that the state solve this question, but unlike Hobbes, Williams insists that it is not sufficient because the point of politics is to save people from terror, which Williams recognises states can also inflict. Any purported solution is therefore subject to a basic legitimation demand (BLD) which is equated with the idea that it is an acceptable answer because 'if the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution to the first political question, and not itself be part of the problem, *something* has to be said to explain ... what the difference is between the solution and the problem, and that cannot simply be an account of successful domination. It has to be a mode of justifying explanation or legitimation' (*IBWD*, p. 5). Hence, the need for a justification of political power arises when 'A coerces B and claims that B would be wrong to fight back: resents it, forbids it, rallies others to oppose it as wrong', because by doing this, 'A claims that his

⁴ Williams thus endorses a 'normative' conception of politics insofar as answering the first question enables us to enjoy the political goods he associates with so doing. But this does not make him a political moralist: he does not prioritise a set of pre-political moral norms in the way the enactment and structural models do. The problem with political moralism is not that it sees politics as a normative enterprise (*per se*) but that it does not give autonomy to distinctively political thought.

actions transcend the conditions of warfare, and this gives rise to a demand of justification of what A does' (*IBWD*, p. 6).

Williams insists that the BLD does not represent a morality that is prior to politics as 'it is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics ... because it is inherent in there being a first political question' (*IBWD*, p. 5). For this reason, legitimacy and other political virtues are 'different ideas' and there 'manifestly have been, and perhaps are, LEG non-liberal states' (*IBWD*, p. 4), because 'a given historical structure can be ... an example of the human capacity to live under an intelligible order of authority. It *makes sense* to us *as such a structure*' (*IBWD*, p. 10, emphasis in original). The crux of Williams's view is that political rule claims authority while brute force is mere coercion, with the important proviso that for political authority to be experienced as such the legitimization story must *make sense* (MS) to those citizens who are subjected to the coercive power of the state. This is why he insists that 'one thing can be taken as an axiom, that might does not imply right, that ... the power of coercion offered simply as the power of coercion cannot justify its own use' (*IBWD*, pp. 5–6). He asks us to consider a *radically disadvantaged* group of subjects who 'are no better off than enemies of the state' (he uses the historical example of the Helot population of Sparta who were openly treated as enemies by their rulers). In such scenarios we do not have 'per se a political situation' because 'the mere circumstance of some subjects being de facto in the power of others is no legitimization of their being radically disadvantaged', as there 'is nothing to be said to this group to explain why they shouldn't revolt' (*IBWD*, p. 5).

Williams notes that we cannot precisely pinpoint when a genuine need for justification arises; it is not a sufficient condition that someone demands one 'because anyone who feels he has grievance can raise a demand, and there is always some place for grievance', but 'it is also not a necessary condition, because people can be drilled by

coercive power into accepting its exercise' (*IBWD*, p. 6). I return to the former point when discussing the 'consensus' critique of the BLD. The latter point introduces Williams's 'critical theory principle', which holds that if the disadvantaged in a society accept a justification of power purely as a result of the exercise of power itself, the fact that they accept the story does not legitimate it.⁵

By focusing on the primacy of securing order Williams rejects 'the *basic* relation of morality to politics as being that represented either by the enactment model or by the structural model' (*IBWD*, p. 8). Political moralism pays insufficient attention to the centrality of answering the first question in realistic terms and, more often than not, forgets the contextual and historically conditioned nature of judgements about what makes sense. Williams insists that 'inasmuch as liberalism has foundations, it has foundations in its capacity to answer the "first question" in what is now seen, granted these answers to the BLD, as an acceptable way ... but this is not the foundation of the liberal state, because it is a product of those same forces that lead to a situation in which the BLD is satisfied only by a liberal state' (*IBWD*, p. 8). He puts this most schematically when he writes that $LEG + Modernity = Liberalism$. 'Now and around here' we only permit liberal solutions because 'other supposed legitimations are now seen to be false and in particular ideological' (*IBWD*, p. 8). This is markedly different from claiming that liberalism is the political expression of a set of timeless moral truths or that all previous legitimization stories were false. Williams accuses political moralism of forgetting this because it has an implausible understanding of ethics as a 'mere moral normativity', the result of the exercise of ahistorical reasoning. He holds that such views lack a theory of error that can explain 'why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the questions of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European

⁵ Williams does not maintain that citizens must accept a legitimization for the 'right' moral reasons, but endorses the idea of a *modus vivendi* solution: *IBWD*, p. 2, n.1.

culture from the seventeenth century onward, and why these truths have been concealed from other people' (*IBWD*, p. 9).⁶ Any fleshing out of what makes sense must be inherently local as it must satisfy the subjects to whom it applies in ways that will, in actuality and not merely in philosophical theory, ring true in the historical context in which they are made.⁷ When we ask what makes sense to us we 'need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history' (*PHD*, p. 186–7).

As answering the first political question is a matter of practical concern, legitimacy is not an abstract moral ideal but a live contextual possibility, or, to put it another way, a reachable threshold. In contrast, political moralism tends to make very demanding claims of legitimacy. To employ a famous example, A.J. Simmons argues that a legitimate state must actually be consented to in quasi-Lockean terms, because of the 'voluntarism' that derives from his rights-based view, and infers that no existent states are legitimate.⁸ From the perspective Williams advocates this gets things the wrong way round. Rather than beginning with an antecedent moral view that is applied to politics, he begins by looking at the character of political rule and asks if we can extract an internal ethic from it, hence his suggestion that the BLD 'is implicit in the very idea of a legitimate state, and so is inherent in any politics' (*IBWD*, p. 8). The basic idea is that politics contains its own internal

⁶ Realists typically overlook the fact that Williams does not consider Habermas to be a political moralist because he rejects the derivation of legitimacy 'from the formal properties of the moral law, or from a Kantian account of the moral person' by situating his account between facts and norms: *IBWD*, pp. 9–10. However, see *IBWD*, pp. 14–17, for a discussion of some of the problems Habermasian views nonetheless face.

⁷ Note the relation with his work on internal reasons. See Chapter One for this discussion.

⁸ Simmons subscribes 'to political voluntarism as the correct account of these transactional grounds for legitimacy' and holds that because 'no actual states satisfy the requirements of this voluntarism ... no existing states are legitimate': A.J. Simmons, 'Justification and Legitimacy', *Ethics*, vol. 109, no. 4 (1999), p. 769. Although his distinction between justification and legitimacy makes his view more complex, his account remains unconvincing because legitimacy ceases to be a meaningful standard of evaluation as no political society has been, or will be, legitimate (it is like claiming tallness is morally significant but that all men are short because they are not giants). This does not accord with our considered use of the term: after all, it makes sense to hold that, for example, Assad's Syria is less legitimate than David Cameron's Great Britain.

legitimatising ‘ethic’ because it demands a particular kind of allegiance from those agents it claims to incorporate as political subjects. Political moralism mistakes the contextual judgements about what makes sense with the basic conditions of satisfying the BLD. When the BLD is answered – which is to say, when the legitimation story is accepted in the relevant way (I discuss what this involves shortly) – rulers exercise *political authority* because they do not merely coerce or subordinate their subjects but act in a politically intelligible manner, and accordingly can be said to stand in a political relationship with their subjects in the way that, for example, a warlord does not.⁹

Mark Philp captures the underlying conception of politics at work when he writes that politics ‘involves at least some claim to authority ... [while] brute force determines outcomes but it does so coercively, not authoritatively’, and ‘it is therefore integral to political rule to invoke at least some claim to authority and thereby to legitimacy ... which implies some recognition of this on the part of citizens’.¹⁰ This is an avowedly internalist conception of legitimacy, in the spirit of Hume and Weber, which holds that the conditions of legitimacy do not, in the first place, lie in the securing/respect of various moral principles, but in the opinion of the subjects over whom political power is exercised; legitimacy is not achieved by enacting or respecting a set of external moral principles but is conferred by subjects. Hence, Williams avoids the view that states are voluntary associations, which is attractive because, as Raymond Geuss notes, such accounts are ‘obsessed with trying to square the circle by presenting as “voluntary” something which is self-evidently deeply non-voluntary’.¹¹

Because legitimacy is conferred by subjects Williams also does not require a theory of error to explain why earlier people held false beliefs about the grounds of legitimacy.

⁹ This kind of authority is an identifying criterion of politics through history: *IBWD*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Philp, *Political Conduct*, pp. 55–6.

¹¹ Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 29.

Moralist conceptions of legitimacy face this problem because they conceive of the state's right to rule as a result of it satisfying various pre-political moral principles that allegedly justify coercion. In contrast, the primary purpose of Williams's account is not to provide an alternative (albeit minimal) set of pre-political moral principles that ground a state's right to rule, but to enable us to understand the nature of politics itself and thus to appreciate the normativity inherent to politics. Of course, when subjects ask if a state satisfies the BLD this is for them a normative question; as Williams puts it, when we ask what makes sense to us we think normatively 'because what (most) MS to us is a structure of authority which we think we should accept' (*IBWD*, p. 11). However, these judgements *do not* characterise the timeless conditions of legitimacy. We enjoy a period of stability that enables us to hold the state to a higher standard of acceptability than has been the case in the past (for instance, during times of prospective civil war standards of acceptability will decrease). Accordingly, judgements about what makes sense will reflect a host of variables that cannot be captured by any specific set of moral ideals, which is why Williams's account is purposefully abstract and indeterminate.

We should also recognise that judgements about the acceptability of the state are manifestly not the same as pondering what a perfectly just society may look like. For Williams, justice, rights and liberty (and so on) are secondary political issues and philosophers who give these priority do not understand the *basic* relationship of morality to politics; the question of first political importance does not concern which moral principles we ought to enact, or the (moral) conditions of just co-existence, because such disputes, however important one might consider them to be, can only take place once the first political question has been solved. For this reason, politics is not in the first instance an instrument of morality. When we ponder which normative goals we should pursue 'now and around here', we must remember that in many cases this is a question 'that

belongs to the level of fact, practice and politics, not one that lies beyond these in the very conditions of legitimacy' (*IBWD*, p. 17). This does not preclude us from claiming that certain features of existent states are objectionable – I may think that the United Kingdom's basic structure should be reformed so it ameliorates the plight of the disadvantaged, or hold that certain decisions my government makes are morally indefensible (like the decision to go to war in Iraq) – but such judgements are not *always* judgements about legitimacy even though on occasion they clearly are, because we can and do make such claims without thinking that, all things considered, the state is an unacceptable solution to the first question.¹² To this extent, Williams is sensitive to the Hobbesian insight that we cannot judge the legitimacy of the state solely in light of our own (often deeply idiosyncratic) optimal moral judgements, because no functioning political state could exist if claims about its legitimacy had to cohere with all citizens' judgements about the *optimal* set of moral principles that should govern political life. Judgements about legitimacy are judgements to the tune that the state is, or is not, a realistically *acceptable* order of coercion that can secure the conditions of cooperation among groups of people who have disparate moral beliefs and conflicting interests.

The basic thrust of this account also suggests that we must recognise the autonomy of politics from morality in a further sense. To wit, if we view the creation of order in the terms Williams encourages, this implies, as Mark Philp notes, that moral precepts or values should not be seen to pre-empt the political project of establishing of order, in the sense of being 'deontological constraint[s] on how people act in its pursuit'. Rather, Williams's account suggests that 'the realities of political struggle, of commanding and securing compliance ... cannot themselves be wholly subordinate to moral principle ...

¹² See John Horton, 'Political Legitimacy, Justice, and Consent', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2012), p. 135.

[because] politics creates the conditions for ordinary citizens to live ordinary lives'.¹³

Because solving the first political question creates the conditions in which we can have a moral and ethical life, the act of securing order may not be compatible with an adherence to the same standards.¹⁴ This is part of Williams's point when he writes that 'the circumstances in which liberal thought is possible have been created by actions that violate liberal ideals and human rights' (*IBWD*, p. 25).¹⁵

2. Defending the BLD

Now that Williams's account has been outlined we are in a position to assess it. In the remainder of this chapter I focus on four influential lines of critique that have motivated complaints. The first alleges that the claim that the state must offer a justification of its power to each subject rests on a moral claim about the equal worth of persons which precludes Williams from offering a realist theory. The second criticism contends that he endorses an erroneous 'consensus' view of politics. The third asserts that our judgements about what passes the BLD must reference a set of moral claims held to be antecedently true to any claim of authority (which prohibits us from providing a categorical distinction between realism and moralism). The fourth criticism sees Williams employing an

¹³ Philp, 'Realism Without Illusions', p. 633.

¹⁴ Similarly, in 'Politics and the Moral Character' Williams claims that it is not helpful to judge the conduct of politicians according to the strictures of personal morality. Politics is taken to involve 'at least bargaining and the expression of conflicting interests and ideals', and in such situations 'a politician might find himself involved in, or invited to, such things as lying, or at least concealment and the making of misleading statements; breaking promises; special pleading; temporary coalition with the distasteful; sacrifice of the interests of worthy persons to those of unworthy persons; and coercion ... up to blackmail' (*ML*, p. 58). For this reason, he concludes that 'if politics is to exist as an activity at all, some moral considerations must be expected to get out of its way' and that to 'refuse on moral grounds ever to do anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot even seriously pursue even the moral ends of politics' (*ML*, p. 60–1).

¹⁵ This also tells against Matt Sleat's complaint that because collective political life can only be the result of such exercises of power Williams's view fails because such coercion is incompatible with his understanding of the critical theory principle: Sleat, 'Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory', p. 500. *Contra* Sleat, Williams does not claim that if a state is to be classed legitimate there must be some kind of shared understanding of the conditions of legitimacy in place *before* any act of state-building, because there is nothing in his account which denies that legitimacy can be forged over time. In fact his view is peculiarly (at least as far the contemporary literature goes) well placed to make sense of this possibility.

idealistic conception of politics itself. I argue that all four arguments fail because they mischaracterise the nature of the BLD and the view of political rule that motivates it.

The Scope of the BLD

Matt Sleat argues that Williams's insistence that the state has to offer a justification of its power to each subject 'fall[s] back ... upon some foundational moral premise that all persons matter', which disqualifies Williams from articulating a coherent realism because if we are to keep 'political realism and political moralism distinct it has to be the case that it is possible to fully explicate politics and the necessary conditions of legitimacy without recourse to external moral conditions'.¹⁶ At certain points this interpretation appears compelling. Williams writes that a subject is 'anyone who is in its [the state's] power, whom by its own lights it can rightfully coerce' (*IBWD*, p. 4), and that the state must offer a justification to each subject because if it does not 'there will be people whom they are treating merely as enemies in the midst of their citizens, as the ancient Spartiates, consistently, treated the helots whom they had subjugated' (*IBWD*, p. 135). To this end, he claims that, 'at least ideally', the state must have something to say 'to each person whom they constrain' (*IBWD*, p. 135).

Yet Sleat misreads Williams's intention as being to present a rival conception of the moral *content* of any successful legitimation, a central aspect of which is the belief that the state can only be legitimate if it offers a justification to each person for moral reasons. However, as we shall see, the most internally consistent reading reveals that the scope of the state's legitimation story is best understood as being offered to those persons considered to be *citizens* or *political subjects*, rather than simply those who are subjected to the state's power on other grounds (like the Helots). The point is that unless the state

¹⁶ Sleat, 'Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory', p. 495.

offers a justification to each person they constrain, the relationship between the rulers and those persons approximates internal warfare, not political authority, because the powerful exercise unlegitimated coercion. It does not follow that these regimes should thereby be classed illegitimate (in a binary sense) in the way many moralistic accounts suggest.

If Sleat is right, Williams would have to hold that Sparta was illegitimate *because* its treatment of the Helots did not respect the premise of basic moral equality that allegedly lies at the heart of the BLD. However, Williams explicitly does not suggest that we can judge Sparta illegitimate for this reason. He explicitly observes that the Helots were considered alien people, not political subjects, and states that it is only when there ‘is an attempt to incorporate’ the radically disadvantaged as political subjects that we can conclude that the BLD ‘has not been met’ (*IBWD*, p. 5). This idea of ‘incorporation’, and the subsequent claim to authority, is centrally important. Williams writes that:

There can be a pure case of internal warfare, of the kind invoked in the case of the Helots. There is no general answer to what are the boundaries of the state, and I suppose that there can in principle be a spongiform state. While there are no doubt reasons for stopping warfare, these are not the same reasons, or related to politics in the same way, as reasons given by a claim to authority. In terms of rights the situation is this: first, anyone over whom the state claims authority has a right to treatment justified by the claim of LEG; second, there is no right to be a member of a state, if one is not a member ...; third, there is no claim of authority over enemies, including those in the situation of the Helots. In virtue of this last point, such people do not have a right of the kind mentioned in the first point ... the significant cases for the present problems are those in which the radically disadvantaged are said to be subjects and the state claims authority over them. (*IBWD*, p. 6)

Once we see the idea of ‘incorporation’ as framing the scope of the BLD we can distinguish between the citizens (or subjects) to whom a justification of power is offered (Spartans), and those people who may simply be subjected to coercion (like the Helots) to whom it is not. Williams is especially clear about this in ‘From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value’ when he writes that the legitimization story ‘is supposed to legitimate the arrangement to *each* citizen, that is to say, to each person from whom the state expects allegiance; though there may be other people within the state, slaves or

captives, who are nakedly objects of coercion and for whom there is no such legitimization story' (*IBWD*, p. 95). The central point is that 'all societies must be to some degree in the business of giving reasons for their practices though clearly they may differ a good deal in the extent to which that is so, in the range of groups between which reasons have to be given, and in the degree of specificity that is demanded for particular policies' (*PHD*, p. 96).

With this in mind, there is little reason to hold that Williams's account is premised on the acceptance of some external moral principle of basic equality, because, as I have intimated, his basic aim is to delimit the nature of political authority, and the state need not stand in political relations with all of those persons whom it coerces. For this reason, he need not (and does not) invoke any necessary claims about the scope of the legitimization story because, as the quotation from his liberty paper (cited above) shows, whom the state must justify itself to depends on who it incorporates as political citizens and thereby demands allegiance from. There is consequently no pre-political moral standard which determines to whom the BLD must be directed, and it is possible that certain groups will be coerced for reasons that only make sense to the constituency of persons to whom the state seeks to legitimate itself (i.e. the Spartan citizens rather than the Helots). In such a situation Williams helps us to see that political relations exist between rulers and the subjects to whom their legitimization story makes sense, even if there are other people to whom no justification is offered.

Williams thus uses a more restrictive conception of whom the state must legitimate itself to than is alleged by Sleet when he claims that Williams holds it as a necessary requirement of legitimacy that, due to some tacit moral principle of equality, the BLD apply to all persons. When Williams claims that, 'now and around here', all persons must be treated as political subjects, in a way that the Helots were not, it is for reasons linked to

the modern notion of the state as a legal-rational order. Hence, this is a historical development that relates to the *disenchanted* nature of modernity that Williams (following Weber) highlighted when he noted that traditional hierarchical justifications of inequitable treatment no longer make sense.¹⁷ He is not claiming that all political orders throughout history should be judged legitimate or illegitimate according to this standard.

Sleat is motivated by Williams's claim that 'slavery is imperfectly legitimated relative to a claim of authority over the slaves: it is a form of internalized warfare, as in the case of the Helots' (*IBWD*, p. 5), but he wrongly infers that Williams holds that all states containing slaves were for that reason illegitimate. This is the sort of fantastically unhistorical judgement that Williams seeks to avoid. The point of the slavery example is that slaves are not party to a political relationship, as a form of legitimation is an identifying category of politics (and they are not offered a legitimation that could make sense to them); *not* that all slave-states were illegitimate. A state can be legitimate and contain people whom it does not treat in political terms provided its legitimation story makes sense to 'a substantial number of the people'. In certain historical periods treating slaves, like the Helots, in this way may have made sense to the relevant constituency of citizens, even though 'now and around here' we do not think this.¹⁸

We can consequently see that Williams's account is not parasitic upon an external (moral) principle of basic equality once we recognise that the legitimation story is offered to each citizen, because it is the act of claiming authority that generates the need for justification. The idea is that not doing so would be a performative contradiction of some sort as the claim to authority – which is intrinsic to politics – implies some account of

¹⁷ As Fabian Freyenhagen notes, Williams holds that 'in the modern world the questions of legitimacy and justification need to be answered in a way which addresses each citizen's reason and judgment': 'Taking Reasonable Pluralism Seriously: An Internal Critique of Political Liberalism', *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2011), p. 335.

¹⁸ This does not commit Williams to the view that slavery is morally acceptable: 'crimes against stateless persons are surely crimes, and Helot-like slavery surely violates rights': *IBWD*, p. 6.

justification or explanation. If the state makes no such claim on certain people, by not incorporating them as citizens, the scope of the BLD is limited to those from whom it demands allegiance.¹⁹

The Consensus Critique

Critics also claim that Williams endorses an erroneous consensus view of politics. For instance, when he claims that LEG + Modernity = Liberalism, his critics allege that he is blind to the pervasive plurality of judgements about what makes sense ‘now and around here’. Jonathan Floyd argues that there is no ‘pre-existing arrangement to be found about which forms of political authority are acceptable’²⁰ and contends that Williams’s account fails because ‘the attempt to identify and then reconcile us to some putatively latent set of ideals in our local way of life is on a hiding to nothing on account of the very plurality of ideals which surrounds us’.²¹ Michael Freeden makes the same point when he insists that the idea that a state could make sense to its subjects in the way Williams suggests ensures that the BLD offers an ‘unfeasible return to an ideal-type expectation’.²² Likewise, Sleat insists that by ‘grounding his theory in the hope or actuality of agreement on ... the conditions of legitimacy ... Williams’s theory becomes vulnerable to exactly the same challenge that other realists have posed to liberalism as a consensus-based theory’.²³

¹⁹ It might be thought that my ‘restrictive’ interpretation emphasises the more marginal papers in *In the Beginning* at the expense of ‘Realism and Moralism in Political Theory’. The latter however was initially presented on 23 May 1996 in Cambridge under the title ‘Moralism and Realism in Liberal Politics’ (see www.histecon.magd.cam.ac.uk/past_hecsms.htm, accessed 11 July 2012) and remained unpublished in Williams’s lifetime. ‘From Freedom to Liberty’ was published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* in 2001 (and is the most polished paper in the collection). Williams *may* have emphasised the more restrictive interpretation to dispel these interpretative problems.

²⁰ Jonathan Floyd, ‘From Historical Contextualism, to Mentalism, to Behaviourism’, in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 44.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²² Freeden, ‘Interpretative Realism and Prescriptive Realism’, p. 6.

²³ Sleat, ‘Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory’, p. 500.

However, these complaints trade on various misinterpretations. Sleat insists that Williams holds that judgements about the acceptability of the state will be unanimous when he writes that, for Williams, ‘universal acceptance is a necessary condition of legitimacy’,²⁴ and this also appears to be Freedman’s complaint. Yet Williams states explicitly that having ‘something to say to each person’ does not imply that ‘this is something that this person or group will necessarily accept’ because there may be ‘anarchists, or utterly unreasonable people, or bandits, or merely enemies’ (*IBWD*, pp. 135–6). In consequence, satisfying the BLD ‘does not coincide with this insatiable ideal of many a political theoretician: universal consent’ (*IBWD*, p. 136, n. 8).

Who has to be satisfied by the BLD is a good question, and it depends on the circumstances. Moreover, it is a political question, which depends on political circumstances. Obviously, the people to be satisfied should include a substantial number of the people: beyond that, they may include other powers, groups ... young people who need to understand what is happening, influential critics who need to be persuaded and so forth. (If this position seems alarmingly relativist, it is important, indeed essential ... to reflect that in the end no theorist has any way of advancing beyond it. He or she may invoke absolute or universal conditions of legitimacy, which any ‘reasonable’ person should accept; but in doing this, he or she speaks to an audience in a given situation, who share these conceptions of reasonableness). (*IBWD*, p. 136)

Williams is therefore categorically *not* endorsing a ‘universal acceptance’ view according to which the legitimacy of the state depends on the unanimous acceptance of the legitimization story. Rather, if the state makes sense to a sufficient number of people (we cannot be more precise than that) the situation transcends the conditions of unmediated coercion in which politics is impossible. To this end, just as there is no timeless pre-political moral standard which determines to whom the state must try to legitimate itself (as I claimed), there is also no pre-political moral standard that determines how wide the *acceptance* of the legitimization story must be. It is possible and altogether likely that certain people will insist that the legitimization does not make sense and therefore refuse to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

recognise their relation to their rulers as being political in kind. Yet Williams recognises, and his critics forget, that it is often crude to make a binary distinction about legitimacy, which is why he emphasises that ‘the considerations that support LEG are scalar’ (*IBWD*, p. 10).²⁵ In some states it may be impossible to legitimate power to all and we may have to accept that some people are simply being subordinated (Paramilitary Catholics in Northern Ireland in the recent past spring to mind). However, Williams helps us to see that politics is still occurring with respect to those to whom the order can be legitimated.²⁶ Despite the inherently contextualist nature of judgements about who must be satisfied by the legitimisation story, the difference between the situations in which a story is offered and generally accepted, and those in which the powerful either fail to offer a justification at all or offer one that fails to make sense to their subjects, should in principle be clear.²⁷ Hence John Horton is right to note that Williams does not hold that the claim to political authority is always ‘settled or uncontested’, but rather that ‘all parties that claim a relationship of political authority, rather than one of mere domination, must recognize the basic legitimization demand as something that needs to be addressed’.²⁸

²⁵ There is no reason to think that it is easy to make blanket judgements about legitimacy, and doing so will often be a matter of judgement that may depend on the perspective of the people doing the judging. Consider apartheid South Africa. Putting it bluntly, we might say that if some white South Africans sincerely endorsed the legitimisation story, there is reason to hold that they were in a political relationship with their rulers. But in regards to the non-white population, for whom the story did not make sense, political relations did not hold as they felt that they were merely subordinated. If, as I presume was the case, such people were not avowedly seen by the rulers to be enemies (like the Helots in Sparta) or slaves (as in ancient Athens) we can cogently hold that the state was illegitimate because the legitimisation story failed to make sense to the vast majority of subjects. Moreover, as we – unlike the Spartans vis-à-vis the Helots – think (for complicated historical reasons to do with the disenchanted nature of modernity) that excluding groups for racist reasons does not make sense, as external observers we can conclude that politics is not occurring between the vast majority of persons and the state because they did not recognise the political authority of their rulers.

²⁶ We can develop the thrust of this if we consider how the coercion of those who deny that the legitimisation story makes sense could be part of strategy that seeks to secure a more wide-ranging legitimacy in the long run. Such coercion is different to the acts of a state that thinks that it can solve such problems by war or genocide. I am grateful to Mark Philp for stressing these implications of Williams’s account. The question of how such people should be treated by the state prior to this remains, and, as an anonymous reviewer for *Political Studies* has observed, this issue is worthy of further discussion in the wider realist literature.

²⁷ I am very grateful to Geoff Hawthorn and Paul Sagar for numerous discussions of this point.

²⁸ Horton, ‘Political Legitimacy, Justice, and Consent’, p. 131.

Having disposed of this ‘universal-acceptance’ misreading, we are in a better position to assess the more charitable variant of the consensus critique. Floyd suggests that although *modernity* may rule out some legitimisation stories it does not help us choose which ones we ought to accept; even if ‘modern populations *do* find the notion of the divine rights of kings unacceptable [this] does nothing to guide our choices between say, social democracy or neo-liberalism, luck-egalitarians and libertarians ... and so on and so forth’.²⁹ However, by repeating the moralistic mistake of conflating our judgements about *optimal* theories of justice with the idea that a state may be an *acceptable* solution, this misses the crux of what judgements about legitimacy concern. The appropriate criterion of making sense is not ‘Does this capture my favoured conception of justice?’, but (the inherently political question) ‘Is this an acceptable order of authority given that I must coexist with other citizens who have conflicting interests and different moral beliefs?’

With this in mind we can ask if it is fair to rebuke Williams for holding that ‘now and around here’ only liberalism makes sense. It is worth bearing in mind two things when assessing this accusation. First, the importance of securing order and the conditions of cooperation, and second, Williams’s capacious description of liberal societies as those that aim ‘to combine the rule of law with a liberty more extensive than in most earlier societies, a disposition to toleration, and a commitment to some kinds of equality’ (*TT*, p. 264). Once we do so we ought to be less disposed to object to his claim. For one thing, throughout the western world regimes that are loosely designated by the term ‘liberalism’ are alone capable of securing various economic goods, minimising military turmoil, and ensuring that we can hold our political representatives to account. This is not a judgement about the ideal moral optimality of actually existing liberalism, but a claim about the merits of realistically achievable competing ways of ordering our political institutions.

²⁹ Floyd, ‘From Historical Contextualism, to Mentalism, to Behaviourism’, p. 46.

Moreover, even though some people will deny that liberalism in Williamsian terms makes sense, if these complaints are to be politically convincing they must offer some reasons for thinking that viable alternatives exist that will be as good at ensuring order and the conditions of cooperation here and now. Although we cannot simply declare that this is impossible, Williams's view is buttressed by the fact that twentieth-century history shows us that alternative political creeds have on this score failed spectacularly.³⁰

Once we grasp the force of this point we are in a better position to ask if social democrats, neo-liberals and luck egalitarians – or, better, the citizens who endorse the commitments these theories rationalise – will disagree about the acceptability of the liberal state because they disagree about its justice-optimality. This is clearly much less obvious than Floyd implies because even if some political philosophers, who link justice and legitimacy closely, may disagree about the acceptability of actually existing liberal states, it is likely that this tells us more about the esoteric and otherworldly nature of their disputes than about the opinion of most citizens. Most of the time most citizens in liberal states seemingly consider winning a democratic election, respecting the capacious liberal values that Williams focuses on, and not violating some basic human rights, to be enough to confer legitimacy, regardless of the content of their optimal moral theories of justice, as their acquiescence attests.³¹

³⁰ Here I am indebted to Paul Sagar's 'From Scepticism to Liberalism', which was presented at the 2012 MANCEPT Workshops in Political Theory. As Williams notes, the point is that in many cases various utopian alternatives to liberalism 'do not even reach the threshold of offering a serious political consideration' (*IBWD*, p. 92) because they do not engage with the basic features of modernity.

³¹ If Tamsin Shaw's interpretation of Nietzsche's political thought is correct, by claiming that some kind of meaningful convergence regarding the conditions of legitimacy can exist 'now and around here', Williams disagrees with Nietzsche, as Nietzsche holds that 'in the absence of myth or religion ... the kind of convergence that is necessary to support a shared form of political authority' cannot exist: see Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Scepticism* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 8. However, this problem results from Nietzsche's adoption of the idea that legitimacy can only be secured via convergence on the independent or moral sources of normative authority – and this is precisely what Williams's account denies.

Therefore, once we accept that Williams *is not* committed to thinking that every person (a) has to endorse liberalism as the *ideal* way to organise political society, or (b) must even consider it acceptable in the more minimal terms I have been focusing on, we can conclude that he does not endorse the unrealistic ‘consensus’ view to which his critics object, as he is merely committed to the view that liberalism (understood capaciously) will be considered acceptable by a sufficient number of people.³² Certain groups may think that ‘there is no legitimate government outside of their own creed, and that the liberal state makes no legitimate demand on them’ (*IBWD*, p. 136), but Williams remarks that we often misrepresent the outlooks of such groups and depict them as consisting entirely of fanatics (he claims ‘this is a standard move, at the present time, in the demonization of Islam’). In these situations, we need to utilise a ‘realistic social understanding, a desire for cooperation if possible, and political intelligence’ (*IBWD*, p. 137).

One way to avoid unrealistic understandings of what forms of political society people will find acceptable may be to move in a quasi-Humean direction and hold that judgements about acceptability are conditioned by our psychological propensities, so that the BLD can be satisfied if authority is exercised by rulers and acquiesced with by the population. (This makes sense of the remark that ‘it is obvious that in many states most of the time the question of legitimate authority can be sufficiently taken for granted for people to get on with other kinds of political agenda’: *IBWD*, p. 62.) If so, the purported problem about consensus may dissipate. In the *Treatise* Hume writes that he seeks:

interest more immediately connected with government, and which may be at once the original motive to its institution, and the source of our obedience to it. This interest I find to consist in the security and protection, which we enjoy in political society, and which we can never attain, when perfectly free and independent. As interest,

³² Floyd also claims that Williams’s view only makes sense if liberalism is ‘so broad as to radically under-determine our political options’: ‘From Historical Contextualism, to Mentalism, to Behaviourism’, p. 45. But there is no reason to suppose that Williams holds that there will be consensus on what is required by the concrete instantiation of these thin liberal principles, because he never suggests that we can avoid debate and compromise and insists that we must reflectively consider how much philosophy can determine politically.

therefore, is the immediate sanction of government, the one can have no longer being than the other; and whenever the civil magistrate carries his oppression so far as to render his authority perfectly intolerable, we are no longer bound to submit to it. The cause ceases; the effect must cease also.³³

While I do not wish to deny that a thoroughgoing Humean account differs from Williams's on various fronts, the thrust of the above is compatible with Williams's view. For Williams, the state offers a solution to the first question, which enables us to pursue our interests. Williams claims (and Hume avers) that if the state ceases to secure the goods associated with it being a solution to the first question, it will no longer make sense to obey it. In contrast to what the consensus critics suggest, 'now and around here' there is reason to think that most subjects find the thin sort of liberalism Williams denotes *acceptable* in the sense he requires even if they disagree about its *optimality*. As Mark Philp notes, 'while that opinion is not necessarily enthusiastic and positive, and for some groups is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, nonetheless, the centre can and does hold in many orders, and does so with our collective concurrence (albeit motivated very differently for different groups)'.³⁴

The BLD and its Normative Content

Charles Larmore contends that Williams fails to offer an alternative to political moralism. 'It is not so much the BLD as rather the justification of state power, whatever it may be, in which satisfying the BLD is meant to consist', Larmore maintains, 'that must express a "morality prior to politics": it has to embody an idea of what constitutes the just exercise of political order – specifically, an idea of what constitutes the just exercise of coercive power – and that is not only a moral conception but one whose validity must be

³³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, Penguin, 1985 [1793]), pp. 601–2.

³⁴ Mark Philp, 'Realism Without Illusions', p. 634.

understood as antecedent to the state's own authority by virtue of serving to ground it.'³⁵ It is true that judgements about what makes sense are normative, but given that Williams acknowledges this – as I noted, 'when we get to our own case, the notion "MS" does become normative, because what (most) MS to us is a structure of authority which we think we should accept' (*IBWD*, p. 11) – Larmore's suggestion that this somehow problematises Williams's conception of the BLD is unwarranted: this does not preclude Williams from reminding us of (a) the primacy of solving the first question, and (b) the unique character of life under political authority. Thus, even though what makes sense to us is a normative question, this does not impugn Williams's attempt to offer an account of political rule and the ethic internal to it. To this end, Larmore muddles Williams's attempt to explain what must be in place for politics (as opposed to war) to be occurring, and the various normative judgements that we make about what makes sense to us.

This invites the possible second rejoinder to his complaint: namely, that speaking about the necessity of an antecedent conception of the just exercise of political power does not capture the nature of the sorts of judgements that actually play a role in judging purported answers to the first political question. As I have argued, judgements about what makes sense are far more nuanced than Larmore implies because they must be sensitive to the exigencies of real-world politics. To this end, the BLD fulfils the relevant criteria of realist as opposed to moralist political thought by giving 'greater autonomy to distinctively political thought' (*IBWD*, p. 3) and by not conceiving of the 'basic relation of morality to politics as being represented by either the enactment or structural model' (*IBWD*, p. 8). Therefore, even though Williams's account references various moral/normative judgements, this does not make the BLD a species of the 'applied moral philosophy' approach to political theory that he seeks to confute.

³⁵ Charles Larmore, 'What Is Political Philosophy?', *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2013), p. 291.

Moreover, the thrust of Larmore's line of critique neglects Williams's point that we should get past the notion that moral principles must not only underlie, but also in some way precede, political practice. This is particularly clear in Williams's papers on toleration where he maintains that 'instead of trying to reach the politics of liberalism from a moral assumption that concerns toleration [namely, a view of autonomy], we should consider first the politics of liberalism, including its practices of toleration, and then ask, what, if any, kinds of moral assumption are related to that' (*IBWD*, p. 135). When we do so it is hard to 'discover any one attitude that underlies liberal practice' because toleration requires 'social virtues such as the desire to cooperate and to get on peaceably with one's fellow citizens and a capacity for seeing how things look to them ... some scepticism, the lack of fanatical conviction on religious issues, and so on' (*IBWD*, p. 138). This reflects Williams's belief that when we think about legitimation in realistic terms we should recognise that people come to accept, in a less reflective manner than is acknowledged by philosophers like Larmore, certain kinds of arrangements which simply strike them as making sense for numerous reasons that may have very little to do with considerations of justice, and may indeed have little volitional quality (as they are in part given to us by history).³⁶ In this sense Larmore fails to grasp the centrality of Williams's contention that in politics, as in much of life, we must remember the truth of Goethe's dictum, *in the beginning was the deed*.

The Unrealism of Williamsian Politics

I now move to the final line of complaint, the suggestion that Williams idealistically misunderstands politics. Freedman remarks that Williams should not only be maligned for retaining the (unrealistic) liberal view that political rule should be understood in 'terms of

³⁶ As Williams puts it, if something makes sense to me this is 'a matter of my reasons, my desires, my on-going projects, and I do not choose all of them': *SP*, p. 334.

trust and cooperation, a theme quite central to Locke's and Rawls's versions of liberalism', but also for failing to recognise that 'legitimacy is not necessarily an attribute of all political arrangements, even if sought after by a large number of political actors and thinkers'.³⁷ The worry here is that Williams's belief that there is something unique about the nature of political rule, given the peculiarity of its claim to authority and the concomitant demand for justification, is baseless because countless examples exist where rulers have routinely disregarded the 'might is not right' axiom at the core of the BLD and have failed to offer a justification of their power which makes sense to their subjects without failing to be 'political' in some sense.³⁸

Yet we can recognise this and resist the conclusion that Williams's account is accordingly flawed. Mark Philp's discussion of Nazi Germany – a regime that clearly falls into the category Freedden invokes – in *Political Conduct* is demonstrative in this respect. Philp claims that although it is absurd to deny that the Nazi regime acted politically insofar as it 'sought to adapt and extend existing forms of political authority [and] relied on an array of traditional political institutions and mechanisms to achieve [its] ends', it is equally hard to insist that it exercised political *authority*. For one thing, its actions led 'to an increasingly distorted set of political ambitions and an increasingly coercive political regime' which ensured that 'the order retained ... a political form but it was less concerned with securing its authority as opposed to establishing its domination'.³⁹ Furthermore, the fact that the most abhorrent policies were carried out in secret shows that 'the state could not legitimate its activities and would have forfeited its claim to a right to rule had its activities been made public'.⁴⁰ Philp concludes that Nazi Germany was in effect 'being run by a cabal within the state – an inner state that had no publicly

³⁷ Freedden, 'Interpretative Realism and Prescriptive Realism', pp. 6–7.

³⁸ See also Baderin, 'Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory', p. 9.

³⁹ Philp, *Political Conduct*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

legitimated ... right to rule', and that when 'things move in this direction ... it becomes increasingly incoherent to describe the relationship between the political order and its victims as political in character'.⁴¹

This reminder about the peculiar nature of regimes that fail to recognise something akin to the demands explicated by the BLD help us to see that although, *qua* Freeden, numerous malevolent regimes exist that appear to be 'political' in some sense – they use state institutions and so on – the relationship that they have to some of the people whom they coerce may not be political *in kind*. Once we accept this there is no reason to think that the existence of such regimes impugns Williams's attempt to delineate some central features of properly political relationships, as such examples can simply be seen to be deficient in this respect. Hence, it is not problematic that some regimes clearly did (and do) not exercise legitimacy in Williams's sense, because when they act in this manner it is hard to describe the relationship that they have with their subjects as being political in kind.

To this end, Williams helps us to make sense of the ways in which regimes like Nazi Germany are not only morally abhorrent but can be said to pervert politics. The point is that even though political power is coercive, not all coercion is political, in much the same way that even though war might be diplomacy by other means, war is not politics by other means. Hence, the appropriate response to the reminder that some states violate the 'might is not right' axiom is not to conclude that Williams's account fails because 'anything goes' as far as political rule is concerned – which is something Freeden comes dangerously close to suggesting – but rather to recognise that such regimes do not exercise political authority. The very existence of such regimes does not therefore refute

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 72–3.

Williams's conception of legitimacy precisely because legitimacy is an evaluative standard which, as such, some coercive orders will fail to meet.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that Williams's critics fail to grasp the force of his account because they misunderstand the claims at the heart of it about the acceptability of the state, as well as the resulting open conception of politics, which allows multiple (but not infinite) variety about which purported solutions might make sense as answers to the first political question. This enables Williams to dodge the horns of the dilemma: that is, either overspecifying the political so as to haphazardly impose a set of liberal norms, or removing all content so that politics becomes compatible with any kind of coercion. At certain points his critics come alarmingly close to one or the other and mistakenly suppose that because the BLD has some normative content this implies some vestige of political moralism. In so doing, they implicitly affirm the categories of 'politics as applied morality' or 'politics as bare force and coercion' that Williams wants to transcend.

I have defended the suggestion that the BLD is a standard of evaluation derived from the practice of politics, rather than an external moral standpoint, precisely because it is sensitive to the distinctively political demand for allegiance which characterises the relationship between the state and its subjects. Once we accept this, we should acknowledge that political theory cannot simply be an exercise in applying a set of principles, derived from an external moral standpoint, to politics. The central questions of political morality arise within politics, relate to the basic legitimacy of the state, and are conditioned by the unique historical and political situation in which the demand for legitimation arises. This problematizes the models of moral application the political moralists favour as such legitimating values arise from within particular contexts of action.

These claims challenge the suggestion that political theory can ultimately be seen as an exercise in applied ethics as they ensure that significant disanalogies hold between the moral and the political cases; hence Williams's claim that the question of first political importance does not concern which moral principles we ought to enact, or the moral conditions of just co-existence, because such disputes only take place once the first political question has been solved. This is the basic mistake of political moralism.

To this end, Williams urges us to acknowledge that political theory should begin with an understanding of the distinctive character of politics as this enables us to understand the goods that are internal to it. Importantly, this allows us to make some ethical sense of politics without recourse to the conceptions of 'morality' that he insists we must jettison, because rather than applying external moral principles – an activity of which he is suspicious, for reasons outlined in Chapter One – our most fundamental normative political arguments relate to a universally experienced feature of politics itself. This is a compelling realism because Williams does not deny that normative considerations have a place in politics; rather, he challenges the (typically unquestioned) authority of moral philosophy by reminding us that if political theory is to contribute to the on-going task of making sense of the political situation in which we find ourselves, we must focus on the unique nature of political allegiance, and address the perennial first question in light of the unique historical circumstances in which the demand for legitimization arises.

Appendix: The Critical Theory Principle

In this chapter I have argued that one of the attractions of Williams's conception of legitimacy is its acknowledgement that any adequate account of political legitimization must recognise the contextual and historically specific nature of subjects' judgements about which political formations *make sense* as answers to the first political question. Yet, as we

have seen, Williams recognises that this is a potentially problematic feature of his account; subjects' judgements about what *makes sense* might themselves be a result of the exercise of coercion, and in these situations a state can be judged illegitimate because such exercises of power violate the 'might is not right' axiom. As I noted earlier, Williams gestures towards the possibility of developing a critical theory principle to overcome these worries. However, as the discussion of the critical principle in *IBWD* is very fragmentary, here I focus on Williams's fullest account: his articulation of the 'critical theory test' (CTT) in *Truth and Truthfulness* (*TT*, pp. 221–32). While Williams claims that the critical theory test can help us to determine whether or not such subjects' judgements are themselves a product of coercion (and therefore incapable of genuinely conferring legitimacy) while respecting the contextualist thrust of his account of legitimacy,⁴² I show that any plausible account of the CTT *must* utilise various external standards of social explanation, and argue that Williams accordingly fails to offer a compelling internal account of a critical theory test.

Williams argues that the great advantage of the critical theory test lies in the fact that it 'offers a kind of critique that is not based simply on the values of the critic' because it only employs 'the genuinely universal principle, that coercion itself cannot constitute legitimation and it deploys the idea that some methods of belief-formation are simply coercive' (*TT*, p. 221). We do not attack a system as unjust or illegitimate simply because we do not 'share its values and accept its legitimations' but instead seek to show why its acceptance itself 'approximates to a paradigm of injustice, unmediated coercion' (*TT*, p. 221).

As a first articulation of how we might think about the critical theory test, Williams suggests the following:

⁴² For example, he claims that even if racist and misogynist rationalisations of disadvantage are 'accepted by the dominated', such instances are 'an *easy case* for the critical theory principle' (*IBWD*, p. 7).

Suppose that of two parties in the society, one is advantaged over the other, in particular with respect to power; and suppose that there is a story which is taken to legitimate this distribution, a story which is at least professed by the advantaged party and is generally accepted by the disadvantaged; and suppose that the basic cause of the fact that the disadvantaged accept the story, and hence the system, is the power of the advantaged party: then the fact that they accept the system does not actually legitimate it, and *pro tanto* the distribution is unjust. (TT, p. 221)

If the story is not ‘at least professed’ by the advantaged, as in the case of the guardians’ use of the myth of the metals in *The Republic*, this is a fairly straightforward case of enforced false-consciousness. For this reason Williams notes that the more interesting cases are those in which both the advantaged and the disadvantaged accept the story and those in which the manipulation may not be intentional or its methods too blatant.

Williams closely follows Geuss’s argument in *The Idea of a Critical Theory*⁴³ and insists that we must approach these questions in deeply contextualist terms rather than the transcendental (quasi-Kantian) terms favoured by theorists such as Habermas (TT, p. 226). He proposes the following test for the beliefs held by disadvantaged groups which purportedly legitimate the unequal distribution of power in a society: *If they were to understand properly how they came to hold this belief, would they give it up?* (TT, p. 227). According to Williams this enables the CTT to avoid labelling too many coercive orders as illegitimate, as we do not have to include all beliefs that result from the exercise of coercion (such as everything children learn at school). However, he admits that there is an ambiguity regarding the ‘understand properly’ clause: ‘if we are supposing that the background is simply these people’s current set of beliefs, then almost anything will pass the test ... [while] if we suppose on the other hand, an entirely external frame of reference, then nothing very distinctive is achieved by the test’ (TT, p. 227). Although we must start with the people’s current beliefs, therefore, we must envisage the people going through a process of criticism in which they reflect on their beliefs and their formation.

⁴³ See Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 62–6.

Williams writes that this is ‘an artificial rationalization, but something like it does happen on a social scale’ (*TT*, p. 227).

He sketches a four-step process of rationalisation (*TT*, pp. 227–9, italics added). The disadvantaged initially believe **(1)** ‘*the distribution of powers and advantages in the system is basically just*’.⁴⁴ However, they then **(2)** reflect on the fact that *they believe (1) only because members of the more powerful party (call them the instructors) give them appropriate training*. In making this claim, Williams writes that we assume ‘that the question of the justice of the arrangements has arisen in the society, and that on the whole its members do believe (1)’. Williams claims that we can also assume that almost everyone in the society recognises **(2)** in some form (*TT*, p. 228). With this in mind he argues **(3)** that the disadvantaged can now reflect that *it is only if (1) is true that the instructors are in a sound position to claim that (1) is true; the basis of their authority comes from the system itself*. Which is to say that the disadvantaged will recognise that ‘one way or another ... the justice of the system, the authority of the instructors, and hence their own reasons for accepting the justice of the system all hang together’ (*TT*, p. 228). They can then ask ‘if there are any independent ways of assessing the instructors’ authority’ which might determine whether it is ‘more or less likely that they have got it right’ (*TT*, p. 228). This can yield the thought that **(4)** *there are perfectly good explanations of the instructors’ belief in their own authority. This means, granted (3), that there are good explanations of their teaching (1) which do not imply that (1) is true*.

In contrast to the Platonic and Kantian traditions which involve the idea that there is a ‘genuine’ way of ‘establishing the truth about justice and other such matters’, Williams argues that this process can make sense in negative terms because it simply uses the ‘weak’ assumption that, granted **(3)** and **(4)**, the ‘processes of instruction do *not* have the

⁴⁴ Williams uses the phrase ‘just’ in *TT* but I think this can be read as being synonymous with ‘legitimate’, given the account he offers in *IBWD*. Indeed, the discussion of justice in *ELP*, pp. 165–7, is extremely close to his later conception of legitimacy.

authority that is claimed for them' (*TT*, p. 229). If so, the disadvantaged will realise that they accept the instructors' legitimisation claims because it is in the instructors' interest that they do so. When this happens we have a situation in which the social system approximates the exercise of unmediated coercion as the legitimisation story no longer makes sense to the subjects.

While there is much to admire in this exposition, to my mind the problem with the structure of Williams's argument is clearly step **(2)**. Call the justification of the distribution of power in **(1)** '*LEG-Story*'. It seems to me that it is only reasonable to presume that persons will accept that they believe *LEG-Story* due to their training (as **(2)** suggests) if one holds that judgements about **(1)** cannot be ultimately grounded or justified by tracking some set of external justificatory conditions. To wit, if we countenance the possibility that an unequal distribution of powers and advantages in a system could be just, as some external justification of this state of affairs could hold, a set of subjects might reflectively believe that they endorse *LEG-Story* because their beliefs track the truth, rather than because they are trained to do so. Consider the case of a religious believer in a theocracy: there is no reason to think that he could not accept that his religious beliefs secure the position of the powerful theocrats without this causing him to give them up, provided he believes that the theocratic claims justify his social arrangement for other reasons (i.e. they represent the word of God). Hence, even if he recognises that his beliefs about the distribution of power and advantage are in the theocrats' interest, he may not endorse the suggestion that he *only* believes this because it is in the theocrats' interest. In this respect, it appears that Williams begs the question to the extent that his account of the critical theory test is implicitly committed to the view that there can be no transcendental justification of a *LEG-Story* which purports to justify a radically unequal distribution of powers and advantages in a society which its subjects'

beliefs might track. Of course, we may be sceptical about the possibility of such a justification in the first place (indeed it might be thought that this conclusion derives from Williams's arguments in ethics). However, this is a highly contentious metaethical position, and accordingly not the sort of 'weak' assumption that he insists the account of the critical theory test relies on.

The *Truth and Truthfulness* account also implies – quite strongly – that any inequality in the distribution of power will likely be unmasked as illegitimate once this process of reflective questioning begins. However, this conclusion goes against the spirit of Williams's conception of legitimacy as it suggests that nearly all states (past and present) would fail this test. This was clearly not Williams's intention: as I have said, he wanted to offer a kind of analytical demarcation of the conditions of political rule, and it would be a strange consequence if his commitment to the critical theory test resulted in us concluding that most politics is simply illegitimate manipulation. Indeed, in his paper 'Human Rights and Relativism' he explicitly denies that we can always assume that inequitable distributions of power violate the critical theory principle; he insists that societies ordered around theocratic conceptions of government or patriarchal ideas about the rights of women will not always be illegitimate because such legitimization stories might make sense:

We may see the members of this society as jointly caught up in a set of beliefs which regulate their lives and which are indeed unsound, but which are shared in ways that move society further away from the paradigm of unjust coercion. In that case, although we shall have various things to say against this state of affairs, and although we may see the decline of these beliefs as representing a form of liberation, we may be less eager to insist that its way of life constitutes a violation of human rights [and is thereby illegitimate].
(*IBWD*, pp. 71–2)

This suggests that what Williams needs (and what he is searching for) is a kind of middle-ground position in which we can hold that some justifications for an inequality in power can be considered legitimate even if we have reason to doubt the veracity of their justifications, as this would enable us to avoid the (unrealistic) view that all societies that are inequitable (in the sense to which Williams alludes) are illegitimate. However, he also

wants to be able to say that certain false justifications of power fail the CTT even if people currently think they make sense, as this is a mark of extreme coercion. The problem of how to differentiate between the two cases is never resolved by Williams because the account of the CTT he articulates in *TT* (which is, by some way, the fullest discussion he gives of it in his corpus) seems to delineate too many states of affairs as being illegitimate.

It would be excessively harsh to be too damning on Williams given the preliminary nature of his work on the CTT. However, the difficulties faced by Williams's internalist account of legitimacy in this respect may simply reflect the fact that it is unlikely that any philosophical account could satisfactorily enable us to articulate any general test which could determine whether or not subjects' acceptance of a legitimization story is brought about in such a way that the state can be classed as legitimate. If so, this yields the more generally Williamsian thought that this is another limit of philosophy that we must accept, as we ought to recognise that providing any general criteria for determining when the critical theory principle is violated is going to be deeply problematic. As I see it, the only sensible conclusion to draw here is that this is another area where nuanced political judgement, rather than philosophical theory, must reign supreme.

Chapter Three

Realism, Moralism and Contemporary Political Theory

When I was coming up, it was a dangerous world, and you knew exactly who they were. It was us vs. them, and it was clear who them was. Today, we are not so sure who the they are, but we know they're there.¹

In the previous chapter I focused on Williams's conception of legitimacy, defended his fundamental claim that the central questions of political morality arise within politics, and argued that, accordingly, political theory should not in the first instance be seen as an exercise in applying a set of external moral principles to politics. In this chapter I question Williams's critique of contemporary political theory more generally. While understanding the exact nature of his critique is difficult due to the unfinished and fragmentary nature of his political essays, in this chapter I argue that his political realism and the kind of normative approach pursued by some contemporary political philosophers are conceptually closer, and their relation more complicated, than the realist critics of post-Rawlsian political philosophy concede. I distinguish between contemporary political philosophers who adopt what I call 'ethics-first' approaches and those who pursue a 'political ethics', and argue that Williams's realism is closer to the work of political ethicists than he acknowledges because political ethicists do not apply an antecedent morality to politics in the way Williams objects to when criticising the dominant moralism of contemporary political thought. With this in mind, I question the extent to which Williams's *oeuvre* gives us reason to reject the work of political ethicists (like the later Rawls) on other grounds. To do so, I focus on his warnings about wishful thinking,

¹ George W. Bush. speech in Council Bluffs, Iowa, 21 January 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1302232.stm>

his claim that political moralism ignores the platitudes of politics, and his reminders about the limitations of the role that theory can play in politics. I argue that while these aspects of Williams's thought articulate various qualifications and correctives, there are greater similarities between his realism and a certain kind of political ethics than most contributors to the realist critique of political moralism acknowledge.

1. Realism and Contemporary Normative Political Theory

In the previous chapter we saw that Williams holds that political moralists pay insufficient attention to the centrality of answering the first question in realistic and practicable terms, and typically also forget the historically conditioned nature of judgements about what makes sense. Williams's political realism is described as a central influence on the current burgeoning realist countermovement in political theory, which makes a number of wide-ranging claims about the deficiencies of contemporary normative political theory. In this chapter I query the suggestion that contemporary normative political philosophers conventionally apply an antecedent morality to politics in the way Williams claims the 'enactment' and 'structural' models do, by distinguishing between two strands of contemporary normative political theory.

Some influential contemporary political philosophers do favour something akin to the approach Williams sketches as they proceed by outlining a set of moral principles independent of any reference to the circumstances of politics, which they then apply to the political realm. Dan McDermott characterises the underlying view of political philosophy at work in these accounts when he writes that political philosophy traffics 'in "oughts" – moral oughts. The discipline is thus a branch, or subset, of moral philosophy ... [as] political philosophers try to figure out the implications of morality [for political practice] ... a particular instance of the more general problem with which moral

philosophers are concerned'.² Following Raymond Geuss we can refer to these thinkers as 'ethics-first' theorists because they hold that 'one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step, one can apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents'.³ Ethics-first theorists often hold that any set of factual or empirical characteristics taken to be constitutive of the political only pertain to political philosophy as feasibility constraints and, as such, do not impinge on the truth conditions of normative claims. This view is prominent in the work of philosophers like G.A. Cohen, Robert Nozick and Adam Swift, and makes most sense of Williams's characterisation of political moralism as a form of applied moral philosophy.⁴

However there is another prominent strand of contemporary political philosophy – which I refer to as political ethics – which objects to the ethics-first approach on methodological grounds. Andrea Sangiovanni has perhaps given the most illuminating description of this approach which he refers to as the 'practice-dependent' view. According to Sangiovanni, 'practice-independent' theorists hold that the moral principles that ought to regulate politics are 'justified by appealing solely to moral values or to facts about human beings as such. No reference is made to existing institutions or practices, and the content, scope and justification of such principles in no way depend on the underlying structure or functioning of such practices and institutions'.⁵ In contrast, 'practice-dependent' theorists endorse a more hermeneutic approach, which holds that 'the content, scope, and justification of a conception of justice depends on the structure and

² Daniel McDermott, 'Analytical Political Philosophy', in David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12.

³ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, p. 8. Although I borrow this phrase from Geuss, my use of it is different, as on my reading fewer contemporary political philosophers endorse this approach than he implies.

⁴ See, G.A. Cohen, 'Facts and Principles', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2003), pp. 211–45; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1974); Adam Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances', *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2008), pp. 363–87.

⁵ Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Justice and the Priority of Politics to Morality', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2008), pp. 139–40.

form of the practices that the conception is intended to govern'.⁶ Rather than aiming for 'a conception of right in general' that is then applied to politics, the practice-dependent theorist 'begins from social and political institutions as they are here and now' because they recognise that 'the elaboration of a conception of justice is ... both a philosophical task and a historical and political one'.⁷ Sangiovanni insists that they accordingly respect the priority of politics to morality by recognising the importance of solving the first political question, but he holds that political philosophy can retain a normative edge by focusing on the reasons persons might have for endorsing an institutional structure.⁸ To this end, he insists that once the first political question has been solved 'attention can shift to other concerns; indeed, we might say that the structure for solving the first political question is not an end in itself, but a means for making other concerns eligible to political and social choice'.⁹

This account is influenced by, and is to some extent an explication of, Rawls's later work which is self-consciously premised on the idea that there is a significant difference between moral and political philosophy.¹⁰ Rather than adopting an ethics-first approach, Rawls begins with reference to an allegedly shared fund of basic ideas and principles taken to be implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society; these are taken as 'provisional fixed points'¹¹ and then 'worked up into a conception of political justice'.¹² As Burton Dreben notes, this approach begins *in mediis rebus* and contemplates if and how a set of values implicit in the practices of constitutional democracies can be explained,

⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

⁹ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁰ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 14.

¹¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, paperback edn (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 8.

¹² Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 5.

extended, and made internally consistent¹³ - which, as Rawls says, ensures that justice as fairness ‘starts from within a certain political tradition’.¹⁴

Williams nonetheless counts Rawls’s later work as a form of political moralism because he holds that it is still ‘a moral conception, one that is applied to a certain subject matter under certain conditions of constraint’ (*IBWD*, p. 2).¹⁵ He defends this interpretation by citing a passage from *Political Liberalism* where Rawls writes that the political conception ‘is of course, a moral conception’.¹⁶ But in the note accompanying this remark Rawls explains that ‘in saying that a conception is moral I mean, among other things, that its content is given by certain ideals, principles and standards; and that these norms articulate certain values, in this case political values’.¹⁷ This makes Williams’s reading of Rawls’s later work look rather hasty. Indeed, if we read Rawls’s work in light of Sangiovanni’s practice-dependence thesis, Williams’s suggestion that it is merely a reworked version of the structural model in which morality, understood as a practice that is prior and external to politics and offers constraints on what politics can do, is unpersuasive. This characterisation misses the subtleties of the hermeneutic exercise in which Rawls is engaged, an exercise which does not involve constructing a moral theory without any reference to the ‘circumstances of politics’ and then applying it, in the way that ethics-first theorists do.

¹³ Burton Dreben, ‘On Rawls and Political Liberalism’, in Samuel Freeman, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 332–3.

¹⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 14. See James Gledhill, ‘Rawls and Realism’, *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2012), pp. 55–82, for a defence of Rawls from the realist critique of political moralism. However, Gledhill does not focus on the aspects of Williams’s thought that I examine here which explain his antipathy toward Rawls’s later work; thus, he misconstrues the nature of Williams’s antagonism toward this kind of political philosophy.

¹⁵ This despite the fact that in his review of *Political Liberalism* Williams notes that Rawls ‘no longer offers a universal theory of justice’ and instead ‘offers a solution to ... a distinctively modern political problem’. Williams remarks that this ‘movement from a near-universal moral theory of social and economic justice to a political theory of the modern liberal state, with its pluralism and its toleration, is a remarkable, impressive and compelling transformation’: ‘A Fair State’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 15, no. 9 (13 May 1993), pp. 7–8.

¹⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11, n. 11.

In light of Sangiovanni's distinction between practice-dependent and practice-independent approaches, we can view the work of political ethicists as concerned with helping us to consider which institutional principles are justified in terms that, are (broadly speaking) compatible with the idea of *making sense* that Williams endorses even if they do not explicitly note the priority of the first question in the way Williams conceives of it. Once we see the work of political ethicists in these terms, Williams's insistence that we ought to view Rawls's later work as a species of political moralism is problematized: Rawls need not be read as denying the importance of solving the first political question in a way that respects the historical situation in which the demand for legitimation arises or as applying an external moral theory to the political in the way the enactment and structural models do.

This has repercussions for Williams's critique of contemporary political theory because it helps us to see that he falsely views contemporary normative political theorists as employing a monolithic kind of political moralism.¹⁸ In the remainder of this chapter I examine three facets of Williams's work that might explain his hostility toward the work of contemporary political ethicists like Rawls: his aversion to moralistic understandings of moral psychology, his reminders about the platitudes of politics, and his remarks about the relationship between moral theory and political practice. I argue that although Williams articulates some important correctives which political ethicists should heed many of these can be incorporated without leading to categorical changes in the way they theorise about politics – with one exception being the commitment to very strict interpretations of the liberal principle of legitimacy (although even in this case the situation is far more complex than realists typically acknowledge). This ensures that there are greater similarities

¹⁸ I am indebted to Matt Sleat for discussion of this point.

between Williams's realism and a certain kind of political ethics than realists have hitherto noted.

2. Wishful Thinking

When expanding on his claim that in *Political Liberalism* Rawls articulates a 'moral' as opposed to an appropriately political theory, Williams points to Rawls's insistence that liberalism is not a mere *modus vivendi* but a principled solution sustained 'by the moral psychology of citizens living within an overlapping consensus'. Williams objects to this because the basis of Rawlsian co-existence, 'and the qualities elicited by those conditions, include the highest moral powers' (*IBWD*, p. 2, n.2) which he takes to confirm that Rawls's later work still 'implies a contrast between principle and interest, or morality and prudence, which signifies the continuation of a (Kantian) morality as the framework of the system' (*IBWD*, p. 2). However, the suggestion that a political theory should be abandoned because it pursues a moral consensus is rather blunt; for this criticism to be persuasive we must have reason to believe that the imagined consensus is excessively unrealistic in some respect. In this section I question if political ethicists are susceptible to this line of complaint by assessing the role that various psychological claims play in Rawls's later work in light of Williams's account of the dangers of wishful thinking.

An account of moral psychology plays a central role in Rawls's attempt to show how 'it is possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines'.¹⁹ Rawls holds that we can assume that 'human beings must have a moral nature, not of course a perfect such nature, yet one that can understand, act on, and be sufficiently moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice to support a

¹⁹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xxxvii.

society guided by its ideals and principles'.²⁰ In *The Law of Peoples* he states that because 'the limits of the possible are not given by the actual ... we have to rely on conjecture and speculation, arguing as best we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist'.²¹ He claims that some idealisation is necessary if we are to retain faith in the possibility of progressive political change,²² but that it is not problematic provided it is 'realistically utopian' where this means that, following Rousseau, we take *men as they are* and *laws as they might be*. When we do this we can extend 'what are ordinarily thought of as the limits of practical political possibility'. By satisfying this requirement Rawls holds that we can conclude that 'the nature of the social world allows reasonably just constitutional democracies'.²³ When Rawls claims that an overlapping consensus 'affirmed on moral grounds'²⁴ is possible, his reasoning is thus self-consciously conjectural, which is one of the reasons why he emphasises the role that a kind of Kantian faith plays in this account.²⁵

For our purposes the important underlying claim endorsed by Rawls is that his political theory is sufficiently realistic as his conception of democratic citizenship is not ruled out by our understanding of history and psychology. On what grounds can realists like Williams object to this kind of argument? Rawls's claim that citizens have a moral nature that can be sufficiently moved by considerations of justice so as to make compliance with his favoured institutional set-up viable, ensures that his theory is marked with optimism from the outset. However, unless realists want to insist that we must

²⁰ Ibid., p. lx.

²¹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 12.

²² Rawls argues that the lack of such faith has worrying political effects; he invokes the decline of the Weimar Republic and the horrors that resulted as an example of this. *Political Liberalism*, p. lx.

²³ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 6. To this extent, we can hold with Leif Wenar that 'Rawls saw his life's work as imagining a moral order realistic enough to redeem a credence in man's moral nature': 'John Rawls', in David Estlund, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 394.

²⁴ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 147.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

pessimistically presume that people are never moved by moral considerations, which is implausible, the very existence of such optimism cannot (by itself) persuasively ground a realist rejection of Rawls's moral psychology; rather, we must be given reason to think that such optimism is misplaced.

One important divergence between the two approaches springs from Williams's alignment of his political realism with Weber's ethic of responsibility. The ethic of responsibility necessitates a certain attitude towards the world, in particular the recognition that features of it are beyond one's control. Weber insists that we must reckon with 'average human failings' because we have 'absolutely no right to assume humankind's goodness and perfection'.²⁶ These claims are mirrored in Williams's Nietzschean belief in the need for a 'sense for the facts'.²⁷ His work is peppered with warnings about theories that eschew non-idealised starting points and refuse to recognise that the world can frustrate the pursuit of our ends. One consequence of adopting Weber's ethic is the commitment to being more conscious about the ways in which reality must impinge on the pursuit and articulation of our convictions. Williams discusses this most fully in *Truth and Truthfulness* when he examines the phenomenon of wishful thinking. An important step in his account is the distinction of desires, wishes and beliefs. Desire is 'a state of an agent, the content of which he can regard at various stages of deliberations being potentially satisfied by the actions that will flow from the deliberation', whereas a wish 'will have content that cannot be satisfied in that context'. Problems arise, however, because what we think is practically possible is partly a function of our desires, which ensures that wishful thinking is a perennial threat to responsible deliberation (*TT*, p. 196). This makes distinguishing between beliefs and wishes an achievement that requires the

²⁶ Max Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in David Owen and Tracy Strong, eds. *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis, IN, Hackett, 2004), p. 84.

²⁷ Geuss, 'Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams', p. 200.

virtue of Accuracy (one of Williams's virtues of truthfulness) because our beliefs are 'answerable to an order of things that lies beyond our own determination' (*TT*, p. 125).

Similarly, Williams warns against the moralisation of psychology because he claims that it enables philosophers to smuggle a set of normative commitments into their arguments. This idea, implicit in his work on internal reasons, is fully expressed in *Shame and Necessity* when he criticises Plato because it is 'only in the light of ethical considerations, and certain ethically significant distinctions of character and motive, that Plato's schema [the tripartite division of the soul] is intelligible' (*SN*, p. 43). To counter this Williams endorses a Nietzschean minimalist moral psychology, which he classes as a commitment to the idea that our understanding of 'our moral capacities should be consistent with, even perhaps in the spirit of, our understanding of human beings as part of nature' (*SP*, p. 301). The Nietzschean view proceeds by identifying 'an excess of moral content in psychology by appealing first to what an experienced, honest, subtle and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behaviour elsewhere'. Williams writes that 'such an interpreter might be said to be – using an unashamedly evaluative expression – realistic'. This is not 'a plea for a value-free psychology but a commitment to what Ricoeur called the *hermeneutics of suspicion*', an approach which does not attempt to 'compel demonstratively ... [but] invites one into a perspective, and to some extent a tradition (one marked by figures such as Thucydides ...), in which what seems to demand more material makes sense in terms of what demands less' (*SP*, p. 302).²⁸ Accordingly, Williams does not renounce the attempt to offer an account of moral agency, but insists that there must be some evidence to vindicate the psychological assumptions employed by philosophers if their arguments are to move beyond the realm of self-validating circularity.

²⁸ This suspicious approach is motivated by the sense that 'sophisticated and reflective observers have always had good reason to think that stories human beings tell themselves about the ethical tend to be optimistic, self-serving, superstitious, vengeful or otherwise not what they seem to be': Williams, 'Replies', p. 204.

His fellow twentieth-century British political realist John Dunn expresses how such ideas relate to political philosophy when he writes that political philosophers must ‘locate the levels of moral ambition which they espouse within their best causal understanding of the human world as this is’, as this prevents them ‘from subordinating their understanding of how it really is to the importunities of their own projective desires’.²⁹

To this end, the fact that Rawls’s view is conjectural might be taken to invite the suspicion that his projective desires have influenced his calculation of the ‘realistic’ component of his utopianism. Although it is beyond the remit of this thesis to offer a lengthy critique of Rawls’s work in this regard, certain claims that he makes appear vulnerable to this kind of sceptical unmasking. For one thing, when he attempts to vindicate his faith in the possibility of political liberalism because ‘the history of religion and philosophy shows that there are many reasonable ways in which the wider realm of values can be understood so as to be either congruent with, or supportive of, or else not in conflict with, the values appropriate to the special domain of the political as specified by a political conception of justice’,³⁰ his reading of history is clearly extremely selective; it is inconceivable that any historian of religion who felt moved to draw honest conclusions about the possibility of an overlapping consensus on the basis of post-Reformation events could seriously report the conclusion as Rawls does.³¹ In addition, as Freyenhagen has argued, Rawls’s justification strategy either presumes that citizens will agree that his political values are ‘very great values and hence not easily overridden’,³² which stacks the cards in his favour, or suggests that all citizens recognise the importance of avoiding ‘the

²⁹ John Dunn, ‘Reconceiving the Content and Character of Modern Political Community’, in *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 196.

³⁰ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 190.

³¹ Indeed, in the United States today religious belief has become more comprehensive, less reasonable and far more politically significant than Rawls supposed: Klosko claims that between 60 and 100 million American citizens hold religious views that Rawls would consider unreasonable. See George Klosko, ‘Rawls’s Public Reason and American Society’, in Shaun Young, ed. *Reflections on Rawls: An Assessment of his Legacy* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2009), pp. 23–44.

³² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 139.

fact of oppression',³³ which looks very much like a substantive moral claim.³⁴ Hence, there seems to be a danger that by employing various idealisations and conjectures about how we might allegedly behave if our moral powers were given room to develop, Rawls fails to provide a good enough reason to think that his well-ordered society is realistically possible. For realists like Williams this kind of idealistic reflection on the requirements of democratic citizenship is not weighty enough to lead us to disregard various historical lessons that we have learned about how human beings are likely to act in various institutional settings. This line of complaint need not reject the truism that the possible is not given by the actual, but, rather than making some conception of Kantian faith central, would stress that our beliefs about achievability should be grounded in a resolutely historical and sociological understanding, and not in the pious hope that men may change for the better if only the right institutional transformations take place.

This is one area in which the realist critique of political ethics has great potential: political ethicists *should* be embarrassed about a lack of realism in their psychological assumptions. However, it is not clear that a commitment to a realistic psychology opens up as much of a space between a Williams-realism and a pseudo-Rawlsian political ethics as the distinction between political realism and political moralism implies: even if a political ethicist succumbs to the temptations of wishful thinking at certain points, it is not clear that they thereby commit some kind of category error. Rather, this shows us a way in which their theory is defective by being excessively unrealistic. Therefore, rather than drawing a sharp, categorical line between 'realism' (good) and 'moralism' (bad), we should see various political ethicists as located too far towards the idealistic end of the realistic/idealistic spectrum. While it is important to recognise this propensity, if realism is to avoid a kind of dejected cynicism and despair about the world (and the people within

³³ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁴ Freyenhagen, 'Taking Reasonable Pluralism Seriously', pp. 328–9.

it) it must grant that some hope about how people might act in better ways is appropriate, at least some of the time. To this end, even if we have reason to believe that a set of assumptions employed by political ethicists is excessively idealistic, we should be wary about hoping for too little. After all, Williams notes that his idea of *making sense* has a 'progressive possibility' (*IBWD*, p. 15), but this claim can only be made good if we do not assume that we will never collectively act better than we currently do. Realists need to say more about how we might think in these terms without falling prey to the dangers of wishful thinking. Therefore, although a wishful thinking-based critique of Rawls's later work can help us to remember that political ethicists should take seriously the need to construct descriptively adequate political theories, this reminder does not have the wide-ranging implications that a distinction between realism and moralism seems to promise.

3. Disagreement

In his essay 'The Liberalism of Fear' Williams writes that his work largely consisted of reminding 'moral philosophers of truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings except moral philosophers' (*IBWD*, p. 52). In his political thought, too, Williams complained that political philosophy 'should shape its account of itself more realistically to what is platitudinously politics' (*IBWD*, p. 13). Centrally, Williams insists that 'political difference is the essence of politics' (*IBWD*, p. 78) and complains that certain strands of liberal theory have failed to incorporate this fact. For this reason, his realism has been invoked in support of the claim that disagreement is an 'essential, underlying characteristic of the activity of politics itself'.³⁵ In this spirit many realists hold that postulating consensus or full compliance is a philosophical mistake

³⁵ Marc Stears, 'Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion', p. 545. For the invocation see Sleat, 'Liberal Realism', p. 472.

because, as Glen Newey puts it, politics is ‘characterised by endemic disagreement over issues which are by common consent a matter of public concern’.³⁶ They therefore reject the liberal principle of legitimacy which holds that ‘a social and political order is illegitimate unless it is rooted in the consent of all those who have to live under it; the consent or agreement of these people is a condition of its being morally permissible to enforce that order against them’.³⁷ The idea is that if we accept that political difference is the essence of politics, and that disagreement extends to matters of basic justice just as it does to conceptions of the good, it is implausible to think that any such justification can succeed.³⁸ Realists consequently emphasise the inevitability of a *modus vivendi* rather than a moralised consensus on principles of legitimacy.

As we have seen, the argument Williams articulates in ‘Realism and Moralism in Political Theory’ is an important example of this position, as he denies that a principled moral consensus is the only solution to the problem of legitimacy. Similarly, in an interview given to the (now defunct) journal *Cogito*, Williams objects to Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* on precisely these grounds when he insists that ‘we can combine more various views of the good [than Rawls can] if we do regard the rules of the right as a mere *modus vivendi*’, as this ‘gives people a more vivid sense of what’s at stake. They know that they are not going to get the best order, which is homogeneity in beliefs about the good; [but] they know that the costs of constant strife will be hideous’. Williams claims that this ‘gives them a vivid sense of why they have to stay together and make a few shared notions of the

³⁶ Newey, *After Politics*, p. 7.

³⁷ Jeremy Waldron, ‘The Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism’, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 147 (1987), p. 140.

³⁸ For defences of these claims see Freyenhagen, ‘Taking Reasonable Pluralism Seriously’; Galston, ‘Realism in Political Theory’; Sleat, ‘Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory’; and Stears, ‘Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion’.

right work', hence a *modus vivendi* conception 'gives a stronger account of the matter than Rawls' more idealized version of it'.³⁹

This opens up some distance between Williamsian realism and the Rawlsian iteration of political ethics, as the kind of agreement Williams envisages is not the kind of moralised consensus Rawls pursues – in fact, it might only be the kind and degree of agreement required for citizens to accept, or acquiesce with, a set of constitutional or conventional rules that entail the avoidance of the problems of widespread social disorder. Yet as Williams acknowledges, for citizens to reflectively endorse this kind of *modus vivendi* they must not only accept that the costs of constant strife will be 'hideous' but also that the only response is to make some shared notions of the right work. Something of a puzzle arises here because even if we grant that Rawls offers a rather misconceived answer insofar as he idealistically hopes for the wrong kind of agreement, on a Williamsian account there is substantial normative work to be done in explicating what the more minimal shared notions of the right are that can ground this kind of a *modus vivendi*. As I have noted, Williams not only accepts that in modernity the state 'has to offer a justification of its power to *each subject*' (*IBWD*, p. 4), but also acknowledges that this answer must be considered acceptable by at least 'a substantial number of the people' even though not everyone 'will necessarily accept' it (*IBWD*, pp. 135–6). As Freyenhagen notes, he thus 'admits that ... *in the modern world* the questions of legitimacy and justification need to be answered in a way which addresses each citizen's reason and judgment, something which Williams admits cannot be achieved by appeal to traditional authority'.⁴⁰ Therefore, even if we adopt a Williamsian conception of legitimacy, when we ask what makes sense to us, we must delineate some subset of shared reasons that a sufficient number of citizens of

³⁹ Bernard Williams, interview in *Cogito*, reprinted as 'Bernard Williams' in Andrew Pyle, ed. *Key Philosophers in Conversation: The Cogito Interviews* (London, Routledge, 1999), p. 158.

⁴⁰ Freyenhagen, 'Taking Reasonable Pluralism Seriously', p. 13.

modern pluralist liberal states might collectively endorse. Once this is accepted we should recognise, as Williams himself did in a seminar in the late 1990s (transcribed in *Ethical Perspectives*), that there is ‘more room for certain kinds of systematic theory nearer to ethical theory with regard to political and social practices than in regard to personal ethics. That's because of the nature of our state, that is, that it's a discursive state. I mean, that's what a liberal state is. It has to explain things to itself in general terms. That's actually quite a good idea, certainly the only game in town which is tolerable’.⁴¹

If so, even though the existence of ‘deep disagreement’ has important implications for how we should think about legitimacy in the abstract (in the sense that it rules out the idea that universal consensus is an apt standard of legitimacy), it does not follow that we can avoid thinking, as the liberal political ethicist typically does, in hypothetical terms about which more minimal shared notions of the right might *make sense* ‘now and around here’. In consequence, even if we drop the universal consensus aspiration, it is very hard to conceive of which kinds of institutions can be legitimated in modernity, or to put it another way, which shared notions of the right can ground a reflectively acceptable *modus vivendi*, without thinking hypothetically about what people with plural interests might accept. Therefore, if we endorse the aspiration that modern liberal states must offer a justification of power to each subject, there is a sense in which thinking in the sorts of ways encouraged by political ethicists may be inevitable. For one thing, the impermissibility of basing our institutions on various ‘comprehensive’ conceptions of the good (if not the whole public reason approach) is very likely to persist in a positive Williamsian account of legitimation because it is highly unlikely that justifications that invoke various comprehensive claims are going to *make sense* in the appropriate way. There is no inconsistency in thinking that hypothetical consent views are useful modelling

⁴¹ Williams, ‘Seminar with Bernard Williams’, p. 256.

devices for considering how widely a legitimization story might be accepted while simultaneously acknowledging that there will always be some citizens who will fervently disagree with any such story.

Realists who criticise hypothetical consent views therefore need to provide an argument that goes beyond pointing out that disagreement is pervasive, and to actually prove that such models are incapable of helping us think about acceptability, for their complaints to hit the mark. This argument is lacking in Williams's work (although given its incomplete nature this is to be expected) but it is also lacking in the wider realist literature. Therefore, even though Williams is correct to remind us that real-world political prescription cannot simply be collapsed into a form of applied morality, this does not invalidate the hypothetical search for agreement because it may be an indispensable tool when thinking about what might *make sense* in modernity. To this end, there is little reason to think that contemporary political ethicists make a category error when they think in terms of hypothetical agreement. Accordingly, it appears that Williams's reminders about the fact of political disagreement may not have the drastic implications for how we should theorise the conditions of legitimacy 'now and around here' that realists often suggest.

4. Theory and Political Application

I now turn to the final aspect of Williams's critique that I will consider in this chapter: his claim that political moralists conventionally forget the limits of the role that normative theory can play in politics. Williams adopts Goethe's epithet – *in the beginning was the deed* – to make a point about the limits of philosophical reflection. It expresses the important truth that any theory:

will seem to make sense, and will to some degree reorganize thought and action, only by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented, and its relation to

that historical situation cannot be fully theorized or captured in reflection. Those theories and reflections will themselves always be subject to the condition that, to someone who is intelligently and informedly in that situation (and those are not empty conditions), it does or does not seem a sensible way to go on.

(*IBWD*, p. 25)

Such sentiments lead Williams to refuse to see our moral commitments as timeless moral truths because such views lack a theory of error which can explain ‘why, when, and by whom it has been accepted and rejected’ (*IBWD*, p. 9). In this regard he is adamant that our belief in liberalism cannot be seen as a cognitive improvement because the ascendancy of liberalism cannot be understood in terms of a set of moral arguments that have been won against various committed arguers. For this reason, a coherent understanding of the ascendancy of liberalism requires a social-cum-historical understanding that explains how liberal forms of argument came to be accepted.

Williams also warns against overestimating what a political theory can achieve. The basic truth is that ‘no political theory, liberal or other, can determine by itself its own application’ because ‘political projects are essentially conditioned, not just in their background intellectual conditions but as a matter of empirical realism, by their historical circumstances’ (*IBWD*, p. 28). This is not to deny that theory can occasionally play a melioristic role; in fact, ‘exceptional action gets ahead of theory, and theory ... can get ahead of ordinarily accepted practice ... [but] there is no way in which theory can get all the way ahead of practice and reach the final determination of what can make sense in political thought’. Thus, while ‘powerful political discourse can of course be proleptic’, and Williams accepts that ‘liberal discourse itself has had considerable success in this’, he is adamant that it has done so in ‘a way that is markedly different from the ways in which liberalism typically sees itself, and there is good reason to believe that liberalism’s continued success may require a better, more Wittgensteinian and, more important, Goethean self-understanding’ (*IBWD*, pp. 25–6).

Furthermore, Williams argues that political moralists overlook the fact that any political theory will underdetermine a decision on how to act in the here and now because any concrete political proposal must take into account a series of contextual considerations, ensuring that we cannot simply apply the recommendations of political theory to the real world in a deductive manner. This is made especially clear in his discussion of the extent to which the duty to intervene can be modelled on the 'moral principle of rescue', which holds that if X is in peril, and Y is saliently related to X's peril, and Y can hope to offer effective aid to X, at a cost to Y which is not unreasonably high, Y ought to help X (*IBWD*, p. 146).

Williams finds this inadequate for various reasons. First, in the political case 'the people who decide to intervene and the people who go on the intervention are not the same people'. While I may have a duty to jump into a lake to save a drowning child it does not obviously follow that a government has the right to send in their troops: 'The risk of being killed had better be rightly imposed, and in a democratic state this requires at least that it be justifiable to the public' (*IBWD*, p. 150). Second, these situations often involve a third party who is active in the perpetration of crimes, which means that the principle must be reshaped so that X is in peril at the hands of Z. Third, Williams insists that if we seriously consider salience and effectiveness we ought to realise that 'the state that is fingered [to intervene] is the state that has the power to intervene', which ensures that the number of potential rescuers is limited in the political case because salience must be understood in terms of power and few states are powerful enough to intervene. This recognition subsequently ascribes responsibility to the same (powerful) actors, which makes the duty far more burdensome than it first appeared. The cumulative effect of these remarks is that while anyone can take the initiative in the private case this is not true of the international case. For these reasons he argues that intervening states and their neighbours

have to make a political decision and must ask, as a matter of political judgement, if intervening is likely to incur the self-defeating wrath of a regime and its associates or cause suffering crucial to the intervening state's own interests. The key point is that because the political decision to intervene requires judgement of contingent and endlessly variable political particulars it cannot simply be a matter of acting in accordance with a set of (allegedly) universally valid action-guiding moral propositions.

While there is a great deal of sense in these remarks it is highly debatable that political ethicists necessarily employ more naïve views. In many ways Williams is reiterating Oakeshott's view that it is excessively rationalistic to assume that any normative theory can be applied straight off the bat.⁴² However, it is far from clear that sophisticated political ethicists are rationalists in Oakeshott's sense or claim, as Williams implies, that the relationship between normative political theory and political action is unproblematic. For example, Rawls accepts that what is required by his theory in practice is often 'a matter of political judgement guided by theory, good sense, and plain hunch',⁴³ and in a similar vein A.J. Simmons notes that 'the conclusions of ideal theory, applied to particular injustices in particular societies, are likely to be somewhat speculative (and certainly nothing like simple deductions from those requirements conjoined with societal data)'.⁴⁴ For this reason political ethicists can happily accept that 'applying a theory ... to a certain social context is a complex intellectual operation' without committing themselves to the view that 'the theory is irrelevant to that social context'.⁴⁵

Of course, many political ethicists refuse to explain how their theories could be enacted, which can be problematic according to a Weberian ethic of responsibility, as

⁴² See Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN, Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 5–42.

⁴³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 246.

⁴⁴ A.J. Simmons, 'Ideal and Nonideal Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2010), p. 19.

⁴⁵ Laura Valentini, 'On the Apparent Paradox of Ideal Theory', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 3 (2009), p. 244.

political proposals must be judged by their consequences. But realists can push these claims too far. Raymond Geuss makes an especially egregious argument when he claims that the only way to appreciate the true character of a political theory is to witness the long-term effects of its application, and argues on this score that the egalitarian content of Rawls's theory is illusory because 'the world that has arisen as the theory has established itself more and more firmly is one of increasing inequality'.⁴⁶ Even if we pass over the preposterousness of Geuss' claim that Rawls's theory has established itself *politically* since 1971 (even if it has gained some dominance in certain parts of the academy), what Geuss means by 'true character' is unconvincing. For instance, we can imagine a piece of legislation derived from a multicultural political theory that aimed to improve the welfare of a minority group but in so doing augmented levels of 'white resentment' which in turn led to widespread social unrest that had the effect of harming the said minority. Yet it would be absurd to insist this meant that the true character of the theory was racist or harmful. Instead, it shows that the implementation of the theory was politically irresponsible, but anyone can say that such implementation was irresponsible.

It is also uncharitable of Williams to insist that contemporary political philosophy is conventionally premised on some kind of misunderstanding of the proleptic potential of philosophical arguments. Very few would claim to have uncovered the 'final determination of what can make sense in political thought' in the way he suggests; even Dworkin recognises that as moral and political philosophers 'we should be less judgmental, more modest, more aware of the possibility that in the future we will be thought as insensitive as we now think others were'.⁴⁷ Likewise, it is also hard to agree with his view that political theory cannot advance 'securely ahead' of practice (consider

⁴⁶ Raymond Geuss, 'Neither History nor Praxis', in *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 36.

⁴⁷ Ronald Dworkin, 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1996), p. 122.

cosmopolitan defences of ‘open border’ policies or most accounts of distributive justice). Hence, Williams cannot possibly mean that we cannot properly theorise about such matters until they are practically enshrined, because this is false. By getting ‘all the way ahead’ he suggests a kind of political philosophising that, in a platonic spirit, sees itself to be uncovering a set of normative principles that are historically invariant and independent of the ways of life in which we find ourselves. However, even if some ethics-first theorists may cast their theories in these terms (such as G.A. Cohen), it is by no means accurate to claim that contemporary political theorists *typically* do so. As I argued in Section 1, political ethicists reject the notion that normative political theory can remove itself from its historical context, and thereby make no claim as to what will happen in the future or what character liberalism will come to take. These thinkers can painlessly accept Williams’s reminder that the realities of practice will go a long way to determining this. Therefore, even though Williams is right to point out that the realities of practice will play a large part in determining the future character of liberalism, he is wrong to think that political moralists are guilty of presuming that they have a special moral insight which determines for eternity how political societies ought to be organised, or that they naïvely think that the application of a political theory is a simplistic deductive exercise.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have defended two related claims. First, that Williams’s critique of post-Rawlsian political theory is problematic because he falsely holds that contemporary normative political philosophers endorse a monolithic kind of moralism. Second, I have claimed that while there are other resources in Williams’s thought that explain his opposition to the normative approach that I have labelled ‘political ethics’, these are best seen as timely reminders that do not fundamentally compromise their approach to

political theory. This does not establish the superiority of the political ethicists' account of how we should *make sense* of our political situation, but it demonstrates that the suggestion that they merely apply an antecedent morality to politics – and thereby endorse a defective moralism – is false. This in turn suggests that Williams's political realism and the kind of political ethics defended by Sangiovanni and the later Rawls (among others) are conceptually closer, and their relation more complicated, than most realist critics of post-Rawlsian political theory are ready to concede.

This is not to say that there are *no* significant differences between political ethics, as I have described it here, and Williams's political realism. Rather, I have argued that we should scrutinise certain aspects of the realist critique which are being stated with increasing frequency and boldness and which often invoke Williams's work – such as realists' hostility to hypothetical models of agreement – as certain tools political ethicists employ may not be susceptible to reminders about the central features of politics (i.e. the presence of pervasive disagreement) and may have an important role to play in compelling accounts of what *makes sense* to us. Furthermore, the argument of this chapter suggests that appeals to realism – if they are to remain critically credible and distinctive – are perhaps best understood not as *straightforward* refutations of contemporary normative political theory as a whole (as this claim is problematic), but as invitations to reflect on politics in a different spirit; namely by adopting the kind of 'attitude' I described in the Introduction.

Appendix: Political Realism and Fact-Sensitivity

In this Appendix I assess an argument that is widely deemed to have significant implications for the issue of realism in political philosophy: G.A. Cohen's claim that facts do not constrain the truths of political philosophy. Although Cohen's work was written with Rawlsian constructivism in mind, it is relevant to the realist critique, because if

Cohen is right it is tempting to think that any criticism of contemporary political philosophy on the grounds of *unrealism* is misplaced.⁴⁸ However, here I argue that even if we take a purely prescriptive approach, Cohen does not give us reason to think that the ultimate principles of political philosophy can be uncovered absent the sort of consideration of the platitudes of politics that political realists urge political philosophers to take seriously. In particular, because we can only determine whether or not we should endorse a principle in light of what is entailed by acting upon it, we must consider how principles apply to the factual contexts which they aim to govern; this makes their justification sensitive to the sort of facts about the political realists seek to draw our attention to.⁴⁹ Following David Miller I then argue that even if Cohen does reveal a truth about the logical entailments of our moral utterances, this does not support his (Platonic) suggestion that principles transcend the facts of the world because we must take seriously the idea that certain facts presuppositionally ground certain principles. I contend that this undermines the claim that we can uncover a set of principles via idealised and non-political thought experiments and then apply them to politics by examining Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?*

Facts and Political Philosophy

In *Rescuing Justice and Equality* Cohen articulates a variety of metaethical claims that bear on political philosophy. Of particular importance is his claim that fundamental principles are fact-independent. He claims that 'a principle can respond to ... a fact only because it is

⁴⁸ I refer to thinkers who hold that political principles are not subject to any facts about the political world or the capacities of people within it in this way as 'Cohenites'.

⁴⁹ I would like to head off at the pass the suggestion that this argument fails on the grounds that if one claims principle (P) should be rejected because its practical application in politics is unattractive, this judgement must rest on an implicit commitment to another principle that may, as Cohen claims, be insensitive to matters of fact. This seems true enough, but I do not think this frees the Cohenite from the realist critique: if this is all that Cohen proves he must accept that we are only prepared to endorse various political principles that various facts about their implementation do not lead us to reject, which seems to me to make political philosophy importantly fact-sensitive.

also a response to a more ultimate principle that is not a response to a fact: accordingly, if principles respond to facts, then the principles at the summit of our conviction are grounded in no facts whatsoever'.⁵⁰ For example, we may endorse the principle (P) 'keep your promises' because we believe fact (F), that people can only successfully pursue their projects when promises are kept. Yet if we ask why (F) grounds (P) we have to appeal to a more fundamental fact-independent principle (P1), that we should help people pursue their projects. According to Cohen only a principle such as (P1) can enable (F) to support (P), and (P1's) validity is independent of the truth of (F). This is taken to show that the grounding of fundamental principles is independent of any facts and that if we affirm an ultimate principle our support of it is applicable across any set of facts.

Cohen extends this line of thought by distinguishing principles from rules of regulation. He accuses Rawls of conflating the rules adopted by the original position, which are shaped by values other than justice and practical considerations, with more fundamental principles of justice. Cohen considers this dangerous because the rules of regulation that we adopt can only move us toward justice if they reflect fact-insensitive principles. To this end, he claims that 'the task of delineating a virtue ... is not the same task as that of setting out the design of a society. And ... the first should influence the second, whereas the second cannot influence the first'.⁵¹ The underpinning metaethical commitments of his view come out when he writes that he endorses:

the Socrato-Platonic view that ... no list of examples reveals what it is about the examples that makes each an example of justice. Until we unearth the fact-free principle that governs our fact-loaded particular judgments about justice, we don't know why we think what we think just is just. And we have to retreat to ... justice in its purity to figure out how to institute as much justice as possible inside the cave.

The 'lovers of sights and sounds' in Book V of Plato's *Republic* think it suffices ... to say what counts as just within the world of sights and sounds. They scarcely recognize the question What is justice, *as such*? In a world where the facts

⁵⁰ G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 229.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

are *F*, they believe that *P* constitutes justice, and they do not abstract even so far as to see that they believe, independently of the facts *if F then P*. Plato thinks, and I agree, that you need to have a view of what justice itself is to recognize that justice dictates *P* when *F* is true. That is how justice transcends the facts of the world.⁵²

This leads to a conception of political philosophy which distinguishes between the contingency and temporality of practice and fact and the realm of value and principle. Cohen also embraces value pluralism and rejects the idea that the justification of principles must rely on a coherentist theory of justification⁵³ which ensures that it is a mistake to revise our values, or reject some principles, in an attempt to bypass such trade-offs.

This separation of principle from fact might be taken to excuse Cohenites from the realist critique because realism might be taken to merely enumerate various factual considerations that cannot bear on the truth conditions of ultimate principles. However, this repudiation of the realist critique cannot be sustained for the simple reason that when we decide whether or not to endorse a certain principle we must reflect on what that principle entails, requires, necessitates etc., in practice. For example if we ask what some variant of equality of opportunity practically entails, and consider its demands justifiable, we will endorse it and, barring problems of weakness of will, acquiesce to it. On the other hand, if practically implementing it has various negative consequences, such as too greatly infringing upon an inviolable sphere of personal freedom, we will reject it. Normative reflection accordingly requires us to consider the practical *externalities* of applying a principle because they are important issues to consider when judging whether or not we ought to endorse it. This is apparent in the way that certain philosophers reject libertarianism as a theory of justice because they consider its equation of taxation with slavery morally unpalatable; it makes forcibly redistributing goods to those in danger of

⁵² Ibid., p. 291.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 4.

starvation or death or misery impermissible. To these critics this *externality* of applying libertarianism provides grounds for rejecting it as a matter of principle.⁵⁴

Cohen does not deny that this sort of fact-sensitive reflection occurs, but he insists that affirmations of fact-insensitive principles are not temporally or epistemically prior to fact-sensitive principles, but logically prior.⁵⁵ He thus accepts that ‘asking what we think we should do, given these or those factual circumstances, is a fruitful way of determining what our principles are’.⁵⁶ However, this prompts a serious question about whether or not his metaethical claim has any practical implications for how we should practise political philosophy. Indeed, it appears that it is precisely because he is not concerned with justification but with the logical entailments of our moral beliefs that its importance at the first-order political level may be nugatory.⁵⁷

Consider the socialist argument against capitalism. Socialists present countless moral arguments against capitalism, among them the claims that it treats people as commodities, exploits workers, frustrates human flourishing, and so on. For this critique to have bite one must therefore examine the failings that occur when capitalism is adopted as a rule of regulation. This suggests that we must look at how certain principles translate into rules of regulation if we want assess them as candidate principles to govern politics.

⁵⁴ Brian Barry’s review of *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, *Political Theory*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1975), pp. 331–36, is perhaps the best example of this response. This focus on externalities does not suggest a consequentialist bias but merely points to a justificatory methodology like Rawls’s reflective equilibrium. I thank Sune Laegaard for this point.

⁵⁵ Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 247.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁷ Thus Robert Jubb argues that ‘whether we have reason to believe a principle depends on its plausibility – on whether it is epistemically grounded – and that depends on what, as a matter of fact, it demands that we do, making judgments about it fact-sensitive’: ‘Logical and Epistemic Foundationalism About Grounding’, *Res Publica*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2009), p. 344. With this sort of claim in mind I am in broad agreement with much of the criticism that Cohen’s metaethical position has received, both in regard to its practical importance and as a critique of Rawls in particular. See A. Faik Kurtulmus, ‘Rawls and Cohen on Facts and Principles’, *Utilitas*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2009), pp. 489–505; Thomas Pogge, ‘Cohen to the Rescue’, *Ratio*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2008), pp. 254–75; and Miriam Ronzoni and Laura Valentini, ‘On the Meta-Ethical Status of Constructivism: Reflections on G.A. Cohen’s “Facts and Principles”’, *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2008), pp. 403–22.

However, if it is the case that to reject capitalism (and the principles that underlie it) we must engage with its effects as a rule of regulation, by extension it seems that if we are to endorse socialism (as a matter of principle) we must question what it politically entails precisely because socialist principles aim to be practically implemented as rules of regulation. Thus, if we are led to endorse certain principles because we abhor the effects of a certain set of rules of regulation, this only makes sense if our favoured principles do not have equally pernicious externalities when implemented.

To this end we can see that much of the action in political philosophy takes place at the level of considering how a principle translates when it is put into practice. This seems to undermine the sharp distinction Cohen draws between principles and rules of regulation as it shows that the justification of political principles is sensitive to how they regulate politics. To see why, consider various responses that a socialist could give to a capitalist who argues that they should relinquish their commitments because socialism does not work in practice. For the sake of simplicity let us assume that the socialist ponders the three following responses:

(1) The *morally right and politically possible* rebuttal. This response argues that the fact-insensitive principles that ground socialism are right and that although socialism has not been properly translated into practice, it could be.

(2) The *morally right and only politically misguided in the here and now* rebuttal. This response rejects the idea that the (contingent) unsavoury externalities of implementing socialism here and now refute its fact-insensitive fundamental principles while conceding that these facts mean that we should not currently adopt it as a rule of regulation.

(3) The *morally right but always politically misguided* rebuttal. This response accepts the capitalist argument about the political deficiencies of socialism but

argues that this does not preclude us from considering it normatively true in some fact-insensitive manner.

Cohen must consider all of these responses intelligible, including (3), if principles are fact-independent and distinguished from rules of regulation. He would, of course, be extremely happy if (1) were true, but as this does not challenge his separation of principle and fact we can leave it aside. However, if we think that (2) only makes sense because the recalcitrant facts are contingent obstacles that we are capable of overcoming, it follows that it is a mistake to think that (3) is a cogent position to adopt. In contrast to (2) the recalcitrant facts that impede socialism in (3) are necessary impediments to its practical achievement, and if we think this makes the idea that a political principle could be *morally right but always politically misguided* nonsensical, as I suggest we should, we have realigned the normative acceptability of fundamental principles with certain considerations of practicability, and fact-sensitive judgement, in a way that is anathema to Cohen's thesis.

To flesh out this point let us say that the fundamental fact-insensitive principle that grounds socialism is of the form '*from each according to his ability, to each according to his need*'. Imagine that our socialist agrees that we should not implement socialism now because our epistemic abilities are temporarily afflicted by certain limitations that preclude us from determining people's needs with any accuracy (we might, therefore, decide to favour some bastardisation of Rawls's idea that we ought to give everyone an equal set of primary goods because this is a more practicable proposal). In this case, there might be some truth in the claim that socialist principles are morally attractive but their practical enactment is misguided, yet this is surely because the problems that frustrate the practical achievement of socialist justice here and now exist due to an unfortunate set of contingent circumstances that we are capable of overcoming. Thus, the claim that socialism is in principle attractive seemingly relies on the fact that contingent sets of facts

prohibit it from being achieved – the significant point being their contingent nature. However, we might think that arranging society according to the distributive principle *from each according to his ability, to each according to his need* would be a political mistake for a different reason. For example, imagine that it requires a certain ethos from its citizenry and that this ethos is unachievable absent repressive state coercion because it is inconsistent with some deep inclinations of human nature.⁵⁸ If this is the case we seem to have sufficient reason to reject socialism both as a political project, and at the level of principle, because repression is something we must avoid.⁵⁹ Thus, while we might think that various contingent factual impediments can be dismissed as feasibility constraints (and therefore incapable of repudiating socialism at the level of principle), various necessary factual presuppositions of a principle's achievement (coercion, re-education programmes, etc.) cannot. Yet if Cohen is committed to viewing all factual considerations as nothing but feasibility constraints it seems that he cannot make sense of this. Of course, if the political implementation of a principle necessitates various pernicious actions we can still consider it an ideal in a whimsical '*wouldn't it be great if it didn't need that repressive vanguard*' kind of way. Yet this judgement is not, in any sense, prescriptive.⁶⁰ Consequently, although imagining what a society populated by beings who endorsed such an ethos would be like might be normatively inspiring in some indirect sense, it is not clear that this sort of highly counterfactual 'if F then P'-talk admits of normative truth.

⁵⁸ I do not mean to imply that human nature is necessarily like this. The point is to consider what to think about socialism, at the level of principle, if it is.

⁵⁹ The Cohenite might point out that in making this claim I endorse another fundamental, fact-insensitive principle, namely '*people should not be repressed*'. I am perfectly happy to accept this but, as I have already said, this shows the severe limitations of using his metaethical claim to rebut the realist challenge; reflection on various political facts is still of central importance to justification, and therefore so is thinking about which *political* principles we should ultimately endorse.

⁶⁰ As Pablo Gilabert recognises, this is where Cohen's division of the normative and the prescriptive falls down. *Contra* Cohen, political philosophy does not just ask us what we should think, it asks us what we should think about what we must do. See Pablo Gilabert, 'Feasibility and Socialism', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2011), pp. 58.

In the scenario I have sketched, implementing the fact-insensitive socialist distributive principle brings about moral disaster. With this in mind we should conclude that these externalities are decisive against socialism's adoption at the level of principle and not simply as a rule of regulation. This gives us reason to believe that the justification of political principles is dependent on what their political instantiation requires, which is a fact-sensitive judgement. Therefore, even if the tenor of Cohen's thesis about the ultimate fact-insensitivity of normative statements is logically valid (in a post-justificatory sense), it would be a mistake for Cohenites to dismiss the realists for merely articulating a variety of feasibility constraints, because we have seen that the way in which principles map onto the political context they seek to govern is the decisive consideration we must confront if we are to endorse those principles.

Thinking Politically

Furthermore, even if the logic of our normative statements bottoms out in a fact-insensitive claim, there is no reason to presume that ultimate principles apply across all factual contexts, as David Miller has shown by observing that Cohen neglects the importance of what he calls *presuppositional* grounding. Miller argues that a fact (F) can presuppositionally ground a principle (P) in the sense that although (F) cannot entail (P)'s truth, (F's) truth can be a necessary condition of (P)'s. Miller employs the principle of liberty – that it is intrinsically valuable for humans to enjoy liberty of thought and action provided they do not infringe the equal liberty of others – as one such example. For Miller this principle must reflect human beings 'capacity, in normal cases, to make self-conscious choices as to how to live. This fact ... explains why liberty is intrinsically valuable for

humans but not for other animals'.⁶¹ He argues that this diminishes the polemical force of Cohen's position because we can see that some facts bring certain principles into play.

Cohen's reply to Miller acknowledges that the applicability of principles presupposes certain facts, but he claims that 'presuppositional grounding is not a form of grounding where that means ... providing a reason for affirming'. He thus insists that 'even if it were true ... [that] the principle of liberty (itself) presupposes that people are capable of conscious willing, their merely being so, absent further propositions, no more supports the principle of liberty than it does the principle of frustration'.⁶² However, this misses the thrust of Miller's critique. The lesson to draw from Miller is that we have no reason to suppose that we are logically required to endorse ultimate principles across any set of facts; in much the same way that if I tell you that you have a nice haircut I need not claim that your haircut would look good on anyone, a set of facts may make a principle relevant and in so doing limit its applicability to a range of cases. Thus, even if Cohen uncovers a truth about the semantics of ethical claims, we can reject the substantive universalist implication that might be taken to follow from this; Cohen may simply have uncovered a rather trivial fact about the logic of normative beliefs, which does not lead to the platonic conclusions about the nature of value that he seems to endorse.

We can see how this is significant for political philosophy if we consider the approach he adopts in *Why Not Socialism?*. There Cohen employs a highly idealised camping trip to identify principles of equality and community which he claims shows that they are desirable in general, and then urges us to use these as the basis for political prescription. He claims that a good camping trip expresses a spirit of communal reciprocity whereby 'I serve you not because of what I get in return by doing so but because you need or want

⁶¹ David Miller, 'Political Philosophy for Earthlings', in David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 35.

⁶² Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 336.

my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me'.⁶³ Although differences exist between the camping trip and modern society, Cohen concludes that they are merely feasibility constraints, and therefore do not undermine the values.⁶⁴ However if, *qua* Miller, certain facts bring a set of principles into play and these facts do not hold universally, there is no reason to presume that our endorsement of a principle must persist over any set of facts. To this end, even if Cohen's spirit of communal reciprocity is a noble attitude to have towards fellow campers, there is absolutely no reason to think it is relevant to politics because the ethos that governs such a camping trip, which does not persist in politics, may presuppositionally ground the principle. It is wrong to see this as a feasibility issue, as Cohen suggests, because the problem is not that it is unfeasible to think that such a spirit of reciprocity could be extended to a political society. Rather, if we accept the platitude that politics is, in large part, a matter of managing large-scale collective action problems (as realists like Williams stress we must), and agree that in such scenarios different psychological traits must exist than in Cohen's camping trips, then we have reason to believe that employing such thought experiments as a proxy to uncover political principles is a mistake.

To this end, we have reason to believe that non-political thought experiments of Cohen's sort are not suitable devices for the representation of *political* values because the principles that we may be prepared to endorse in these fanciful hypothetical settings may not have the same attractions in different factual contexts. In this respect, the insistence that political philosophy must start with the acceptance of various facts, such that in politics people do not display the sort of unity of purpose that they do in Cohen's camping

⁶³ G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 39.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

trip, is not a 'feasibility' concern at all but rather the more fundamental requirement that we actually address the practice with which we claim to be concerned.

Conclusion

If the foregoing argument is correct it appears that Cohen gives us little reason to reject the central realist point that if we want our reflections on politics to be at all convincing it is imperative that we begin from within the political domain and not with some idealised position external to it. It therefore seems that Cohenites cannot discredit the realist critique by pointing out that ultimate principles are fact-insensitive because if, as the realist suggests, certain facts characterise politics, and, as Cohen accepts, justification is fact-sensitive, our endorsement of a set of political principles will be sensitive to facts about the political.

Chapter Four

Making Sense of Political Values

These transcendental humours frighten me, like lofty and inaccessible places. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside. Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk with our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world, we are still sitting only on our own arses.¹

In the previous chapter I argued that the most philosophically plausible reconstruction of Williams's critique of political moralism offers grounds for the correction rather than the wholesale repudiation of the strand of contemporary normative political theory that pursues what I called a 'political ethics'. In this chapter I move on from the more overtly critical aspects of Williams's realism to his more positive views about how we should construct political values. To do so, I focus on his papers concerning how we ought to conceive of liberty as a political value, because they give sense to his claim that political philosophy 'cannot escape from starting from what is at hand, from the kinds of life among which it finds itself ... [it] must accept the truth that in the beginning was the deed' (*IBWD*, p. 23–4). While Williams does not argue that utopian political thought is incoherent he insists that our constructions of certain political values must be 'realist' and this has wide-reaching implications.

I argue that by examining Williams's liberty papers we can extract a constraint that we must attend to when we construct political values, which I dub the 'realism constraint'. I then go on to show that Williams's arguments about how our construction of liberty must be responsive to the demands of democratic coexistence, and how overly-moralised understandings of liberty can threaten this, have important implications for our construction of political values. For various reasons I mainly focus on 'From Freedom to

¹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, ed. D. M. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 856–7 in Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Justice and the Priority of Politics to Morality', p. 158.

Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value', (IBWD: 75 – 96, hereafter FL).). First, this paper was originally published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* which ensures that it is more polished than many of the other essays in *IBWD*. Second, it is also the most mature expression of Williams's thinking about liberty.² For this reason I treat FL as Williams's most considered view and invoke the earlier papers as and when they serve the exposition of it. I also think that, given the long history of thinking behind FL, the ideas contained within it should have a certain authority for an interpreter of Williams's political thought, especially in comparison to some of the other pieces in *IBWD* which are clearly *pièces d'occasion*. Moreover, as Williams chose to publish this paper, rather than his work on legitimacy, before his death, it should be accorded more attention by interpreters of his political realism than has hitherto been the case.

In Section 1 I set out Williams's view of how we should construct political values. Section 2 focuses on his work on interpretation in order to forestall two potential criticisms that could be levelled against his account of realist construction. In Section 3 I focus on what I call the 'realism constraint' and defend it from a variety of criticisms that contemporary political moralists are likely to make against it. In Section 4 I show why endorsing this kind of constraint does not inexorably lead to a conservative acceptance of the *status quo*. In Section 5 I spell out some of the consequences of Williams's arguments for our understanding of the demands of democratic coexistence and the implications this has for our reflexive understanding of the role of political philosophy in democratic settings.

² Williams's papers on liberty progress from 'Saint Just's Illusion', *MSH*, pp. 135–52, which was given as his inaugural lecture for the White's Professorship of Moral Philosophy at Oxford; to 'Liberalism and Loss' in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert Silvers, eds. *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York, New York Review of Books Classics, 2001), pp. 91–103; to 'Conflicts of Liberty and Equality', *IBWD*, pp. 115–27; to the most polished FL.

1. From Freedom to Liberty

FL begins with Williams claiming that what puzzles and concerns us about ethical and political ideas ‘is the understanding of those ideas ... as a value for us in our world’, and that we will not understand them unless ‘we understand what we want the value to do for us – what we, now, need it to be in shaping our own institutions and practices, in disagreeing with those who want to shape them differently, and in understanding and trying to co-exist with those who live under other institutions’ (*IBWD*, p. 75). Hence, our political values must help us to make sense of the political world we hope to change, and if they are to do so they must be sensitive to the forms that our world may take. As answers to this question must move beyond the domain of first-order moral argument, Williams holds that political philosophy must be *impure* in the sense that ‘materials from non-philosophical sources – an involvement with history or the social sciences, for instance – are likely to play a more than illustrative part in the argument’ (*PHD*, p. 155).

Williams holds that political values such as liberty and justice have a thin universal element as they relate to universal or widely shared human experiences. To wit, the core of liberty is *primitive freedom* (*IBWD*, p. 79), the ‘simple idea of being unobstructed in doing what you want by some form of humanly imposed coercion’, while the core of justice lies ‘in such things as a loss that demands recompense, or a good that needs to be shared’ (*MSH*, p. 138). Yet at this skeletal or primitive level these values are highly indeterminate. More determinate conceptions ‘involve a complex historical deposit, and we will not understand them unless we grasp something of that deposit’, because both what liberty ‘has variously become, and what we now need it to be, must be a function of actual history’ (*IBWD*, pp. 75–6). For this reason Williams claims that political philosophers must not attempt to define but to construct a political conception of liberty from the non-political conception of freedom.

To a certain extent, primitive freedom points us in the direction of politics because when we are restricted from doing something by the intentional activities of others this ‘can give rise to a quite specific reaction, resentment; and if resentment is not to express itself in more conflict, non-cooperation, and dissolution of social relations, an authoritative determination is needed of whose activities should have priority’ (*IBWD*, p. 82).³ As we saw in Chapter Two, when such an authoritative source deploys coercion, questions of its legitimacy arise. However, Williams claims that primitive freedom is not a political value but rather a *proto-political concept*, because ‘no one can intelligibly make a claim against others simply on the ground that the activities of others restrict primitive freedom, or that the extension of one’s primitive freedom requires action by them. At best this is the start of the quarrel, not a claim to its solution’ (*IBWD*, p. 83). If claims to a loss of liberty are to be taken seriously, Williams argues that they must be socially presentable. A claim is ‘(minimally) *socially presentable*, if it can be urged consistently with accepting a legitimate political order for the general regulation of the society’ (*IBWD*, p. 120).⁴ Complaining that your liberty has been restricted if you are outlawed from stealing your neighbour’s property is not a socially presentable claim, but ‘an objection to the operations of Franco or James II was a socially presentable claim: one could, and most objectors did, accept that these rulers should be replaced by some other rulers, and more generally they accepted a state system’ (*IBWD*, p. 120). Social presentability does not ensure that we impartially agree that the activity complained about should desist, but it is a precondition of us deciding to take the complaint about a loss liberty seriously.

³ By beginning with resentment Williams founds his construction upon a set of experiences that we have as agents rather than (as with much contemporary political thought) various moral intuitions that are then rendered into a set of propositions and (hopefully) accommodated into a theory. This is at one with his overall approach, which purports to understand ethics, as far as it is possible, as a part of nature. See Chapter One *passim* and Chapter 3, Section 2 for more on this.

⁴ This rules out anarchist complaints. Williams insists that ‘the fact that a person is subject to the state is [not], in itself a limitation on his primitive freedom ... [because] the amount of freedom that a person would have without the state is entirely indeterminate or, at any rate, very small’: *IBWD*, p. 85.

So how can we responsibly claim that our liberty has been restricted? Williams does not think that utopian discourses about liberty are *analytically* or *definitionally* incoherent but holds that they are ‘at best obliquely related to arguments about liberty we find in our world’ because ‘the comparisons they invite with the actual, do not do much for the more specific construction of liberty as a value for us’ (*IBWD*, p. 90). If our complaints about liberty are to be worth taking seriously we must consider what someone ‘now and around here’ could reasonably resent as a loss of liberty. When we do this:

the question of the form of society that is possible for us becomes relevant. From this perspective, a practice is not a limitation of liberty if it is necessary for there to be any state at all. But it is also not a loss of liberty if it is necessary for the functioning of society as we can reasonably imagine it working and still being ‘our’ society. Thus, while some force and threats of force, and some institutional structures which impose disadvantage on people will count as limiting people’s liberty, being prevented from getting what I want through economic competition will not, except in exceptional cases. That is because competition is central to modern, commercial society’s functioning.⁵

For this reason we should accept that ‘modernity is a basic category of social and hence political understanding, and so a politically useful construction of liberty for us should take the most general conditions of modernity as given’ (*IBWD*, p. 90).⁶ Of course, there is much room to argue about the conditions of modernity and the forms that modern society can intelligibly take, but Williams is adamant that socially presentable constructions of liberty must be curtailed by such historical considerations. Therefore, even though one can ‘semantically, conceptually, [and] indeed psychologically’ complain of a cost in liberty if one is obstructed from doing what one wants by any form of human coercion, it does not always follow that this is ‘useful, helpful, [and] to be taken seriously as a contribution

⁵ Williams, ‘A Mistrustful Animal’, pp. 199–200.

⁶ He thus endorses the spirit of Constant’s distinction between the liberty of the ancients and moderns which he interprets as such: ‘whatever the merits for an ancient republic of a concept of liberty linked to republican virtue, they were essentially limited to the conditions of the ancient republic, and only disaster could follow, as indeed it had followed in France, from trying to apply such an ideal to modern commercial society’: *IBWD*, p. 90.

to political debate'; many claims 'that fly in the face of modernity do not even cross the threshold of offering a serious political consideration' (*IBWD*, p. 92).

This is taken to show that there is 'no conflict between the historical diagnosis, on the one hand, and the political argument, on the other; indeed the argument gets its materials from the historical interpretation' (*MSH*, p. 138). Williams claims that this thought can be expressed in terms of *realism* because 'a form of liberty that could not be offered by the state is an entirely unrealistic basis of objection, and the limitation to the conditions of modernity implies a further step towards a realistic political position or claim' (*IBWD*, p. 92). It follows that there are two distinct questions that ought not be conflated: 'whether it is true that someone has sustained a cost in liberty and whether it is sensible, useful, reasonable, or sane to complain about it'.

To rather schematically sum up the point, just as Williams writes that $LEG + \text{Modernity} = \text{Liberalism}$, we might say that $\text{Primitive Freedom} + \text{Modernity} = \text{Liberty}$. That Williams insists on our understanding these points as part of attending to 'real history' shows the elasticity of what he counts as a *historical* consideration. The key idea is that because political values have to shape our institutions and practices they must pay attention to what the world we inhabit has become *and* how we can reasonably think it might become (this is what I mean by the 'realism constraint'). This links up with his conception of legitimacy in the sense that when we come to judge the legitimization story offered by the state, as citizens or political theorists, the political values we employ, and the normative judgements that we make about what *makes sense*, should be sensitive to the sorts of claims about the nature of modernity that he outlines. The basic thought, then, is that we cannot clarify the nature of various political values in any meaningful manner before we consider the historical and practical question of what their elaboration requires

‘now and around here’. Thus the realism constraint functions in a prescriptive way as an arbiter of responsible political argument.

If this view of realist construction is to convince those political philosophers who are, generally speaking, unmoved by invocations of the importance of attending to ‘real history’ in the way Williams favours, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed. First, we need to ask what Williams’s belief in the importance of ‘social presentability’ tells us about his underlying understanding of the role of political theory/philosophy, and if his view is defensible. Second, this realist conception of the role of political theory must admit the possibility of a critique of our current social situation if it is to avoid falling prey to the dangers of conservatism. However, before we turn to these issues it is worth discussing Williams’s view of social and historical interpretation, because it might be thought that his insistence that we ought to take the conditions of modernity as a given leads him into the bind of either (a) endorsing the disreputable positivist idea that various facts about modernity can be uncovered without our values or commitments determining our selection and characterisation of them, or (b) granting that because any act of interpretation is inevitably value-laden we cannot offer the kind of realist interpretation he seeks.

2. Interpretation

In *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams discusses interpretation in a way that aims to put these doubts to bed. As part of his critique of the ‘deniers’ who try to discredit any sort of truth-talk he points out that there is no difficulty in accounting for ‘everyday’ or ‘plain’ truths such that it is, for example, Tuesday night, but he acknowledges that these truths do not touch on the deniers’ suspicion about things such as ‘historical narrative, about social representations, about self-understanding, about psychological and political

interpretation' (*TT*, p. 5). Yet Williams insists that the existence of plain truths does enable us to offer *truthful* interpretations when he examines the extent to which we might articulate a truthful historical narrative. He defends a view that negotiates the extremes of the abovementioned statements (a) and (b) by granting that a historical interpretation cannot simply be a matter of recounting various facts about the past in a positivistic manner as 'facts have to be discovered, and the interests that shape the narrative also shape the inquiry that discovers them' (*TT*, p. 139). This ensures that a historical narrative 'cannot be a mere chronicle, the barking out of unrelated truths' (*TT*, p. 242). However, this does not inexorably lead to the conclusion that no historical narrative can claim to be responsive to the demands of truthfulness: it is absurd to say that the plain truths on which a historical narrative focuses are created by our inquiries themselves; because 'facts are not individuated before any inquiry ... that does not mean that the inquiry creates them out of nothing' (*TT*, p. 257).

Raymond Geuss employs the example of a constellation to get at the crux of Williams's suggestion that a historical interpretation must capture a series of truths, meaning that it cannot take any form it likes, but neither is the overall picture which we draw with those truths pre-given.⁷ Williams consequently concludes that while we must accept that 'there is no such thing as the "truth" about the historical past ... this does not mean ... that there are not truths about the past, and it does not mean that interpretations, whatever they may be, need not be responsive to the demands of truthfulness' (*TT*, p. 258). He thus appreciates how contestable any historical interpretation will be while insisting on the possibility of articulating truthful interpretations. It is precisely because positivist interpretation is impossible that we must be concerned with the idea that our interests and commitments will cloud our

⁷ Raymond Geuss, 'Did Williams Do Ethics?', *Arion*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2012), pp. 147–8.

judgements. This leads him to warn against the dangers of wishful thinking and self-deception, as we saw in the previous chapter, and to paint Accuracy, as a virtue of truthfulness, as involving the exercise of ‘skills and attitudes that resist [self-deception] ... from a gross need to believe the agreeable, to mere laziness in checking one’s investigations’ (*TT*, p. 125).

These claims about how we might articulate a truthful historical narrative cannot simply be carried over and employed to as the guide to how we might articulate a truthful interpretation of modernity, because this latter interpretation tries to make sense of the central features of our historical epoch rather than a period of documented history. However, the main contours of Williams’s account of historical interpretation can help us to think about what a truthful interpretation of modernity might be like. To wit, it must try to make sense of certain hard facts of our existence while accepting that any such act of interpretation is value-laden (and therefore open to dispute). This is perfectly compatible with the statement that ‘there is room for much argument about what the conditions of modernity are, what forms modern society can intelligibly take, and so on’ (*IBWD*, p. 90). In fact, we might think that the ever-present possibility of contestation and disagreement on these matters is a precondition of us making the effort to avoid complacency in the first place.

3. Defending the Realism Constraint

We are now in a better position to assess Williams’s endorsement of what I have termed the ‘realism constraint’ when constructing political values. This endorsement is controversial as many political philosophers hold that political philosophy is a normative enterprise and therefore must not be constrained by considerations about how the world

currently *is*, as this comes at the cost of rigorously considering how it *ought* to be.⁸ In this section I explain why Williams accords it such a place in his thought.

As we saw in Chapter One the refusal to insulate matters of principle from the exigencies of practice has a long history in Williams's ethical thought (and is more generally part and parcel of his general characterisation of philosophy as a humanistic discipline). It is present in his earliest paper on political philosophy, 'The Idea of Equality', despite predating his later realist turn by around four decades. In this paper Williams distinguishes between two core principles of egalitarian thought – equality of respect and equality of opportunity – and emphasises the ways in which the pursuit of one is likely to engender a loss of the other. The pursuit of equality of opportunity will destroy a certain sense of common humanity which is itself a precondition of equality of respect, because 'there are deep psychological and social obstacles' to the idea that there could be a society in which equality of opportunity was the sole criterion of the distribution of goods and this did not have the effect of encouraging contempt and condescension' (*IBWD*, p. 113). Yet Williams revealingly notes that it would also be wrong to focus on equality of respect alone, because 'an ideal of equality of respect that made no contact with such things as the economic needs of society for certain skills, and human desire for some sorts of prestige, would be condemned to a futile Utopianism, and to having no rational effect on the distribution of goods, position and power that would inevitably proceed' (*IBWD*, p. 114). He insists that we must recognise such practical constraints and that although we may find this uncomfortable, 'the discomfort is just that of genuine political thought' (*IBWD*, p. 114). Thus, just as his work in ethics seeks to make sense of ethical life as it is

⁸ For example, and at the risk of rather arbitrarily picking a twig from a thicket of similar complaints, Samuel Freeman argues that Raymond Geuss's (similar) suggestion that political philosophy must focus on the contexts of action rather than mere beliefs and propositions forgets that 'the role of a moral conception of justice is not to understand the contemporary social and political relations and institutions but to reform them by providing an ideal of social and political relations': Samuel Freeman, review of Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics, Ethics*, vol. 120, no. 1 (2009), p. 177.

actually lived, we might say that for Williams, when political philosophy tells us how we should live, it must be constrained by realistic consideration of how *we* might *actually* live. Unfortunately he does not explain the underlying motivations behind this view of political theory in great detail, so to get a better grip on this kind of commitment I now turn to some claims that John Dunn makes which point in a similar direction.

In *The Political Thought of John Locke*, Dunn endorses something akin to the realism constraint when he argues that the suggestion that Locke failed to extend his egalitarian commitments into a programme of revolutionary social change is absurd because, ‘the profoundest structures of seventeenth-century English society made the prospect of any such revolution succeeding altogether impossible’. Dunn concludes that ‘it was [therefore] a correct assessment of his own social experience which in this way formed Locke’s sense of the socially accessible dimensions of human freedom’.⁹ Dunn defends such focus on the socially accessible by arguing that:

there are very crude moral dangers involved in elevating the expression of edifying feelings over the evincing sense of social reality. It is easy enough to write moral charters for socially impossible institutions. But it is scarcely *morally* less appropriate to explore the moral dimensions of effectively possible social arrangements ... the exploration of the moral potentialities of authentically possible social change cannot be assimilated to the reactionary claim that social improvement is impossible. What matters is whether the change commended is derived from the exploration in fantasy of what is desirable but only logically possible or the investigations of what is desirable and sociologically possible ... there should be no moral prizes for the insecurity of grasp on the ‘reality principle’.¹⁰

Dunn is not claiming that the refusal to attend to what he calls the ‘reality principle’ ensures the philosophical unintelligibility of certain claims, in much the same way that Williams is impatient with utopian conceptions of liberty without claiming that they are philosophically incoherent. The idea is rather that the writing of moral charters which

⁹ John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 240.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

explore ‘in fantasy’ the logically rather than the sociologically possible should be avoided because they do not help us to reflect on the existent moral potentialities we face.

For Williams and Dunn, our political arguments, and our construction of various political values, must be curtailed by various historical and practical considerations. Dunn is unequivocal about this, claiming that ‘the purpose of political theory is to diagnose practical predicaments and to show us how best to confront them’. To do so he insists that political theorists need to be trained in three things: firstly, ascertaining ‘how the social, political and economic setting of our lives now is and in understanding why it is as it is; secondly, in working through for ourselves how we could coherently and justifiably wish the world to be or become; and thirdly in judging how far, and through what actions, and at what risk, we can realistically hope to move this world as it now stands towards the way we might excusably wish it to be’.¹¹ Once we view political theory in these terms, it is incumbent that political theorists endorse something like a Weberian ethic of responsibility, as Williams suggests, and work with a ‘more realistic view of the power, opportunities, and limitations of politics actors’ (*IBWD*, p. 12). Moreover, as I have said, realistically possible states of affairs become something of an arbiter of serious political argument. This is why Williams claims that, because what it is reasonable to resent as a loss of liberty ‘implies the thought of an alternative world in which that loss does not occur’, when someone claims to have suffered a loss of liberty we should ask ‘whether his conception of a social world ... is not a fantasy, either in general or in relation to historical circumstances in which he necessarily finds himself’ (*IBWD*, p. 93). Dunn makes a related point when he states that ‘power – what can or cannot be brought about – is a

¹¹ Dunn, ‘Reconceiving the Content and Character of Modern Political Community’, p. 193.

fundamental consideration in political theory: hence the *moral* force of the claim to realism'.¹²

With these realist commitments in mind, Williams and Dunn deny that we should begin by prioritising what Williams calls utopian political thought, which ponders how we should arrange our political institutions if we faced either no (or an idealised set of) practical constraints.¹³ The real area of dispute between them and many other contemporary political theorists in this respect arises from the fact that the latter group, often following Rawls's claims about the relationship between 'ideal' and 'nonideal' theory, insist that, as a normative enterprise, political philosophy must give priority to some kind of utopian political thought (in the sense that I have given to that term above) because the kind of realist claims Williams and Dunn support only pertain at the nonideal stage of working out how we might best apply an ideal political theory. In the remainder of this section I seek to explain Williams and Dunn's reasons for rejecting this position.

Contemporary defences of the primacy of the ideal question come in two forms. As we saw in the Appendix to Chapter Three, some political philosophers, following G.A. Cohen, hold that political philosophy is an epistemic enterprise that seeks to clarify the nature of various ideals that are not subject to the sorts of facts to which Williams and Dunn draw our attention. For example, when discussing justice (although the claim appears to apply more widely), Adam Swift writes that it is 'only by reference to philosophy – abstract, pure, context-free philosophy' that we can understand what justice is and 'have an adequate basis for thinking about how to promote justice in our current ...

¹² John Dunn, 'Political Obligations and Political Possibilities', in *Political Obligation in its Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 261.

¹³ In this regard, Jonathan Wolff claims that Williams insisted that 'the important question is not "what is the best form of society?" but rather, "what is the best form of society we can get to, starting from here?"': *Ethics and Public Policy: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London, Routledge, 2011), p.192.

circumstances'.¹⁴ Such thinkers like to paint as an ethical requirement their refusal to accord a place to such facts, because they are worried that if we incorporate something like the 'realism constraint' we risk coming to accept the world as it is. Hence, in 'The Future of a Disillusion', which questions how socialists should respond to the breakdown of the Soviet project, G.A. Cohen claims that if one repudiates their principled commitments purely on the basis of some 'realist' or 'practical' considerations, such as the practical failings of the Soviet Union, one practices 'adaptive preference formation', a 'process in which a person comes to prefer A to B just because A is available and B is not'. Cohen claims this is irrational because 'that A is more accessible than B is not a reason for thinking that A is better than B'.¹⁵

As we saw in the previous chapter, to avoid contaminating our normative inquiries Cohen famously argues that we must clear the deck of all facts, while in a similar vein David Estlund claims that facts about human nature should not constrain theories of justice. Both insist that this does not violate the requirement that *ought implies can* because we can coherently say that something can be brought about provided that if a person were to try to do it 'and not give up, she would tend to succeed'.¹⁶ Estlund consequently denies that a theory of justice that told us to institute and comply with an institutional system would be false, even if we recognise that this institution will not be complied with for various reasons (human selfishness, etc.), and therefore ought not to be instituted.¹⁷

¹⁴ Swift, 'The Value of Philosophy in Nonideal Circumstances', p. 382. Other truth-seekers include: Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, esp. chs 6 and 7; Andrew Mason, 'Just Constraints', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2004), pp. 253–4; Alan Hamlin and Zofia Stemplowska, 'Theory, Ideal Theory and the Theory of Ideals', *Political Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2012), p. 53; and Patrick Tomlin, 'Should We Be Utopophobes About Democracy in Particular?', *Political Studies Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2012), p. 42.

¹⁵ G.A. Cohen, 'The Future of a Disillusion', in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 253.

¹⁶ David Estlund, 'Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2011), p. 212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

The passage from Dunn's book on Locke that I have quoted suggests that rather than finding this focus on the logically rather than the sociologically possible an indication of one's refusal to fall prey to the dangers of adaptive preference formation, realists find it a self-involved, pejoratively academic and politically complacent type of self-congratulatory imagining which impedes one from answering the serious question about which sorts of authentically possible social changes we should pursue. This complaint has Hegelian resonances. In *The Philosophy of Right* Hegel argues that we ought to be suspicious of philosophical theories that try to transcend their historical context because a theory that 'builds itself a world as it ought to be ... certainly has an existence, but only with his own opinions – a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases'.¹⁸ The suggestion that the sort of approach preferred by Cohen and Estlund may do no more than explicate the inner findings of the pliant medium of their minds has found favour among contemporary realists. Jeremy Waldron makes it clear that he finds this sort of theorising questionably profitable when he disparagingly refers to it as belonging to the '*I-expect-you'd-all-like-to-know-what-I-would-do-if-I-ruled-the-world*' school.¹⁹ Raymond Geuss ridicules it with his vision of three men struggling in the sea with a plank that will only support the weight of one of them. According to Geuss, the ideal theorist might tell us that 'the public good would require that they be in a lifeboat or that each of them have a flotation vest'. True enough, he admits, 'and if each was a fish, they could all swim happily away'.²⁰ Similarly, David Miller argues that the focus on the logically possible at the expense of the sociologically realistic ensures that philosophers like Cohen leave political philosophy in the position of having nothing to do but *lament* 'the size of the gap

¹⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1821]), pp. 22–3.

¹⁹ Waldron, *Law and Disagreement*, p. 1, n. 2.

²⁰ Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 100.

that unavoidably exists between the ideals it defends and the actual conditions of human life', with the result that 'the ideas are drained of their practical force'.²¹

Yet judging the philosophical force of these remarks is problematic. Dunn bluntly claims that 'political theory is the theory of what to do about what is there, not the theory of what, were we God, we would have brought about or merely what we, while not being God, would greatly prefer',²² and even if we are inclined to agree, it is hard to conceive of any argument that could judiciously prove that political theory really has *this* purpose. Moreover, the tacit realist insistence that the writing of merely logically possible moral charters does not help us to think about what *we* should do, runs up against the rejoinder that although such charters may not be directly action-guiding they might be able to serve as ideals that we can, however imperfectly, move toward.

There are three interrelated responses that realists can make to this claim. (To be sure, these involve various substantive commitments about metaethics, the nature of politics, and the point of political theorising, which mean that they are not only controversial but also unlikely to convince all their opponents. However, given that this is also the case with the Cohen/Estlund line, this does not present a problem.) First, realists can challenge the implicit metaethical view at work in the Cohen/Estlund approach. As we have seen, Williams denies that abstract philosophical argument can uncover a historically unencumbered core of an ideal or value beyond the primitive concern that political values speak to and for this reason rejects the suggestion that the sort of abstract, pure and context-free philosophy that these thinkers favour will actually lead to a determinate conception of any political value. Thus the content that primitive values come to hold when they are historically and culturally elaborated does not divert us from their

²¹ David Miller, 'A Tale of Two Cities; or, Political Philosophy as Lamentation', in *Justice for Earthlings: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 231 and 237.

²² John Dunn, 'Political Obligations and Political Possibilities', p. 291.

true value. Rather, the practical elaboration of these primitive conceptual definitions alone gives them any determinate political meaning. This an extension of Goethe's dictum *in the beginning was the deed*, with the underlying idea being that, as Robert Pippin notes, 'the issue of the "actual" content of any principle, when it is applied and asserted in the public domain, when it is opposed by others and directed towards the use of coercive restraint on others, is not a secondary or supplementary issue, does not involve a mere unfortunate compromise with an imperfect world. It is in such contestations and in the midst of historical change that the concept can be said to have any determinate content at all'.²³

Second, realists can deny that the problem is always one of 'feasibility', as Cohen and Estlund suggest, and instead claim that the refusal to incorporate certain facts is more akin to a category error, for the reasons I outlined in the Appendix to Chapter Three. Third, they can make the related point that once we see politics as an institutional response to the historically given problems that we face we should be less inclined to think that the political question – 'What should we do?' (*IBWD*, p. 73) – can be illuminatingly answered solely by reference to our moral beliefs and intuitions. The idea here is that if we accept that the aim of normative political theory is to guide political action we must recognise the materials to which the 'realism constraint' draws our attention, because any act of political reform has to start with reference to them. Williams makes this point by noting that 'political projects are essentially conditioned, not just in their background intellectual conditions but as a matter of empirical realism, by their historical circumstances'. He insists that this should lead us to take seriously how our fellow citizens (and not their idealised Kantian selves) will actually be motivated to act because 'whether our thoughts even make political sense depends to an indefinite degree on other people's actions' (*IBWD*, p. 25). This implies that the sort of moral imaging that Cohen and Estlund

²³ Robert Pippin, review of *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 104, no. 10 (2007), p. 538.

favour is, if not guilty on the category error front, at best nothing more than politically defeasible moral imagining that, to quote Williams again, has not yet ‘cross[ed] the threshold of offering a serious political consideration’ (*IBWD*, p. 92); it may well be incapable of serving as a political ideal, given that the point of political ideals is to help us to live with other morally imperfect people in the unique historical and political situation in which we find ourselves.

For these reasons it seems that a more compelling defence of the primacy of the ‘ideal’ question would proceed more minimally by observing that answers to the ‘political’ question only have direction and purpose to the extent that it helps to bring about the answers that we might give to the ‘ideal’ question. Rawls famously puts this by arguing for the primacy of an ideal theory when he writes that ‘until the ideal is identified ... nonideal theory lacks an objective, an aim, by reference to which its queries can be answered’.²⁴ For Rawlsians, focusing on what I have called the ‘political’ question thus mistakenly supposes that we can engage in the task of guiding our actions in the here and now before we have an answer to the ‘ideal’ question.

It is certainly true that arguing about what to do ‘now and around here’ presupposes some normative commitments, so in which ways might realists object to this claim about the basic priority of the ideal question? Let us begin by considering the recent neo-Rawlsian defence of the primacy of ideal theory offered by Robert Jubb. Jubb argues that we ought to rehabilitate the Rawlsian understanding of ideal theory as full compliance because it enables us to imagine a political framework in which all moral duties are met. We should therefore see the ‘ideal’ question as prior to the ‘political’ question because if we do not, ‘we will often not be able to understand if and to what extent non-ideal theory is tragic. In not understanding that tragedy, we will tend to make mistakes about what is

²⁴ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, p. 90.

actually desirable in the circumstances of tragedy ... [because] unless we know how people are being mistreated, then we are likely to continue to mistreat them'.²⁵

How can a Williams-style realist respond to this charge? First, given his belief in value pluralism, Williams holds that we can only pursue our values and commitments by intuitively balancing their respective claims. If we understand pluralism as Williams does and concurrently hold that 'moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without reminder' (*PS*, p. 179), there is little reason to think that we could, even in theory, imagine a world in which all our ethical demands were met. If so, and if Jubb is right, for the Rawlsian the point of doing ideal theory vanishes.²⁶ Moreover, although Williams (and Dunn) would no doubt accept that we must presuppose the existence of various ethical commitments if our action-guiding political arguments are to have any purpose, it is by no means clear that they have to be set out in the sort of ideal theoretical structure Rawlsians favour. For Williams these commitments will rather be the sort of pre-volitional or pre-reflective concerns that he draws attention to in his work on internal reasons.²⁷ These orienting sentiments will give our political arguments their normative purpose but there is not a great deal of philosophical work that we can do to either systematise them or justify them in the ways the 'morality system', and its supporters, desire.

The final point that Williams makes which relates to the kind of Rawlsian approach under examination here stresses that once we see these as *political commitments* it is part of the political theorists' job to consider whether or not they can overcome various obstacles they face. Focusing on the 'ideal' question can be politically evasive to the extent that it

²⁵ Robert Jubb, 'The Tragedy of Nonideal Theory', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2012), pp. 238–9.

²⁶ See Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', p. 407 for a similar claim.

²⁷ For more on pre-volitional commitments see Robert Pippin's *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 27–9.

enables us to imagine away the various difficulties that necessarily arise when we come to consider how our theories might be implemented. He illustrates this point when he argues that many discussions of social justice simply ignore:

the real difficulties with redistribution: the very serious social, political and economic obstacles to making it work. The obstacles include such things as the bureaucratic inertia of welfare agencies and *ressentiment* among their personnel; difficulties in targeting; the mounting costs of health services; resistance to taxation; and the unfriendly perception, by both recipients and taxpayers, of welfare support for the structurally unemployed. Such problems are ... well known to anyone who has tried to think about the actual politics of trying to make social democracy once more a credible force ... the philosophy of social justice, however, seems often to acknowledge such problems only in the form of discussing the moral character that would be desirable in citizens, a Utopian emphasis that never gets to most of the real problems.²⁸

The problem, as I see it, is that by ignoring these obstacles political theorists do not treat their political convictions with requisite seriousness. If we see political philosophy as a branch of practical reasoning it becomes clear that a political philosophy fails if it cannot solve the question with which it is exercised. It is not that Williams is urging political theorists to simply do more nonideal theory. Rather, it seems that the refusal to discuss such practical obstacles, or to wish them away by postulating a certain moral motivation on the part of citizens, as Rawls seems to, should be seen as a condemnable, because self-deceptive, kind of wishful-thinking that must be avoided.

In light of the preceding argument we have reason to hold that a Williams-realist can plausibly respond to those who insist that, by incorporating the 'realism constraint', realists forget that the 'ideal' question is primary in political theory. The realist position that follows from this makes political philosophy hostage to the vicissitudes of political

²⁸ Bernard Williams, 'Social Justice: The Agenda for the Nineties', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1989), p. 72. This is a motivation behind his claim that utopian thought 'is not necessarily frivolous, but the nearer political thought gets to action ... the more likely it is to be frivolous if it is utopian': *IBWD*, p. 25. Jonathan Wolff makes a similar point: 'philosophers have been known to write as if the entire issue is an intellectual one, and once the best reasons are set out for the best policy the philosophers' work is done. Of course, no one thinks that somehow the world will miraculously conform itself to the intellectual ideal, but philosophers sometimes fall short of taking up the challenge of thinking hard about questions of the process and, even more importantly, consequences of implementation': *Ethics and Public Policy*, p. 192.

practice and history in a way certain philosophers will rally against but I have the impression that thinkers who find this acceptance of certain ‘givens’ morally compromising hold on to a worldview which is, to appropriate a phrase Williams uses in a different sense, ‘not yet thoroughly disenchanted’ (*PHD*, p. 138) by the failure of the search for an absolute perspective from which we can ultimately justify how we should go on. If we agree with Williams that the prospects of such a vindication is doomed we are less likely to be concerned by the idea that incorporating various historical and political constraints runs the risk of causing us to conservatively accept the world as it is. Rather, we might defensibly think that it is the first step towards responsibly thinking about how it should be.

4. The Possibility of Social Criticism

As I noted at the end of Section 1, the second criticism that might be aimed at Williams’s use of the realism constraint is that it risks leading us to accept the world as it is, ruling out the possibility of effective social criticism. Yet Williams is adamant that his view of construction, as a matter of historical or hermeneutical understanding, ‘is entirely consistent with its being at the same time a matter of practical concern, and this is one reason why the unity of history and philosophy ... need not imply a spectatorial conservatism’.²⁹ In ‘Pluralism, Community, and Left Wittgensteinianism’ he takes up these themes by arguing against the idea that unless there is a general and abstract framework of principles of justice, local practices and traditions cannot be criticised. He stresses that if we reject foundationalism we should recall, in a Hegelian manner, that our ways of life and our ethical concepts and thoughts have a history, and that once we do so, there is little temptation to assume that our political world ‘is a satisfactorily functioning

²⁹ Williams, ‘Liberalism and Loss’, p. 96.

whole ... some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in the light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts' (*IBWD*, pp. 36–7). For this reason, he insists that neither foundationalism nor an abstract theory is necessary for social critique because we can deploy parts of our ethical thought against others and reinterpret 'what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers' (*IBWD*, p. 37):

[There is] no reason why non-foundationalist political thought ... should not take a radical turn ... The disposition of most of his [Wittgenstein's] followers not to go in this direction is due to their refusal to think in concrete terms about the extent of 'we'. In Wittgenstein's own work ... it may often not make too much difference whether the 'we' refers to one cultural group or tribe as contrasted with another, or rather extends to everyone with whom we might intelligibly speak ... but in political and ethical matters of pluralism and community, these are the differences that matter to the exclusion of almost everything else, and the right understanding cannot be uncontentiously extracted. Once a realistic view of communities is applied, and the categories that we need to understand anyone who is intelligible at all are distinguished from those of more local significance, we can follow Wittgenstein to the extent of not looking for a new foundationalism, but still leave room for a critique of what some of 'us' do in terms of our understanding of a wider 'we'.

(*IBWD*, p. 37)

Williams denies that this leads to a 'communitarian relativism' in which 'we reflect on our (local) practices and take them as authenticating a way of life for us' because (a) no Wittgensteinian argument tells us who is meant by 'we', and (b) because even if 'we' in the political case meant a local 'us', 'the communitarian interpretation ... runs straight into the point ... that in any sense in which *we*, this local *we*, have identifiably local practices, one of them consists in criticizing local practices' (*IBWD*, pp. 24–5). For this reason focusing on historical and social circumstances rather than searching for transcendental criteria of justification does not rule out the possibility of a progressive politics, as we can find a plurality of standards of evaluation with which to criticise the political and social situation in which we find ourselves *from within it* if we think clearly about who 'we' are.³⁰

³⁰ See 'Wittgenstein and Idealism' for Williams's first discussion of this topic: *ML*, pp. 144–63.

This is why Williams was uncomfortable with the communitarian label. As his adoption of Goethe's epithet shows, when it comes to politics Williams alleges that political moralists misunderstand historical change by greatly overestimating the power of theoretical argument because (as he puts it), most of the time, 'what comes first is that somebody does something, usually which they don't understand and the consequences of which they certainly don't foresee'.³¹ Williams accordingly sides with the communitarians against the more rationalistic Kantian approaches insofar as the Kantian strands of modern moral philosophy are 'governed by a dream of a community of reason that is too far removed ... from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life', and which endorse 'a false image of how reflection is related to practice' (*ELP*, p. 197). However, he resists (*IBWD*, p. 33) the communitarian label for 'political reasons, and for the undisguised element of nostalgia which seems to hang over its aspirations' as it implies a preference for a certain ethical homogeneity and unreflective confidence which runs 'the risk of being not merely intellectually empty and unrealistic, but pathetic, pretentious, evasive, or deceitful as well' (*IBWD*, p. 44). Even if one praises 'rootedness, unspoken grasp, and traditional understandings' we can still sensibly think that 'to try to suppress reflection in that interest can lead to nothing but disaster, rather as someone who finds that having children has disrupted her life cannot regain her earlier state by killing them' (*ELP*, p. 168). The pervasively reflective nature of the enlightenment is non-negotiable as modernity involves 'a self-consciousness which can no longer feel

³¹ 'Seminar with Bernard Williams', p. 253. Williams elaborates as such: 'What isn't true is that what changes a situation in which people are very unfair and nasty is more likely to be an argument than something that isn't an argument. That's not true. What I suggest is that you take a sack full of utilitarianism or Kantianism or whatever the preferred mark of ethical theory is and try it out in Serbia. What happened in Serbia or Bosnia was that people had lost the sense of living with their neighbours and of fairness and of living in a community which had to operate under law. They'd been taken over by the most primitive forms of loyalty and then exactly the ground that is needed for using your ethical theories is what is then absent. Somebody's got to stop the war, shake them up, appeal to their images of what they can do before anybody can start these arguments, and therefore it seems to me just inappropriate to appeal to situations of extremity to motivate the force of moral arguments. Not surprisingly, moral arguments do better when the situation is not very extreme. That's because you have a bit of elbow room': *ibid.*, p. 254.

unreflectively at home in its social environment' (*TT*, p. 190). Therefore, to the extent that communitarianism yearns for homogeneity and a kind of unreflective acceptance, it is fanciful, historically evasive, and prone to the kinds of wishful thinking he abhors.³² The political problem we face is that of 'finding a basis for shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive (the requirement of freedom) nor dependent on mythical legitimations (the requirements of the enlightenment)' (*TT*, p. 201). In pluralistic modernity, communitarianism is problematically positioned vis-à-vis the second clause. Hence with regard to the (often starkly drawn) contrast between liberal universalism and nostalgic communitarianism Williams adopts a typically nuanced position, which remains sceptical about the more exuberant claims of either side.³³

The insistence that we do not need a systematic moral and political philosophy for effective social criticism also derives from his belief that it is not a requirement of rationality that moral conflict be avoided. In 'Political Philosophy and the Analytical Tradition' he writes that conflict between our moral sentiments and beliefs is 'a historically, socially, and probably psychologically conditioned phenomenon, the product of such things as pluralistic societies and rapid cultural change as well as, perhaps, more generally distributed psychological needs which tend to conflict. We can, to some extent, understand *why* we have conflicting sentiments, but that does not mean, or should not mean, that we therefore withdraw our loyalty from them' (*PHD*, p. 162).³⁴ He thus objects to the (early) Rawlsian model which assimilates moral and political theory with linguistic theory: 'while a linguistic theory seeks to explain and predict acceptable utterances', a theory which aims to unify our normative commitments into a set of

³² For further discussion see *SN*, pp. 162 and 166.

³³ Hence his acknowledgement that his contribution to this debate 'has been to some extent that of making myself a nuisance to all parties': *IBWD*, p. 33.

³⁴ Or as he puts it in *Moral Luck*, a moral theory cannot succeed in answering the question 'by what right does it legislate the moral sentiments?': *ML*, p. iv.

principles ‘is not alone in the field: for we can understand equally an external theory, e.g. of social explanation, which predicts that no one set of such principles or notions will do the job’ (*PHD*, p. 162). To this end, although there needs to be consistency in public positions, we should recognise that (thankfully) politics ‘can embody not only conflicts of interests, and of straightforwardly opposed principles, but of conflicting values, and of conflicting interpretations of the same values’. A philosopher may accordingly do his best work in sharpening these conflicts and ‘making it clear in what ways both have a foot in our sentiments’ (*PHD*, p. 164).³⁵

The resolutely anti-theoretical position that Williams champions has been questioned by numerous critics.³⁶ I now want to focus on two important lines of complaint. First, in ‘Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour’ Martha Nussbaum criticises Williams for failing to understand the good practical effects philosophical theory can have. She claims that ‘in a world where moral perception is corrupt and judgment likely to be thrown off the track by temptations of all sorts, we need all the explicitness and articulateness we can muster if we are to elicit the best for ourselves, to identify defects in our social world, and to devise appropriate institutional and educational remedies’.³⁷ She points to the success of feminist theories – such as J.S. Mill’s work on the subjugation of women and Catherine Mackinnon’s work on

³⁵ Moreover, Williams emphasises the dangers both in terms of value loss and possible suffering that more systematic conceptions of political theory may engender. He accordingly emphasises the central role of moral and political judgement throughout his work – see especially *IBWD*, pp. 19 and 46. The literature on this is substantial but for presumably influential views on Williams’s understanding see (in particular) Isaiah Berlin, ‘The Pursuit of the Ideal’, in Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer, eds. *The Proper Study of Mankind* (London, Pimlico, 1998), pp. 1–16, and Isaiah Berlin, ‘On Political Judgment’, *The New York Review of Books* (October 1996): www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1996/oct/03/on-political-judgment (accessed 9 July 2013). For very engaging discussions of this issue from a variety of perspectives see the essays in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss, eds. *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁶ For the most recent discussion of many see Brad Hooker, ‘Theory and Anti-theory in Ethics’, in Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang, eds. *Value, Luck and Commitment* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 19–40.

³⁷ Martha Nussbaum, ‘Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Principle, and Bad Behaviour’, in Brad Hooker and Margaret Little, eds. *Moral Particularism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 232.

sexual harassment – and how they, rather than a set of concrete judgements, enabled us to articulate various grievances in previously impossible ways.³⁸ Nussbaum's accusation is that the sort of anti-foundationalist and unsystematic criticism favoured by Williams is likely to be insufficient to uncover distortions in our practices. She claims that Williams:

conveys the strong impression of thinking that when we do away with the theory we will be left with people like Bernard Williams: they will lack philosophical theory, but they will still be energetically critical and self-critical, not captive to any other theory either, and alive to the possibility of distortion and hierarchy in the experiences that are the basis for their judgments. Life might then be like an Oxford common room in one of the more liberal colleges; or a Henry James novel with the liberal politics thrown in.³⁹

Without doubting that Mill and Mackinnon's work has been incredibly successful in the ways Nussbaum outlines, one can respond to the rather mocking suggestion that Williams presupposes a (false) view of a world which contains self-critical and politically engaged individuals by pointing out that Nussbaum presupposes a view in which people appear to be far more likely to be moved by methodical, philosophical argument, with all its attendant abstraction, than we have much reason to endorse. Indeed, if we reflect on those philosophical theories that have had profound political effects it appears to be the case that this is just as (if not more) likely to be for reasons that are often disconcertingly related to their philosophical ability to painstakingly and incontrovertibly argue their case. J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*, one of the most politically influential pieces of political theory of the last 150 years or so, is a case in point. The 'harm principle' at the core of *On Liberty* is deeply problematic because there is no reason to hold, with Mill, that one can distinguish other-regarding and self-regarding actions in the way that appears to be necessary for it to work; nevertheless, it has had enormous political influence. Because of this we need to think more carefully about the extent to which the philosophical cogency of the theory at hand is likely to make it a political success. There is little reason to hold, as does

³⁸ Ibid., p. 254.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 248.

Nussbaum, that a meticulously argued philosophical theory alone is likely to have significant political effects; motivational ability is just as (if not more) likely to be a matter of chiming with public sentiment (or generating it). If so, there is no reason to think that an anti-foundationalist critique of a Williamsian kind – one that took seriously the requirement that it must *make sense* to those whom it seeks to guide in light of various ethical commitments they currently endorse – could not motivate action in the way Nussbaum favours.

Ronald Dworkin raises a different, but equally pressing, point against Williams's model of construction when he states that 'we need something more than history here. We need to confront the essentially moral question of how to construe the ideal of liberty'.⁴⁰ However, Williams does not prohibit us from introducing moral considerations into the construction of our political values; rather, he holds that they have to relate to a historically realistic and sociologically possible ways of ordering our political institutions. To this end, although realistically possible states of affairs become an arbiter of serious political argument, we still have to argue about how the world should be, and various ethical considerations will, obviously enough, play a significant role in these debates. Pippin (again) hits the mark when he notes that Williams is not 'encouraging us to trim our philosophical sails to accommodate prevailing political winds. He is trying to point out that it is a very bad sailor indeed who proposes to sail to his goal no matter the wind; just as bad as one who lets the prevailing winds and currents set his destination. To philosophers who profess no interest in actual sailing (just its "principles") Williams makes

⁴⁰ Dworkin makes this point in response to Williams's argument in 'Liberalism and Loss': 'Discussion', in Ronald Dworkin, Mark Lilla and Robert Silvers, eds. *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin* (New York, New York Review of Books Classics, 2001), p. 124.

very clear here why he is as suspicious as Hegel of such attempts to instruct the political world from on high about how it ought to be'.⁴¹

This might be thought to invite a further criticism; that among the more blustery winds of modernity are various morally troubling facts (e.g. sexism, racism, etc.) and it would be an unappealing implication of Williams's view if appropriately modern constructions of political values had to incorporate these in the way that he thinks we should accept the existence of a competitive economic system. This can lead one to wonder why we must accord economic competition a central place in our interpretation of modernity if we can refuse to accord such a place to facts such as racism and sexism. This is a serious worry, but there are a variety of judgements that can be utilised here to differentiate these features of modernity so as to support Williams. To do so we would have to hold, as a matter of judgement, that we cannot conceive of an attractively possible world (for us) in which competition was not an essential feature of our economic system.⁴² This claim can have any number of supports: the historical lessons of the failures of command economies, sociological interpretation, ideological analysis (and so on and so forth). The point is that for realists like Williams a potentially idiosyncratic set of moral intuitions concerning the morally disquieting facts of economic competition are not considered weighty enough to silence these sorts of claims. This is not necessarily the case with racism and sexism. While we cannot think of a functioning modern political system absent a competitive economic system we can think of an institutional framework (if sadly not the peculiar convictions of each and every person within them) that refuses to condone racism and sexism. This is a judgement about what could actually happen, and how a set of institutions could actually be ordered. The important point is that when we

⁴¹ Pippin, review of *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, p. 539.

⁴² There is see no reason to hold that seeing economic competition as central to modernity requires us to endorse a specific conception of global capitalism. Williams is making a more abstract claim than that.

come to construct political values we do not simply investigate our moral intuitions about a range of real and imaginary cases but embrace the impurity of political theory by asking if it is (really) reasonable and attractive to think of a social world where a constitutive feature of our lives is not central.

This leads to the final point worth stressing here: for Williams there is something improper, in the sense of politically and historically evasive, about the idea that we should simply discard those facts of modernity we (quite often idiosyncratically) abhor, and favour the findings of various fanciful devices of representation (be it imagined original positions or socialist camping trips) as *the* decisive material to work with when thinking about how the world should be. There is no problem with endorsing these suggestions while accepting that what we take as a given in modernity may well reflect our own prejudices (*TT*, p. 134), but the only antidote to this is to be as honest and reflective as possible.

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams contrasts two rival ways of doing moral philosophy in a way that is relevant to this discussion. One approach – ‘a phenomenology of ethical life’ – reflects on ‘what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways we confront obligations and recognize responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame’ (*ELP*, p. 93). The other – ethical theory – ‘tends to start from just one aspect of ethical experience, beliefs’, and sets out a ‘structure of propositions, which, like a scientific theory, in part provides a framework of our beliefs, in part criticizes or revises them’ (*ELP*, p. 93). It should be reasonably clear how the approach that I have been sketching in this chapter accords with the former and why something like the ‘realism constraint’ plays an inescapable role in it. The idea is that when we see our task in terms of making sense of the world we inhabit, rather than searching for an absolute perspective from which to legislate our moral and political sentiments, we must, as Williams puts it in

Truth and Truthfulness, ‘appeal to a historical story about our situation, about the origins, development, and character of modernity’. He acknowledges that some people might consider this is a ‘circle’ but retorts as such: ‘if so, it is the circle of the horizon within which any such speech must occur: one cannot blast someone into seeing the point’ (*TT*, p. 263–4).

Before I conclude this section it is worth mentioning one final point. Certain defenders of immanent critique hold that there always exist practically efficacious internal resources for social critique.⁴³ However, I think that the analysis of chattel slavery in ancient Greece offered by Williams in *Shame and Necessity* should make us treat this claim with some suspicion. Williams notes that ‘slavery was taken as necessary ... to sustaining the kind of political, social and cultural life that free Greeks enjoyed’ and that ‘the effect of the necessity was ... that life proceeded on the basis of slavery and left no space, effectively, for the question of its justice to be raised’ (*SN*, p. 124). When we reflect on our politics such recognitions can generate the despairing thought that no matter how hard we try, it is incredibly likely that we are wronging people in ways that we cannot even envisage; ‘the main feature of the Greek attitude to slavery ... was not a morally primitive belief in its justice, but the fact that considerations of justice and injustice were immobilised by the demands of what was seen as social and economic necessity’, and ‘that phenomenon has not so much been eliminated from modern life as shifted to different places’ (*SN*, p. 125). Yet on the other hand, this is the sort of truthful recognition that we ought to confront if we are to avoid deceiving ourselves. It is certainly not a reason for abandoning the sort of politically engaged Left-Wittgensteinianism that Williams favours because to do so in search of a firmer grounding for critique is a non-starter. (If philosophical reflection has its limits there is no use in wishing these away in the hope of

⁴³ See Dan Sabia, ‘Defending Immanent Critique’, *Political Theory*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2010), pp. 684–711, for one such argument.

moral salvation.) As truthful political agents we ought to embrace our plight and work within these limits as best we can, by attuning our moral sentiments and seeking to comprehend the myriad ways in which people are mistreated, and then try to do something politically to sort them out.

5 .The Implications of Seeing Liberty as a Political Value

I now want to outline some of the implications that follow from Williams's claim that when constructing political values we must take the idea of political opposition seriously. In the previous chapter I argued that, contrary to the arguments of the majority of Williams's fellow new realists, recognising the centrality of political disagreement is not necessarily incompatible with appeals to hypothetical agreement. Here I spell out some of the consequences of Williams's arguments for our understanding of the demands of democratic coexistence and the implications this has for our reflexive understanding of the role of political philosophy.

Williams claims that, as liberty is a political value, we must take seriously the point that the most important disagreements that surround it are political disagreements (*IBWD*, p. 77). He criticises Dworkin's view that liberty and equality cannot conflict because it fails to appreciate the role played in our political experience by the claim that we have suffered a loss of liberty:

We are constructing liberty as a political value, which means among other things that we can make sense of its role in political argument and political conflict, and generally of the experience of life under a political order. It is one datum of experience that people can even recognize a restriction as rightful under some political value such as equality or justice, and nevertheless regard it as a restriction on liberty. The notion of a cost in liberty is at least as well entrenched in historical and contemporary experience as that of a rightful claim in liberty.

(*IBWD*, p. 84)

In 'Liberalism and Loss' he uses the example of government outlawing private schooling in the name of providing greater equality of opportunity as an example of an action which

may be justified but which still results in a loss of liberty for those people who are prohibited from doing something that they were previously free to do. If we endorse Dworkin's view that liberty is simply matter of a rightful claim, we cannot make sense of these scenarios.

The important complaint that Williams makes against the Dworkinian view is that it impedes us from adopting the appropriate attitude to our political opponents. He insists that 'we should take seriously the idea that if, under certain conditions, people think that there is a certain cost in liberty, then there is ... [This] is a condition not only of taking seriously the idea of political opposition, but of taking our political opponents themselves seriously' (*IBWD*, p. 85). Even if we were 'utopian monarchs, we would have to take account of others' disagreement as mere fact', but Williams insists that 'as democrats, we have to do more than that' (*IBWD*, p. 13). The central point is that:

Moral disagreement is characterized by a class of considerations, by the kinds of reasons that are brought to bear on a decision. Political disagreement is identified by a field of application – eventually, about what should be done under political authority, in particular through the deployment of state power. The reasons that go into political decisions and arguments that bear on them may be of various kinds. Because of this, political disagreement is not merely moral disagreement, and it need not necessarily involve it, though it may do so; equally, it need not necessarily be a disagreement simply of interests, though of course it may be.

(*IBWD*, p. 77)

For this reason Williams claims that rather than seeing our fellow citizens as misconceived arguers after the truth, it can be more respectful to view them as losers of political contests (*IBWD*, p. 13).

If we view political disagreement in these terms, and think about liberty and what we need it to do for us 'now and around here', Williams thinks that we should make space for the fact that people will reasonably disagree about the rightful ends of political action. To this end, he objects to Dworkin's 'Rousseauian view' that many citizens are simply wrong to complain that various coercive actions, like the outlawing of private education, inhibit their liberty. The basic problem with such a view is that it is 'hostile to the

relations of fellow citizenship which we must hope can co-exist with political opposition' (*IBWD*, p. 86). The mistake flows from Dworkin's implicit use of a 'judicial conception, of an agreed authority which can rightfully grant or refuse such a claim', with the central error being that 'political opponents do not necessarily understand their situation in these terms' (*IBWD*, p. 86). Williams claims that Dworkin misunderstands the fact that politics is neither morality nor constitutional law and holds that many contemporary political theorists fail to appreciate that 'the politics of principle isn't morality or constitutional law either' because 'in these mistaken conceptions of politics there is lurking a Kantian dualism, to the effect that there is one world of interests which consists of winning and losing, and another world of principle, which is expressed in being right and wrong'.⁴⁴

Once we distinguish between the kinds of reasons deployed in moral and political arguments we will see that 'the reasons for which an agreed political authority decides what will happen are various' and that a political decision 'is not itself an announcement of what is a rightful claim in liberty' (*IBWD*, p. 86). It is easy to understand how a decision can be procedurally correct, and therefore perfectly rightful, but nonetheless limit one's liberty, as this recognition is part of the political maturity of realising that while we can resent a legitimate state for not enacting our favoured interpretation of equality, we should nevertheless accept that our fellow citizens may not be persuaded by our case. There is 'no incoherence in this – merely the containment within the law of, and a shared political system of, conflicting interests, passions, and interpretations' (*IBWD*, p. 125).

Consequently, while we need to move beyond the notion of primitive freedom if we are to construct liberty as a political value, certain resentments should be taken seriously as genuine representations of losses in liberty because '*the proposed interpretation of liberty is what we need in order to live in society with others who have different interpretations of*

⁴⁴ Williams, 'Liberalism and Loss', p. 101.

equality' (*IBWD*, pp. 125–6, emphasis in original). Rather than condescendingly instructing one's fellow citizens as to how they should interpret their political lives, a thoroughly political concept of liberty recognises that even if 'you and I share a certain conception of equality, and are happy to see its policies being enacted, we can and should use a political concept of liberty in terms of which we can not only sympathize but agree with our fellow citizen who does not share this conception of equality, resents what is being done to him in its name, and says that he has lost some of his liberty' (*IBWD*, p. 126).

The central point is that the Dworkinian picture rests on an image of the political that we should be sceptical of, as:

The on-going political framework that contains all this conflict is not given to us, as for instance, the institutional protocols of the Supreme Court supply an on-going framework for its decisions. We have to constantly reinvent the political framework – in part, through our attitudes to our fellow citizens ... our relation to them is not that of offering them instruction in reading a text which we believe we can read better than they can. (*IBWD*, p. 126)

The key idea here is that, as democrats, we need a kind of 'double-mindedness'. As a result, we must take people and their opinions as they are rather than moralistically lamenting them because they do not accord with our own moral claims. Overly determinate and moralised understandings of liberty, such as Dworkin's, can thus be pernicious because they are not responsive to the basic requirements of democratic respect: treating our fellow citizens whom we disagree with as opponents 'can, oddly enough, show more respect for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers' (*IBWD*, p. 13). As liberals, we need a conception of liberty that not only makes sense of this need but which can actually enable us to live together by reflexively incorporating it.

This fundamental claim about the implications of seeing political values as values for us in the democracies we inhabit 'now and around here', is central to Williams's paper

‘Forward to Socialist Basics’. This was written as a rejoinder to G.A. Cohen’s ‘Back to Socialist Basics’, which criticised the Institute for Public Policy Research’s Commission on Social Justice (which included Williams among its commissioners).⁴⁵ In ‘Back to Socialist Basics’ Cohen chastises the report for compromising the Labour Party’s traditional values in the hope of greater electoral success and argued that this exposed the Commission’s mistaken view of the nature of the relationship between principles and matters of political expedience. Williams criticises Cohen for failing to attend to a variety of salient historical and political considerations that are relevant to the task of making sense of the political values that we appeal to in our political arguments. He insists that political success, and the possibility of gaining widespread support, cannot be neglected as being of secondary importance in the way Cohen supposes; when ‘the disappointed Left offers not much more than moralising disappointment with the electors, to the effect that they are too greedy and self-centred to accept one’s principles, and then the time has come to ask whether one’s principles are principles for these people – whether indeed, they are *political* principles at all’.⁴⁶ Instead of lamenting the moral deficiencies of those who supported the rise of the new Right, the Left must accept that ‘one of the less encouraging explanations of why these ideas have had an effect is that they are in a certain sense psychologically and historically realistic, they may be seen as appealing to motives that people have and are not ashamed to have, rather than to motives the moralists would prefer them to have’.⁴⁷ If we ask what the egalitarian tradition can mean for us today we must accept that although there was a ‘rough coincidence between the interests of the organised working class and the interests, more generally, of the worse-off ... more recently it has dramatically fallen apart, and to the extent that supporters of the Left go on

⁴⁵ See <http://www.ippr.org.uk/ipprcommissions/index.asp?id=2378>. Bernard Williams, ‘Forward to Socialist Basics’, in Jane Franklin, ed. *Equality* (London, IPPR, 1997), pp. 49–58.

⁴⁶ Williams, ‘Forward to Socialist Basics’, p. 49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p 50.

as though this had not happened, they show less social understanding than Margaret Thatcher did'.⁴⁸

This commitment to taking seriously the opinions of our fellow citizens has wide-ranging implications for our reflexive understanding of political theory itself. Williams stresses that taking our fellow citizens seriously as opponents is not some kind of imperfect compromise with injustice, in the way the 'ideal' theorists might imply. Rather, considering which policies people will actually find acceptable, rather than those which further one's favoured philosophical principles, can be a principled position because the question 'how will it play in Peoria ... can involve a consideration of political right, as well as of expediency' (*IBWD*, p. 151). The corollary of this is that if we genuinely want to move people to act in a particular way we must take seriously the need to speak to them in terms that they can embrace, a reminder which ties in with Williams's belief that that ethical and political arguments will fail to guide action if they offer the sort of (conventional) philosophical theory which systematises ethical thought and reduces it to some basic principles. As we saw in Chapter One, Williams laments this modern turn to *thin* concepts for related reasons, primarily because they are 'inadequate to provide any great substance to personal ethical experience' (*IBWD*, p. 49). As Geoffrey Hawthorn notes, this leads Williams to malign the sort of abstract, thin and general theoretical political arguments that many political moralists articulate because they fail to offer a 'full and satisfactory account of how we should go on ... now and around here' (*IBWD*, p. xiii). In what 'What Might Philosophy Become?' Williams develops this line of thought to make a point about the style of moral and political philosophy. He claims that 'a philosopher may need to give us a picture of life and society and the individual, and to give it in a way that integrates it with what he or she cares about. If a philosophical writer does not solve

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p 55.

the problems of how to express those concerns adequately, or, as in many cases, does not even face those problems, he or she will have failed to carry reflection far enough' (*PHD*, p. 205). With this in mind Williams insists that the 'demand that moral and political philosophy should sound right, should speak in a real voice, is not something arbitrarily imposed by those with a taste for literature, or for history, or for excitement. It follows from philosophy's ideal of reflectiveness' (*PHD*, pp. 205–6). Therefore, political philosophers should be more concerned than they have been with the idea that their work should *ring true*.⁴⁹

Hence, although the argument in FL reminds us about the appropriate way to view our fellow democratic citizens, and how our understanding of liberty should incorporate this fact, it has important implications for how political theorists should construct their action-guiding arguments. It shows that we must make more of an effort to view the people we address as agents with concrete identities and disparate projects, who need to be convinced and motivated to act *as they are*, rather than as recalcitrant impediments toward the achievement of one's favoured philosophical theory or set of distributive principles. Once we grant the principled basis of this idea we ought to recognise that the requirement that political arguments be ecumenical is not always a morally problematic concession to immorality and injustice. Rather, if we remember, as realists following Hobbes are wont to, that politics is an achievement in itself, we should view the desire to ensure that one's claims make sense to people in whatever way we can as a responsible aim.

Secondly, and more tentatively, Williams's reminders about the basic requirements of democratic coexistence suggest that we should be more prepared to leave certain

⁴⁹ As he puts it, philosophy can be unimaginative, 'not because it is badly argued but because it is arguing with the wrong people; not because it has missed an argument, but because it misses the historical and psychological point; not because it fails to be clever, but because it is stupid': *PHD*, p. 211.

decisions to be decided politically rather than philosophically. As Glen Newey notes, there is a sense in which overly moralised views can be ‘anti-political, to the extent that [they aim to derive] ... philosophically a set of principles, enacted through institutions and procedures, which if implemented would herald the end of politics’.⁵⁰ Williams takes up this theme most explicitly at the end of his lecture on humanitarian intervention when he asks his audience to imagine a body that expressed the moral principle of rescue – an extremely well-funded NGO commanding military forces unencumbered by the usual constraints that governments face when they consider such acts of intervention – and to consider if there is an objection *in principle* to it (*IBWD*, p. 152). The obvious objection is that it would not be answerable to anyone other than the moral consciousness of mankind and, as Hawthorn notes, ‘the implausibility makes the point. It is no answer’ (*IBWD*, p. xviii). If, as Williams expects, we share this response, then we have to consider if there is any alternative to the situation where states have to make political decisions about whether or not to intervene. This is an indication of what Williams might well have termed ‘politics and the limits of philosophy’, the idea being that because politics is a good in its own right sometimes we have got to let the politics, as politics, occur rather than trying to determine in advance by philosophical argument what we should do. This is what he conveys when he remarks that, because in many cases the question *What should we do?* ‘can only be a political question, there is not much that can be said in general about it at an ethical or philosophical level’ (*IBWD*, p. 73). At its worst the desire to evade this conclusion can, as Newey surmises, perhaps best be diagnosed as the result of a basic mistrust of politics and ‘the distaste which political practice, and political professionals, so often engender’.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Newey, *After Politics*, p. 7.

⁵¹ Newey, *After Politics*, p. 22.

The important result of these ‘democratic’ reflections is reflexive. They remind political theorists of the difficult task of ensuring that political philosophy actually helps us to think about how we can make acceptable political decisions, decisions which claim authority over all even though certain people will inevitably resent them. Furthermore, they cause us to reflect on the fact that much contemporary political theory is strangely suspicious of some of the basic features of politics itself (be it bargaining, the pursuit of compromise or the institutional management of political opposition).⁵² The central liberal value of liberty is perhaps unique in this sense, given that, as liberals, we should construct a conception of liberty that respects the judgements of our fellow citizens. Nonetheless the point applies more generally. If political thought, in its various guises, is to help with the task of ameliorating our political existence, there is little point in constantly adopting the position of the moral preacher who, more often than not, looks upon those who need to be convinced by their arguments as feckless and mistaken. If we take seriously the reminder that we constantly need to reflect on what we want political values to do for us ‘now and around here’ we are more likely to bear in mind that our fellow citizens are not best seen as impediments to the realisation of our favoured normative political theory but as part of the material from which a properly action-guiding political value will be constructed.⁵³

⁵² For further discussion of this evasion and plea for a refocus see Jeremy Waldron, ‘Political Political theory: An Inaugural Lecture’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1–23.

⁵³ This is one of the many virtues of the method of ‘dynamic public reflective equilibrium’ developed by Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit in, *Disadvantage* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

Conclusion

Where does this leave us vis-à-vis Williams's political realism? In Chapter Two I argued that his conception of legitimacy and articulation of the BLD promises a way of thinking about politics that resists the moralism of much contemporary political theory. I noted that while a Williamsian approach needs further development, his work on legitimacy gives political theorists a suitable subject on which to focus, one that is not committed to the various implausible ideas that his critics contend it is. Despite this, in Chapter Three I argued that Williams's realism and the kind of 'political ethics' defended by Sangiovanni and the later Rawls (among others) are conceptually closer, and their relation more complicated, than most of the realist critics of post-Rawlsian political moralism are ready to concede, because a certain type of political ethics need not deny the importance of the first political question or the inherently historically conditioned nature of judgements about what makes sense.

The argument of this chapter does not impinge on my earlier arguments because the more positive Williamsian account of how we might construct political values in what we can call 'realist' terms that I have been focusing on here, can be seen to play into his realist approach at the level of how we might contribute to the ongoing process of making sense of the political situation in which we find ourselves. I have argued that Williams's papers on liberty offer a defensible indication of how we can go about this task because they bolster his claim that political theorists must accept the disanalogy that exists between some of the forms of moral enquiry that political moralists favour, which typically oppose the idea that political philosophy should be *impure* in the way Williams outlines. As we have seen, Williams is adamant that if we are to responsibly think about what might make sense 'now and around here' we must embrace such impurities by taking seriously the 'realism constraint' and his reminders about oppositional respect. I have outlined why

Williams accords them such a place in his thought and defended his use of these constraints from the sorts of objections that are likely to be made against them.

In the remaining two chapters of this thesis I turn to Williams's endorsement of liberalism. As I argued in the Introduction, Williams's understanding of realism, and hence his attempt to make ethical sense of politics, can be seen as part of his attempt to explain how certain things that we value can be 'something, despite their failures of self-understanding' (*SN*, p. 11). Contrary to many of his fellow new realists, whose realism functions as part of a trenchant critique of liberalism, Williams's understanding of the centrality of legitimation to politics offers an explanation of how we can continue to affirm a kind of liberalism without recourse to the discredited conceptions of 'morality' that we must abandon. Which is to say, it offers Williams a way to rescue liberalism from the moralism of much contemporary liberal thought. In the next chapter I explain how he thinks we can endorse various values without having recourse to the kind of moralistic strategies he thinks we must renounce. In Chapter Six I explain how his defence of a certain conception of liberalism – a variant of Shklar's liberalism of fear – fits in to this account.

Chapter Five

History, Contingency and Confidence

*And that something stands fast for me is not grounded in my stupidity or credulity.*¹

As I argued in the Introduction, while Williams claims that much contemporary moral and political philosophy is prone to various kinds of wishful thinking, his contribution is not wholly skeptical because in much of his late work he is deeply concerned with thinking about how certain modern values can ‘be something, despite their failures of self-understanding’ (SN, p. 11). It is for this reason that he distances himself from the anti-enlightenment conclusions of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, a book which shares certain things with his own attack on modern moral philosophy, but which claims that ‘the Enlightenment project was not only mistaken, but should never have been commenced in the first place’.² In contrast, Williams insists that to the extent that the enlightenment represents ‘a set of social and political ideals in favour of truthfulness and the criticism of arbitrary and merely traditional power, [it] has no essential need’ for illusory philosophical underpinnings. He therefore refuses to denounce enlightenment ideals insofar as they celebrate the pursuit of social and political honesty rather than what he calls a ‘rationalistic metaphysics of morality’ (SN, p. 159). It is not so much that MacIntyre makes the mistake of throwing the baby out with the bathwater but that, to extend the metaphor somewhat, he mistakenly infers that because the enlightenment bath is a bit leaky there is nothing to be said for having a wash.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993 [1969]), remark 235, p. 31e.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011 [1981]), p. 118.

One of the central claims of this thesis is that Williams's political realism is best read in light of this commitment of his. To this end, in the final two chapters I examine why Williams remained committed to liberalism despite his scepticism about modern moral philosophy and his related discontent with the argumentative strategies of his fellow twentieth-century liberal political philosophers. My central claim is that his articulation of a political realism sensitive to the perennial realities of politics and the historically-conditioned nature of the responses to the 'first political question', can be seen as part of this project that animated him in his late work because it promises a way to rescue liberalism from the philosophically suspect moralism of much contemporary political philosophy. This is of some significance because Williams is unique among the new-realists in this respect because for many of them, their 'realism' functions as part of a wider critique of liberalism.³

In this chapter I begin by recapping the nature of Williams's scepticism about the power of moral philosophy to articulate an external justification for ethical life. I set out the implications this has for certain moralistic defences of liberalism before introducing Williams's notion of 'confidence'. In Section 2 I examine his views about the relationship between historical and philosophical enquiry. In Section 3 I argue that, despite what certain philosophers have claimed, this conception of confidence is capable of stabilising our commitments in the here and now. This paves the way for the argument of Chapter Six which examines how Williams's defence of a certain iteration of liberalism – the liberalism of fear – fits within the framework outlined here.

³ Raymond Geuss expresses a common realist assessment of Williams's endorsement of liberalism when he remarks that despite the virtues of his work in ethics, Williams ought to be derided for 'paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J.S. Mill, and Isaiah Berlin': 'Did Williams Do Ethics?', p. 150.

1. The Limits of Philosophy

As we saw in Chapter One, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams addresses the question of whether we can offer a universally binding justification of ethical life. He discusses three approaches that aim to validate our ethical beliefs by offering such a justification. Two of these – the approaches favoured by Aristotle and Kant – claim to do so by focusing on ideas of rational agency but, according to Williams, neither succeed. The third probes the possibility of philosophical enquiry generating ‘convergence on a body of ethical truths which is brought about and explained by the fact that they are truths’ (*ELP*, pp. 151–2) in the way that science does. Once again, Williams is unconvinced: while an account of convergence on a purported set of ethical truths might ‘in a weak sense, provide some explanations ... [by] showing why one local concept rather than others was ethically appropriate in particular circumstances ... it could not do something that explanations of perception can do, which is to generate an adequate theory of error and to account generally for the tendency of people to have what, according to its principles, are wrong beliefs’ (*ELP*, p. 151).⁴

This may strike many philosophers as a bitter truth. But although we cannot offer a plausible external justification for ethical life, Williams is adamant that it would be a mistake to think that this inexorably leads to ethical nihilism or some kind of practical paralysis. Instead, we must accept that, ultimately, support for our ethical practices must come from within, which ensures that philosophical enquiry cannot ‘control the enemies of the community or its shirkers’ but at the most can hope that ‘by giving reason to people

⁴ In the endnote accompanying this claim Williams remarks that ‘this difficulty, of finding an adequate theory of error, is encountered by any theory of ethics that concentrates on the notion of ethical truth. When the ethical takes the special form of *morality*, it is connected with a particular deformation, *moralism*. The insistence that a given person is wrong, disconnected from any possible understanding of how it comes about that he is wrong, tends to leave the commentator entirely outside that person, preaching at him’: *ELP*, p. 241, n. 16.

already disposed to hear it ... [it can] help in continually creating a community held together by that same disposition' (*ELP*, p. 27).

It does not follow that we must remain in 'unreflective prejudice' because we can, and should, engage in practices of reflection that seek 'understanding of our motives, psychological or social insight into our ethical practices'. This is not merely an explanatory activity because it can critically reveal that 'certain practices or sentiments are not what they are taken to be' (*ELP*, p. 112).⁵ For this reason, there is the possibility of offering a critique of lived ethical experience but, at least in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams claims that the most we can hope is to 'show how a given practice hangs together with other practices in a way that makes social and psychological sense ... we may not be able to find anything that will meet a demand for justification made by someone standing outside those practices. We may not be able, in any real sense, to justify it even to ourselves' (*ELP*, p. 114).

In line with this, rather than claiming that liberal values can be justified in the way the moralist desires, Williams instead encourages us to view liberalism as a form of authoritative rule that makes sense because of a concatenation of historical and sociological circumstances. Given his scepticism about moralism in ethics we cannot claim that Reason = Liberalism. Williams thinks that many contemporary liberals forget this because they lack a strongly developed historical memory (*IBWD*, p. 55). As we saw in Chapter Two Williams accordingly claims that moralistic liberalism has:

a poor account, or in many cases no account, of the cognitive status of its own history. PM has no answer in its own terms to the question of why what it takes to be the true moral solution to the questions of politics, liberalism, should for the first time (roughly) become evident in European culture from the late 17th Century onward, and why these truths have been concealed from other people. Moralistic

⁵ For Williams this approach is likely to be as potent as any other precisely because the most efficacious styles of critique rely, 'as they always have, not so much on philosophical arguments as on showing these attitudes as resting in myths, falsehoods about what people are like': *ELP*, p. 71.

liberalism cannot plausibly explain, adequately to its moral pretensions, why, when and by whom it has been accepted and rejected. (IBWD, p. 9)

However, an influential strand of thought claims that first-order moral claims are resolutely independent of the kind of second-order debunking strategy Williams launches against liberal moralism. If these arguments hold, Williams's second-order critique of moralistic justifications liberalism will be undermined. It is therefore important to examine the strength of this moralistic riposte, which is exemplified in the work of Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Nagel. Dworkin distinguishes between *external* and *internal* scepticism about normative claims. The *external* sceptic argues for scepticism about ethics by adopting a non-normative conception of objectivity before arguing that normative judgements cannot meet this standard.⁶ The *internal* sceptic, on the other hand, denies the truth of particular judgements by appealing to other ethical considerations. For example, they might argue that the consensual sexual choices made by adult partners raise no moral issues because consent ensures that such choices do not have right- or wrong-making features.⁷ In this case, the sceptical judgement is made without applying non-normative criteria to the ethical domain.

Dworkin rejects external scepticism because he insists that any claim to pre-empt the content of morality from the outside must fail due to the independence of value which follows from the logical distinction of 'is' from 'ought'. There is, he insists, 'no noncircular argument against' this view of the independence of value; that is, 'no argument that does not presuppose rather than establish a demand for philosophical colonialism'.⁸ This means that a moral position can only be rejected in light of further moral claims, which ensures that all second-order claims about the ethical must be seen as

⁶ A good example of such a view is Mackie's argument from queerness: see J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London, Penguin, 1990 [1977]).

⁷ Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 33.

⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

substantive moral positions. It follows that we must treat the claim that ‘no one ever has a moral obligation because there are no queer entities that constitute moral obligation’ as a substantive moral claim which entails, among other things, that we have no obligation to help starving children.

Nagel’s position is, for our purposes, sufficiently similar, if more wide-ranging. He argues against those who try to ‘discredit appeals to objectivity of reason by showing that their true sources lie elsewhere’ and claims that such critiques ‘will inevitably run out’ because ‘whether one challenges the rational credentials of a particular judgment or of a whole realm of discourse, one has to rely at some level on judgments and methods of argument which one believes are not themselves subject to the same challenge: which exemplify, even when they err, something more fundamental and which can be corrected only by further procedures of the same kind’.⁹ For this reason he holds that the relativist or subjectivist is committed to arguing within the domain of reason. Nagel relates this to various debunking rejections of normative judgements when he argues that, ‘having the cultural influences on our ... moral convictions pointed out to us may lead us to reexamine them, but the examination must proceed by first-order ... ethical reasoning ... we must ask whether the proposed “external” explanations make it reasonable to withdraw our assent from any of these propositions or to qualify it in some way.’¹⁰ Much like Dworkin, Nagel insists that we cannot exit the domain of first-order moral argument.

If these arguments hold, first-order moralistic liberalism would not be threatened by the theory of error critique that Williams articulates. However, Williams denies that Nagel’s attempt to insulate normative claims from second-order assessment succeeds. He insists that Nagel’s strategy is misconceived because:

⁹ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

not everything that is threatened by subjectivism, or relativism, or naturalism is in the same situation. Some of the types of thought that have been questioned in these ways are in worse shape to face the attack than others. Parts of our morality, for instance, or our longer-haul historical narratives, or our models of personal self-understanding, are more open to suspicion, more liable to be shown in an unsettling way to depend on a narrow and parochial 'us', than our science or our logic are.¹¹

Williams claims that 'cultural and other explanations of ethical beliefs help to remind us that those beliefs vary from place to place, and, further, that our own beliefs have a peculiar history and probably a peculiar psychology as well. Those considerations should make us think differently and more reflectively not only about the content of our beliefs but about the style in which we argue for them'. In consequence, he criticises Nagel (although the criticism would also seem to apply to Dworkin) for drawing 'arbitrary limits to the reflective questions that philosophy is allowed to ask'.¹²

In this spirit in *IBWD* Williams queries Nagel's claim that 'faced with the fact that [liberal] values have gained currency only recently and not universally, one still has to decide whether they are right – whether one ought to continue to hold them ... The question remains ... whether I would have been in error if I had accepted as natural, and therefore as justified, the inequalities of a caste society'.¹³ Williams agrees that Nagel is right 'that the liberal, if he really is a liberal, must apply his liberalism to the world around him, and the knowledge that few people in the history of the world have been liberals is not itself a reason for his giving up being a liberal'. For this reason he insists that 'if there are reasons for giving up liberalism, they will be the sorts of considerations which suggest that there is something better, more convincing, or more inspiring to believe instead'.¹⁴ Yet, he rejects the implication of Nagel's view; that if certain values exist, 'they have always existed, and if societies in the past did not recognise them, then that is because

¹¹ Bernard Williams, 'The End of Explanation', *The New York Review of Books* (November 1998): www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1998/nov/19/the-end-of-explanation/?pagination=false (accessed 9 July 2013).

¹² Williams, 'The End of Explanation'.

¹³ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 104.

¹⁴ Williams, 'The End of Explanation'.

either those in charge were wicked, or the society did not, for some reason, understand the existence of these rights' (*IBWD*, p. 65).

This is where the theory of error charge applies. Williams claims that Nagel is unable to explain why earlier people were incapable of recognising the truth of liberalism. As a political analogue of the 'relativism of distance' that we encountered in Chapter One, Williams claims that while it is true that if we are presented with a caste society we may have to ask ourselves questions about its justification, this is not the case 'if we are presented with the *description* of such a society – one long ago, let us suppose, belonging to the ancient world or the Middle Ages', because the force of reason does not demand that we think of ourselves 'as visiting in judgement all the reaches of history'. Although one can 'imagine oneself as Kant at the Court of King Arthur, disapproving of its injustices', this does not enable one to get a grip 'on one's ethical or political thought?' (*IBWD*, pp. 65–6). Thus, while there is 'no logical or semantic rule' that excludes judging the past according to our current values, 'it is simply not a very sensible thing to do'¹⁵ because it 'gets in the way of understanding; in particular, of understanding how we differ from the past, and hence who we are'.¹⁶

To this end, Williams queries Nagel's claim that 'to reason is to think systematically in ways that anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct'.¹⁷ If this were the case Williams argues that Nagel must think if Louis XIV were looking over our shoulders he ought to agree that our liberal views are correct – 'or more precisely, ought he to have done so when he was in his own world and not yet faced with the task of trying to make sense of ours' (*IBWD*, p. 66). Williams considers this ludicrous and accordingly insists that the only way to retain some transhistorical faith in liberalism as

¹⁵ Bernard Williams, 'Relativism, History, and the Existence of Values', in R. Jay Wallace, ed. *The Practice of Value* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 107–8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 113–14.

¹⁷ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 5.

‘the one true moral solution to politics’ is to adopt a progressive view of history, as Kant, Hegel and Marx did, but notes that is an unfashionable task because such views bring with them various ancillary problems which are well rehearsed (most obviously an unfashionable commitment to teleology which suggests that as liberals we are ‘being cheered on by the universe’: *PHD*, p. 144). For this reason, Williams concludes that the outlook embodied in ‘liberal universalism’ is untenable. He consequently stresses that asking why liberal values came about when they did is a legitimate philosophical question that will aid our self-understanding, because we cannot endorse the comforting falsehood that reason alone grounds our commitment to liberalism.

George Tsai has recently challenged this claim by arguing that one can offer a theory of error without making the claim (which Williams finds implausible) that past people who were not liberals ‘were bad, stupid, or something on those lines’ (*IBWD*, p. 65). Tsai claims that if we recognise the force of the ‘appeal to socio-historical conditions’ – an explanatory account that shows how the context in which individuals live may constrain ‘access to ethical ideas’¹⁸ – we can recognise that living in a certain historical epoch can determine the extent to which people are able to access various values while denying that these socio-historical conditions impinge on the universal validity of the values. Tsai subsequently claims that liberal universalists could answer Williams’s theory of error challenge by devising an account ‘of how social conditions set limits to the possibilities of liberal thought and practice’.¹⁹ He utilises the example of people who lived in the time after human prehistory to push home his point: ‘these people lived in conditions which would have made the rise of the great monotheistic religions hard for them to envision’. Tsai submits that ‘it would have been very difficult, if not strictly

¹⁸ George Tsai, ‘An Error Theory for Liberal Universalism?’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* (forthcoming), DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2012.00420.x, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

impossible, for individuals untouched by the cultural developments of the last three thousand years to be gripped by the universalistic moral notions and principles that were introduced in the wake of the great monotheistic religions, and later elaborated upon in the liberal tradition'.²⁰ The liberal universalist can accordingly exploit the idea that moral beliefs are constrained by the moral concepts available to us and these, in turn, depend on our context. Hence, Tsai claims that we can explain why earlier people were not liberals – without them being stupid or wicked – by focusing on the structural impediments they faced.

Two implications are said to follow from this. First, liberal universalists must accept that liberal values are not universally justifiable insofar as one cannot reasonably expect all distant persons to be in a position which enabled them to access liberal truths. Second, liberal universalists should accept that the blaming of historically distant others for not being liberals is inappropriate.²¹ But despite these concessions, Tsai argues that we should not 'give up completely on the idea that liberal values are universally applicable in moral judgments' as we can hold that illiberal practices performed by earlier peoples 'were morally wrong and that they should not have done what they did', and that 'the liberal notion of a society of equals expresses a normative ideal of human relations'.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

²¹ For similar claims see Miranda Fricker, 'The Relativism of Blame and Williams's Relativism of Distance', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, vol. 84, no. 1 (2010), p. 151–77; and Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, pp. 140–1, n. 54.

²² Tsai, 'An Error Theory for Liberal Universalism?', p. 18. Hilard Aronovitch makes a slightly different argument in 'How Liberals Can Explain the Moral Errors of Past Eras and Answer Bernard Williams', *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 46, no. 3 (2012), pp. 339–51. Aronovitch claims that liberals can overcome Williams's challenge by making use of the idea of 'analogical reasoning': 'the ordinary sort of inference whereby we liken some novel or unfamiliar thing, person, or situation in various respects, and then point to a further characteristic of the known thing ... which we extrapolate to the novel or unfamiliar instance' (p. 343). While I agree that such reasoning can play an important role in a defence of a certain kind of liberalism, Aronovitch's argument is compromised by the fact that Williams is critiquing a particular species of liberalism, liberal moralism, rather than liberalism *per se*. (As we will see, some kind of analogical reasoning plays an important role in Williams's commitment to the liberalism of fear given his account of the disenchanted nature of modernity.) Moreover, contrary to the liberal moralism he rejects, Williams is not prepared to claim that various moral principles count as 'the final determination' of what morally makes sense in politics (*IBWD*, p. 26) or that liberalism is 'the one true moral solution to the questions of politics

How successful is this riposte? It shares much with the shorter (and rougher) one Nagel posits in his review of Williams's posthumous essays, where he claims that 'one can believe in progress without accusing the past ages of wickedness or stupidity ... perhaps progress can occur only through a series of historical stages, in morality as in science ... It is not because he was stupid that Thomas Aquinas was not a liberal'.²³ However, both Nagel and Tsai seem to downplay the extent to which, if we agree that Aquinas and Louis XIV were in no position to recognise the truth of liberalism, we not only seem to make space for something like the relativism of distance, but should also acknowledge the truth behind Williams's critique of the idea of a *mere moral normativity* which holds that liberal values can be proven through the examination of the timeless conditions of reason alone (the sort of view that Nagel seemed to be endorsing and which was the target of Williams's original attack). Moreover, by agreeing with Williams on this score Nagel and Tsai merely invite a further (central) question which they do not address: whether a reflectively satisfying answer can be given to explain why we should think that liberalism captures some independent moral facts about 'the true moral solution to the questions of politics' (*IBWD*, p. 9).

In his comment on Joseph Raz's Tanner Lectures Williams effectively anticipates the counterargument articulated by Tsai and Nagel:

Someone might prefer to say that, in the case of values such as these, the value did exist at that time, but it was only recognized later ... [they] might say that it is an argument for this way of putting it, that those who first spoke in favour of these values called for their *recognition* ... but, if we take this seriously, the cognitive problem comes back: what was wrong with the pre-modern world, that it did not recognize these values? Why did the existence of these values, which had always been there, only burst on the world in the eighteenth century?²⁴

(*IBWD*, p. 9) in the way he claims the liberal moralist does. Analogical reasoning can help us to recognise certain things – i.e. to uncover some lies and distortions – but it cannot provide this kind of ultimate justification. (See *ELP*, pp. 96–7 and 115–17 for more on Williams's discussion of the limitations of this kind of reasoning.)

²³ Thomas Nagel, 'Williams: Philosophy and Humanity', in *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays, 2002–2008* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 143.

²⁴ Williams, 'Relativism, History, and the Existence of Values', p. 113. Tsai and Aronovitch overlook in

This is particularly significant because it shows that it is not adequate to merely explain how socio-historical conditions might curtail access to liberal ideals, as the liberal-universalist must also make some claim about our socio-historical conditions and explain why they are unique insofar as they (alone) grant access to these truths. If no such account is forthcoming there is further reason to affirm what, as we saw in Chapter One, Williams calls the nonobjectivist model, in which normative judgements are part of a ‘way of living’ or a ‘cultural artifact’ we come to inhabit (*ELP*, p. 147). This is especially pressing if we adopt the Nagel–Dworkin line and hold that a justification of the idea that liberalism is, universally speaking, ‘the true moral solution to the questions of politics’, can only be offered via first-order moral argument, so that we hold liberalism to be the true moral solution to politics because the best internal explanation of our moral intuitions suggest it is. The problem with this metaethical position is that our intuitions are deeply historically conditioned. This recognition subsequently invites a further sceptical thought that Nagel and Dworkin seem to ignore: that an equally coherent first-order defence of alternative moral solutions to the questions of politics was available to countless other individuals in a multiplicity of prior historical epochs. Thus, if we are to continue to think that liberalism is the true moral solution to the questions of politics we must think, as a matter of faith (or perhaps divine providence, or Hegelian teleology), that we (alone) are lucky enough to have lived in a uniquely privileged historical/epistemic time to have grasped these truths.

Sharon Street has made this point very forcefully against Dworkin. She claims that Dworkin is forced to think that ‘there is a *general* coincidence between the true normative

their papers the argument that Williams makes here.

judgments and the ones that causal forces led us to make'.²⁵ But she argues that this is troubling because his account of the independence of first-order thought (like Nagel's) entails that we affirm the objectivity or truth of p if p follows from the most coherent picture of one's moral beliefs as a whole. Yet we can imagine multiple equally consistent systems of belief. Dworkin therefore faces a problem:

when he is challenged to give his reasons for thinking that the causal forces landed him, but not these countless many other poor (possible) souls, on the robustly independent normative truth he posits. By hypothesis, these other agents lack no nonnormative information that we have, and they are making no logical or instrumental errors. In explaining where these others have gone wrong, no doubt the realist [Dworkin] can give non-trivially-question-begging reasons for holding this or that of his own normative premises as opposed to others. But the other ideally coherent individuals are capable of defending their own premises in a similar way, and their sets of values hold together in the same perfectly consistent internal fashion as our own ... ultimately all we are going to be able to say is that these others do not 'see' or show sufficient 'sensitivity' to what we 'see' and 'sense'. At this point, however, the normative realist is in no better position than the person who question-beggingly insists that she won the New York Lottery, even though she has no reason to think so apart from the fact that she entered it.²⁶

It seems that the sort of liberal universalism defended by Dworkin and Nagel (and Tsai) has no answer to this more sceptical thought. Hence we should ask if their view is more plausible than Williams's alternative. In Williams's view, we can make certain evaluative claims about the past if we want to but these judgements do not 'stand in any very revealing relation to our understanding of why others had [these practices]' or 'contribute to a theory of error for alien practices and beliefs'. For this reason there is little scope for thinking that there is 'a collective cognitive enterprise in ethics, such that we can represent our rejection of alien concepts and our use of our own as in itself an advance in knowledge'.²⁷ He writes that it is not a reproach to liberal moralists that 'they cannot see beyond the outer limits of what they find acceptable: no-one can do that. But it is more of

²⁵ Sharon Street, 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Rethink It': <https://files.nyu.edu/ss194/public/sharonstreet/Writing.html> (accessed 9 June 2011), p. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁷ Williams, 'Replies', p. 208.

a reproach that they are not interested enough in why this is so, in why their most basic convictions should seem to be ... simply there' (*PHD*, p. 197).

Williams was deeply interested in this question. Therefore, if we are to understand his conception of liberalism we should see him as trying to defend it from what he refers to, following Nietzsche, as a pessimism of strength: an alternative to the outright scepticism or nihilism that his rejection of rationalistic moralism might be taken to encourage. As I will argue shortly, Williams insists that if we are to adopt the correct reflective attitude to liberalism we must adopt a historical perspective precisely because we cannot honestly claim that reason alone enshrines liberalism. To this end, his turn to history is part of his commitment to truthfulness and the desire to 'understand who we are, to correct error, to avoid deceiving ourselves, [and] to get beyond comfortable falsehood' (*SP*, p. 231). The refusal to believe in the self-deceptions of liberal moralism is imperative because 'unless we face the world truthfully, any hope for a better politics will be doomed' (*SP*, p. 329).

How then can our ethical and political commitments be stable despite the unsettling effects of philosophical reflection? As we saw in Chapter One, Williams argues that ethical conviction must be identified with what he refers to as *confidence* rather than *knowledge* or *certainty*. His discussion of confidence is notably cryptic and has mystified critics.²⁸ He writes that confidence is 'both a social state and related to discussion, theorizing and reflection' and that it is 'a basically social phenomenon' because it is 'a social and psychological question what kinds of institutions, upbringing and public discourse help to foster it' (*ELP*, p. 170–1). The key question we must answer 'is how people, or enough people, can come to possess a practical confidence that, particularly granted both the need for reflection and its pervasive presence in our world, will come from strength and not

²⁸ Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, p. 184; and John Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the Radical Contingency of the Ethical', in Daniel Calcutt, ed. *Reading Bernard Williams* (London, Routledge, 2009), p. 36.

from the weakness of self-deception and dogmatism. (Confidence is not the same as optimism; it could rest on what Nietzsche called the pessimism of strength)' (*ELP*, p. 171).

Williams elaborates this idea in his replies in his *Festschrift*, stating that to understand it we need to think about what is involved in a 'thick concept' surviving reflection; it does so 'in the sense that we would not have encountered any considerations that led us to give it up, lose hold on it, or simply drift away from it, as modern societies in the past two centuries or less have, for instance, done one or more of those things in relation to chastity'.²⁹ But even if this happens, as philosophers we recognise that we nonetheless lack 'any knowledge to the effect that we have a definitively desirable set of such concepts' because we are aware that 'other people have had different concepts, and that people may come to do so in the future'. For this reason, we must accept that 'the thick concepts under which we can have some pieces of ethical knowledge are not themselves sustained by knowledge, but by confidence'.³⁰ The basic idea is that although we can make knowledge claims from within our evaluative perspective – so that the inhabitants of eighteenth-century England could make judgements involving the thick concept *chastity* in much the same way that we can hold that many of Vladimir Putin's political allies are *cronies* – given the limits of philosophy we cannot claim any knowledge about the ultimate desirability of our conceptual schemes which employ these thick concepts. Thus, if we are to continue to use a conceptual scheme we need to have confidence in it.

However, little is said about how such confidence might be reflectively achieved and in *ELP* he is sceptical that philosophy itself can tell us how to bring it about (*ELP*, p. 171). Despite this, the central point I want to put forward in the remainder of this chapter

²⁹ Williams, 'Replies', p. 207.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

is that Williams's later works are essentially engaged in something akin to the task of explaining how a kind of philosophical enquiry can enable us to vindicate (or achieve confidence in) certain commitments we endorse; and so, in this sense, they represent an advance on the rather cryptic remarks he makes about confidence in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. With this in mind I now address Williams's belief that the best way to enrich our philosophical understanding is by turning to history, because a historically informed philosophical approach has the potential to both undercut the rationalistic justifications that are sometimes given of our ideals and values while enabling another more minimal form of vindication.

2. Confidence and History

Jonathan Floyd has explained the reasoning behind the antipathy that certain political theorists feel towards their colleagues who stress the importance of focusing on history. He claims that 'for contemporary political philosophy to be excessively ahistorical ... it would have to be the case that history could select for us one normative political principle or set of principles over another. It would have to be able to press upon us, say, right-libertarianism over luck egalitarianism, luck egalitarianism over market socialism'.³¹ Because history is not prescriptive in this sense Floyd concludes that the claim that political philosophy is too ahistorical is unfounded.³² However, he revealingly admits that

³¹ Jonathan Floyd, 'Is Political Philosophy Too Ahistorical?', *Critical Review of International and Social Political Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2009), pp. 513–14.

³² Ibid., p. 531. Paul Kelly also objects to what he terms the historicist critique of normative political theory because he claims that moralist political philosophers do not assert the sort of objectivism that historicists deny. Kelly places Williams alongside a number of other historicists, including Quentin Skinner, Raymond Geuss and Alisdair MacIntyre, who allegedly claim that 'the attempt to reach beyond mere contingency through abstract reason must fail, as it merely reproduces the local prejudices of a particular society or culture as the dictates of reason': 'Rescuing Political Theory from the Tyranny of History', in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Philosophy Versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 22. Kelly claims that these thinkers argue for non-objectivism by focusing on 'the evidence of historical and social diversity and the absence of noncontingent features of historical experience' (p. 27), but insists that this argument fails because one

history might be ‘necessary for certain kinds of ... self-understanding’.³³ This undermines his argument because few thinkers who insist on the importance of historical reflection claim that one can move directly from a historical enquiry to normative assessment. Rather their point is that history can furnish our philosophical enquiries and in this regard they claim that historical understanding is a necessary but not sufficient condition of political theory. Floyd’s argument would only work if (1) the grounding of normative principles was the only job for political philosophy, and (2) history was incapable of providing some additional insights into these values. However, if we accept that a historical understanding cannot directly prescribe a set of political principles, we might wonder what use it is for political theorists. To begin to answer this question, let us focus on Williams’s view that a historical understanding could enervate some philosophical claims.

In *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams claims that ‘a truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them in any way that vindicates them against possible rivals’, and that ‘this sense of contingency can seem to be in tension with something that our ethical ideals themselves demand, a recognition of their authority’ (*TT*, pp. 20–1). This Nietzschean sentiment – the claim that ‘morality’s various tenets and constitutive attitudes are historical constructions, to which there have been (and may still be) genuine alternatives ... [and] are not absolute, eternal, or compulsory attitudes for human beings

cannot prove this metaethical thesis from within the terms of historical experience. However, even if (for the sake of argument) Kelly is right that various members of the Cambridge School fail to realise that a conclusive argument for non-objectivism cannot be defended from within the terms of historical experience alone, he is wrong to include Williams in their number because Williams proffers numerous metaethical arguments for non-objectivism (as we saw in Chapter One) which cannot simply be brushed aside by casting him as another member of the ‘Cambridge School’.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

to hold, but attitudes invented and perpetuated to fulfil a host of functions and needs'³⁴ – motivated much of Williams's work from the mid-1980s to the end of his life.³⁵ But despite these similarities, significant differences exist between Williams and Nietzsche, most notably with regard to politics. Williams insists that we cannot endorse Nietzsche's views for the transformation of society because they imply 'an heroic transcendence of social and historical conditions by the creator and this belies one of his [Nietzsche's] thoughts: we do not make our thoughts out of nothing; they come in part from what is around us, and we have a very poor grasp, for the most part, of what their sources may be' (*SP*, p. 327). Hence, in an unpublished paper entitled 'Can There be a Nietzschean Politics?' he remarks that if Nietzsche's thought is to help us to philosophically reflect on politics it will not do so by giving us various notions of 'political or ethical desirability that we can substitute for the kind of criteria that we presently work with'. Rather we must 'take up those elements of Nietzsche's thought that seem to make most sense to us in terms of such things as our ethical understanding, our understanding of history, and the relations of thought and actions themselves, and try to let them animate the problems that seem to concern us most deeply politically'.³⁶ Most importantly, Williams insists that we must adopt a more historical perspective to explain our adoption of various values and commitments because once we accept that 'our moral aspirations do not, cannot, mean everything that they seem to mean', we should acknowledge that 'they cannot come from

³⁴ Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 246.

³⁵ For more on the Nietzschean heritage of Williams's critique of 'morality' see Maudmarie Clark, "On The Rejection of Morality: Bernard Williams's Debt to Nietzsche". In Richard Schacht, ed. *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 100 – 122.

³⁶ Bernard Williams, "Can there be a Nietzschean Politics?", *unpublished manuscript*, pp. 9- 10.

where they seem to come from, and another kind of inquiry will be needed to understand their hold on us'.³⁷

This might cause some consternation because many philosophers reject the importance of historical arguments, believing they commit the genetic fallacy of thinking that the origin of X demonstrates something about the value of X. However, in a characteristically suggestive (and under-explained) passage, Williams insists that philosophers who employ the genetic fallacy overlook:

the possibility that the value in question may understand itself and present itself and claim authority for itself in terms which the genealogical story can undermine. The 'morality' that Nietzsche's genealogy damaged claimed to be the expression of a spirit that was higher, purer and more closely associated with reason, as well as transcending negative passions such as resentment, and if Nietzsche's account of it, in its functional and its historical aspects, were true, it would emerge as self-deceived in that respect. Similarly, when it is argued that the values of contemporary liberalism cannot possibly be criticised in terms of their history, this will be so only to the extent that those values can be separated from the claim – one which is often made for them – that they have emerged from the spread of reason and represent a cognitive achievement.³⁸

History, by calling certain justificatory tales into question, can thereby be enervating. For instance, Williams claims that accounts of toleration that appeal to an ideal of 'autonomy that can be traced to Enlightenment conceptions of the individual' are a hangover from the arguments about religious toleration that took root after the European Wars of Religion. In this historical context these accounts made sense because the structure of ideas clustered around the imagined relationship between an individual and God and the notion that coercion could only secure conforming behaviour, not belief. But modern liberals ignore the extent to which this 'structure of ideas is no longer available' (*IBWD*, p. 134), and this compromises their autonomy-based arguments in the here and now.

³⁷ Bernard Williams, 'Republican and Galilean: Review of Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 8 (1990): www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1990/nov/08/republican-and-galilean/ (accessed 17 May 2011).

³⁸ Bernard Williams, 'Why Philosophy Needs History', *The London Review of Books*, vol. 24, no. 20 (2002): www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n20/bernard-williams/why-philosophy-needs-history (accessed 1 June 2011).

Similarly, Williams's claim that liberal values cannot be said to have emerged from the spread of reason is politically important because the universalism implied in approaches like Nagel's suggests that 'if a morality is correct, it must apply everywhere. So that if liberalism is correct, it must apply to all those past people who were not liberals: they ought to have been liberals, and since they were not, they were bad, or stupid, or something on those lines' (*IBWD*, p. 67). As we have seen, Williams insists that if we find such backward-looking judgements problematic the implication seems to be that we should lose our confidence in liberalism. Yet precisely because he denies that we have to make judgements from an absolute point of view, in the name of ethical truth, this does not have to be the case. Instead Williams stresses the importance of appreciating the historical reasons behind our commitment to certain values:

If one is to understand our own view of such things, and to do so in terms that are on anyone's view philosophical – for instance, in order to relieve puzzlement about the basis of these values and their implications – one must try to understand why they take certain forms here rather than others, and one can only do that with the help of history... here history helps philosophical understanding, or is part of it ... Philosophy has to learn the lesson that ... such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place ... are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry.

(*PHD*, pp. 191–2)

If we stay within the realm of our first-order reasons there is not much more we can say about many of our most deeply held beliefs other than rehearsing our (self-validating) justifications of them, even though we know that 'most people in the past have not shared [them and] ... there are others in the world who do not share [them] now' (*PHD*, p. 195). But once we accept that we cannot appeal to a supreme source of moral value to justify these commitments we must recognise that this is reflectively unsatisfying. It is at this impasse that historical understanding 'can help with the business ... of distinguishing between different ways in which various of our ideas and procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond them, that there is no conceivable alternative' (*PHD*, p. 195). The point is that a historical examination of why of our values take the form they do, i.e.

as answers to specific contextual questions, can give us further insight into our practices even if they do not admit first-order rational justification.³⁹ If such an enquiry does not reveal our endorsement of a value to be radically self-deceived we can remain confident in it ‘in the sense that we can understand it and at the same time respect it, support it and live within it. We can also urge it against alternative creeds whose own self-understandings (as divine revelations, for instance) are themselves not going to survive a genealogical inquiry’.⁴⁰

This differs markedly from the views espoused by some historians about the unsettling effects of historical understanding. Quentin Skinner, for instance, has remarked that ‘one effect of learning more about the causal story is to loosen the hold of our inherited values upon our emotional allegiances. Haunted by a sense of lost possibilities, historians are almost inevitably Laodicean in their attachment to the values of the present time’.⁴¹ In contrast Williams defends the idea of a vindictory history modelled on Hume’s theory of justice. He insists that we will only be dissatisfied with such a view if we tacitly yearn for an unsustainably ambitious grounding because on Hume’s account we can ‘still give justice, its motivations and reasons for action, much the same respect as one did before one encountered the explanation – or perhaps more respect, if one had suspected that justice had to be a Platonically or other-worldly idea if it was anything’ (*TT*, p. 36).

This position is manifested in *Truth and Truthfulness* in which Williams sets out to vindicate the virtues of truth – Accuracy (care, reliability etc. in discovering and coming to believe the truth) and Sincerity (saying what one believes to be true) – by attempting to

³⁹ This borrows something from Collingwood’s logic of question-and-answer. See Bernard Williams, ‘An Essay on Collingwood’, *SP*, pp. 341–61, for his discussion of Collingwood. Simon Leach, ‘History, Ethics and Philosophy: Bernard Williams’s Appraisal of R.G. Collingwood’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2011), pp. 36–53 address this relationship in more detail.

⁴⁰ Bernard Williams, ‘Why Philosophy Needs History’.

⁴¹ Quentin Skinner, ‘Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections’, in James Tully and Daniel Weinstock, eds. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.45.

explain how they ‘could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about’. To do so, he sketches a fictional state of nature inhabited by people with some basic human needs and motivations, notably the need for cooperation, with the aim of deriving from ‘within the story values connected with these activities ... by way of an abstract argument from some very general, and I take it, indisputable assumptions about human powers and limitations’ (*TT*, p. 20). He insists that Accuracy and Sincerity (which he argues cannot have any meaning unless we adopt a view of truth) will be functionally vindicated in this light.

The argumentative intricacies of *Truth and Truthfulness* must be passed over here but the structure of the argument has important consequences for our comprehension of Williams’s commitment to liberalism. Accuracy and Sincerity are something like ‘thin’ universals that are essential to collective coexistence, but the *thicker* form they take in a given period will result from their interaction with a plethora of contingencies. For instance, Williams claims that it would be ludicrous to see the idea of personal authenticity as a necessary development of the twin virtues of truth because it arose in reaction to a notion of ‘individuality’ which was alien to the historical periods that preceded it. In this sense it stands in a different relation to the state of nature and ‘cannot be seen as a development of human needs, concerns, and interests which was inevitable, or even particularly probable’ (*TT*, p. 172). This does not mean that we should give up on it, but if we are to understand the aspiration of authenticity, and adequately think about what it means for us ‘now and around here’, we have to turn to history because the content of such ‘thick’ expressions of truthfulness cannot be properly understood absent a historical enquiry into how they came to be accepted.

If we return to the Skinnerian view about the ‘Laodicean’ nature of the historians’ attachment to certain values we can uncover a space for a kind of confidence that

represents an improvement on the dejected acceptance invoked by Skinner.⁴² The point is that we can value certain things in good faith provided they stand up to any self-understanding that we can give them (this is, in essence, what a vindictory genealogy is). We cannot say the same if history enables us to see that our current commitments are based on self-deceptions, as Nietzsche's genealogy claims, or are relics of earlier ideas that no longer make sense, as Williams suggests is the case with autonomy-based defences of toleration. Of course, vindictory genealogies require some starting assumptions, such as the motivations Williams gives the inhabitants of the state of nature, and some may worry that this puts the cart before the horse. However in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams is unapologetic about this: 'critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that, in the context of the reflective discussion, makes some sense and commands some loyalty. Of course that will take things for granted, but as serious reflection it must know it will do that' (*ELP*, p. 117). The basic premise of Williams's later work is that history offers us the best chance of finding a space for ethical and political reflection precisely because we cannot look down on our ethical and political commitments from the point of view of the universe. In this sense, historical understanding offers the best sort of confidence on offer once universal or metaphysical validation is ruled out. In consequence, in *Truth and Truthfulness* and a number of his posthumous essays, Williams effectively advances beyond the concept of confidence he articulates in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

This historical perspective satisfies Miranda Fricker's demand that 'if confidence is a good state to be in ... it must inhabit a midway position between bad kinds of conservatism on the one hand, and neurotic or otherwise exaggerated kinds of self-

⁴² Skinner's work on the neo-Roman conception of freedom suggests that his current position is more nuanced than his earlier remark implies – but I must leave this aside here.

questioning on the other'.⁴³ Once we adopt a historical perspective we can effectively judge our ethical concepts by our best ethical standards, in the way Williams suggests with his talk of a Left-Wittgensteinianism examined in the previous chapter, and thereby realise that certain concepts that we often employ 'now and around here' (like 'slut') are not going to survive genealogical reflection while others (like 'crony') may do. Viewing ethical and political commitment in these terms:

represents the reversal of a familiar Platonic structure. For the Platonic spirit (Plato himself, needless to say, had more complex views), the aim is ultimate truth or rationality, and the powers that could lead us to it merely need to be protected from interference by persuasion. The present picture is rather of a world in which everything is, if you like, persuasion, and the aim is to encourage some forms of it rather than others. This is not a technical task, like clearing a radio channel from static. It is a practical and ethical task, like deciding who can speak, how and when. It is not, as is often suggested by those of a Platonic disposition, a picture that is a product of despair, a mere second-best for a world in which the criteria of true objectivity and ethical truth-seeking have proved hard to find. To recognise how we are placed in this respect is, if anything, an affirmation of strength. To suppose that the values of truthfulness and reasonableness and other such things that we prize or suppose ourselves to prize are simply revealed to us, or given to us by our nature, is not only a philosophical superstition but a kind of weakness. If that is the best we can say for them, we probably do not deserve them anyway. (MSH, p. 148)

As we will see in the next section, those who suggest that this is inadequate and will fail to make our commitment to certain values reflectively stable – those who, to put it another way, suggest that it is all pessimism and no strength – invite the threat of nihilism because the promise of firmer grounding is illusory. The basic claim, then, is that if we are to work within the limits of philosophy we need less philosophical superstition about the powers of philosophical reflection to justify our ethical and political commitments from some universally binding external perspective; but we also need more hope in our ability to recognise that we can still live ethically and politically worthwhile lives without this kind of justification.⁴⁴

⁴³ Miranda Fricker, 'Confidence and Irony', in Edward Harcourt, ed. *Morality, Reflection and Ideology* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 97.

⁴⁴ It might be thought that this kind of internal shoring up of our ethical and political commitments is something of a disreputable philosophical exercise – that it is nothing but a matter of preaching to the

3. Is Confidence Enough?

As I noted in the Introduction, Williams claims that we can rescue liberalism from liberal-moralism while refusing to commit to the philosophically untenable claim that liberalism is the ‘true moral solution to the questions of politics’ (*IBWD*, p. 9). Thus far in this chapter I have argued that his working-out of how we might foster some kind of confidence in our current normative commitments plays a vital role in this account, and that accordingly it is best seen as part of his later project of thinking about how certain values of ours ‘can be something, despite their failures of self-understanding’ (*SN*, p. 11). In this sense, in much of his late work Williams was engaged in various vindictory projects which can be seen as developments of the idea of confidence that he outlines in *ELP*. However, pressing doubts have been raised about the coherence of such an account of the reflectively stable grounds of ethical and political conviction, and I want to conclude this chapter by explaining why I think they are misplaced.

In his monograph on Williams, Mark Jenkins highlights the problem when he remarks that ‘although it is not particularly hard to see what Williams wants confidence to do, namely to undergird ethical conviction in a world without ethical certainty, it is much harder to see how confidence gets going or at least stays going in contemporary life’. Essentially, the problem is that Williams is trying too hard to ‘resolve a fundamentally irresolvable tension between ethical conviction and contingency, with confidence a conceptual casualty of the attempt’.⁴⁵ If the thrust of this criticism is correct the worry is that the vindictory strategy that I have just sketched will not manage to stabilise our

converted when what we should be doing is searching for ethical truth. But this complaint cannot make sense if we agree, with Williams, that we cannot uncover this kind of ethical truth. It is also not clear to me that other liberal thinkers advance beyond it. For example, Rawls’s (evasive) strategy of refusing to ask such questions does not strike me as an improvement on Williams’s recognition of the importance of this question, especially as Rawls’s later work seems to be engaged in something akin to the activity of preaching to the converted while utilising a lot more Kantian/Hegelian baggage than Williams thinks is credible.

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Bernard Williams*, p. 186.

commitments in light of sceptical reflection on the contingent reasons behind our endorsement of them.

Williams chose to address this problem in one of his last published papers, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', where he rejects the suggestion that 'the discovery that liberalism ... has the kind of contingent history than it does have is [seen as] a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best'. He insists that if we go *'far enough* in recognizing contingency', we can consider this worry misconceived:

because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because history has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook something that is ours ... we and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for ... a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view. (PHD, p. 193–4)

However, John Cottingham has criticised this 'defusing' strategy because he claims that here Williams is merely offering 'a kind of resigned acquiescence, an acceptance that we have to rest content in the prospect of a life grounded in no more than how things "merely are"'. For Cottingham however, there is a tension in making this point, 'since the very acknowledgement implicit in that "merely" carries with it a yearning for more'.⁴⁶ While we are, in some sense, 'supposed to gain comfort from the thought that the same collection of random forces and circumstances that generated us human beings also generated the outlook we have', Cottingham insists that 'there is no real harmony here, just a concatenation of contingencies'. Thus, at most Williams has told us that 'we happen to be a certain way, we happen to have certain desires, and to value things in a certain way, and that is all there is to say'.⁴⁷ Hence, Cottingham alleges that Williams's 'defusing' strategy fails because it (in effect) encourages us recognise that we value various things for

⁴⁶ Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the Radical Contingency of the Ethical', p. 35.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

historically contingent reasons, while telling us to continue endorsing them despite the seemingly disquieting effect of this reflection, simply because we and our outlook are ‘deeply’ similar.

If this diagnosis is correct, Williams fails to move us beyond Richard Rorty’s ironism. Rorty divides reflection between the public and private stances one takes to one’s ethical commitments. He paints a picture according to which reflective subjects fervently endorse liberalism as an answer to various public concerns while simultaneously recognising, as private ironists, that they are ‘never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies’.⁴⁸ In a sense the liberal ironist ‘would like to avoid cooking the books she reads by using *any* [metaphysical] ... grid (although with ironic resignation, she realizes that she can hardly help doing so)’.⁴⁹ For this reason Rorty holds that the most that we can hope to do is to offer a ‘redescription’ of liberal societies rather than a ‘defence of them against their enemies’.⁵⁰

There are certain similarities between Williams and Rorty: both acknowledge the historical reasons behind our endorsement of liberalism and refuse to make any claims about it reflecting some kind of transcendent ethical truth. To this end, both essentially agree that ‘an ideally liberal polity ... would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization – those of the past and those envisaged by utopians’.⁵¹ Their defences of liberalism, however, differ. Williams thinks that the basic tenor of Rorty’s ironism is deeply

⁴⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73–4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53

problematic because the liberal-ironist purportedly embraces the psychologically untenable move of committing publicly to various ‘things while knowing that that is all he is doing; he believes in things while knowing, in a sense, that there is nothing to believe in’.⁵² Williams claims that this move is confused and that (somewhat ironically) the ironist stance Rorty advocates itself only makes sense against the backdrop of the metaphysical presuppositions implicit in the morality system which hold that only a universalist justification can properly ground genuine conviction. In this sense, Rorty’s stance is ‘still under the shadow of universalism’ because it suggests that ‘you cannot really believe in liberalism unless you hold it true in a sense which means that it applies to everyone [throughout history]’ (*IBWD*, p. 67). Hence, it is ‘counterfactually scientific: rather as an atheist is really religious if he thinks that since God does not exist everything is permitted’ (*PHD*, p. 187). This leads Williams to declare that although Rorty embarked on the ‘immensely important’ project of giving ‘liberalism a better understanding of itself’, his work offers ‘not much more than a benign celebration of this task’.⁵³

The basic failure arises – and this applies to Cottingham’s lament as much as Rorty’s purported solution – from the fact that such views are ‘relic of a world not yet thoroughly disenchanted’ from the failures of metaphysical justifications in ethics (*PHD*, p. 137). Once we purge ourselves of this hope I see no reason to disagree with Williams’s claim that the recognition of contingency *has* to be dispiriting or alienating. As Miranda Fricker notes, if ‘a given tradition casts the authority of ethical judgements in terms of absolute objectivity – as derived from some set of values held to be metaphysically objective, or from the law of God, or from the workings of Pure Reason – then, so long as its members are at all likely to go in for sceptical reflection about the supposed source of authority, the

⁵² Bernard Williams, ‘Getting it Right’, *The London Review of Books*, vol. 11 (November 1989): www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n22/bernard-williams/getting-it-right (accessed 15 November 2012).

⁵³ Williams, ‘Getting it Right’.

tradition sets them up for a fall'.⁵⁴ Williams's account of confidence (unlike the view favoured by moralists like Nagel and Dworkin), self-consciously avoids making that kind of claim so, in this respect, it is not clear why the recognition of contingency must be unsettling. The point also applies to Rorty's ironist solution because, as Williams and Fricker observe, it only makes sense in light of the 'very familiar assumption' that 'acknowledging the historical and social contingency of our ethical outlook will undermine the authority of our ethical judgements'.⁵⁵

In making these claims I am not denying that sceptically reflecting on our commitments can be unsettling. The basic project of *ELP* is deeply unsettling for the advocates of the morality system, but it is so because they search for the kind of authority that cannot be secured. Nor am I suggesting that this means that we simply go on advocating our commitments regardless of the unsettling effects of reflection. Rather, as I have argued throughout this chapter, if we are to vindicate our commitments and remain convinced and confident in our application of them to the world we inhabit we must offer a different kind of vindication of them; Williams is adamant that there are more resources that we can put to work on this score than are normally acknowledged by philosophers. The problem is that our ethical tradition – the morality system which is, in some sense, 'the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us' (*ELP*, p. 174) – endorses the search for justifications it cannot secure.

This is why so much moral and political philosophy is, as Fricker puts it, 'unnecessarily vulnerable in the face of certain traditional sceptical goadings'.⁵⁶ But the problem is with the tradition and our internalised expectations. We should be sceptical of Cottingham's brute psychological assertion that 'to make our ethical home within an

⁵⁴ Fricker, 'Confidence and Irony', p. 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

entirely closed and contingent cosmos, and pretend that we are wholly comfortable so doing, seems a violation of our human nature'.⁵⁷ This is a superstition: what stabilises is whatever stabilises. The only way to answer this question then it is at the level of fact and practice – ethical life as it is actually lived – rather than by making theoretical assertions about the necessity of ultimate justification. Views on the problem of reflection and commitment which hold that we cannot identify with an outlook if we accept that it is a contingent development themselves require justification.

There may an illuminating analogy here with something Williams says in *Shame and Necessity*, when he claims that, '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' (*SN*, p. 68). If we apply this train of thought to the issue of confidence, we can see that the (alleged) problem between reflection on contingency and practical commitment may only arise for those who insist that ethical and political conviction must rest in the kind of justification Williams insists we cannot have. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Williams reflects on how we might articulate vindications for various commitments of ours even if they are not 'metaphysically deep'. What we need to do (to borrow Nietzsche's phrase) is to 'educate ourselves against our age',⁵⁸ and to realise that the search for that kind of justification is a chimera.

If this is truly acknowledged then we should be less inclined to think that everything else is a matter of falling short. This is why Cottingham's complaint about the uselessness

⁵⁷ Cottingham, 'The Good Life and the Radical Contingency of the Ethical', p. 36.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 146.

of Williamsian confidence is so unconvincing. He claims that ‘the aspiration to confidence seems very likely to be a wan, ghostly trace of the ancient theological virtue of *hope*. That virtue makes sense, for the believer ... but if, by contrast, all you have is that “things merely are” ... then confidence appears arbitrary’. This is deeply unpersuasive for two reasons. First, Cottingham ignores the lesson of much of this chapter, namely that confidence is not simply an attitude we decide to adopt but rather is reflectively achieved via a certain kind of examination of our commitments (typically for Williams in the form of some kind of genealogical enquiry). Second, if we take Cottingham at his word here he appears to merely be counselling us to embrace theism. For most of us ‘now and around here’ this is simply unhelpful because a belief in the possibility of that kind of *hope* is not only deeply inauthentic but also a barrier to serious, engaged and truthful reflection on our modern predicament.

Conclusion

As I noted in Chapter One, at the end of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams claims that we ought to abandon the morality system because it is committed to a set of interlocking fabrications about the nature of the ethics. He claims that ‘a respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions may be no easier to achieve than they have been in the past’, but insists that ‘we need not suppose that we have no ideas to give them a basis. We should not concede to abstract ethical theory its claim to provide the only intellectual surroundings for such ideas’ (*ELP*, p. 196). In this chapter I have argued that much of the work Williams published following *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is best read as an attempt to explain how this remark can be made good; that is, as explaining how we can philosophically engage in ethics and politics in a constructive manner without recourse to the theoretical conceptions of ‘morality’

that we have inherited but must jettison. To this extent, in *Truth and Truthfulness* and his posthumous political essays, Williams effectively suggests that metaphysical defences of the concept of truth and moralistic defences of liberalism are dangerous in similar ways because they both imply that if our practical commitments do not have some kind of universal or external grounding they must be abandoned. Yet he is adamant that once we accept that we cannot secure the sort of justification the morality system pursues it is a mistake to think that everything else is a matter of falling short. As we will see in the next chapter, although Williams agrees that liberalism's critics are right to reject swathes of contemporary liberal thought, he insists that once we appreciate the nature of political legitimation – and the reality of what this entails in the conditions of modernity – we have good enough reasons for continuing to value liberalism, in spite of the failures of its more exuberant philosophical justifications, and can therefore confidently continue to try to improve the world in terms of the political commitments that *make sense* to us, 'now and around here'.

This is why he continued to insist that there is more hope for liberalism than many of its critics claim. Hence, in his review of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* he states that (some) liberals are capable of recognising that 'the self-description of liberalism that it inherited from the Enlightenment was basically flawed' while hoping that we can 'find a sounder understanding of it, which may help to preserve the more humane institutions of the world'.⁵⁹ Likewise, when reviewing another work by a dissatisfied critic of liberalism, Maurice Cowling's *Religion and Public Doctrine in England*, Williams simply denies that it is only liberalism's critics that have recognised that 'much liberalism is optimistic and high-minded claptrap which carries its own intolerances, that survival needs irony, that values conflict, that most things in the world are determined by force and

⁵⁹ Bernard Williams, 'Modernity', *The London Review of Books*, vol. 11 (5 January 1989): www.lrb.co.uk/v11/n01/bernard-williams/modernity (accessed 6 June 2012).

fraud, that political moralism is often self-indulgent'. Rather, 'these facts are part of the present historically-given problems of political thought and action' and 'it is merely superficial ... to suppose that those who equally "accept" modernity, but ... seek to shape its requirements in slightly better rather than worse directions, are necessarily victims of its more flatulent ideologies'.⁶⁰

I now turn to the final chapter of the thesis, and examine Williams's claim that a certain defence of liberalism – modelled on Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear – can be reflectively endorsed in line with the vindictory approach I have sketched in this chapter. I then examine various criticisms that have been raised against the liberalism of fear as a coherent basis of liberalism to see if Williams's defence of liberalism avoids falling prey to the fallacies and self-deceptive justificatory strategies employed by liberal political moralists, or the dangers of nihilism.

⁶⁰ Bernard Williams, 'How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song', *London Review of Books*, vol. 3 (2 April 1981): www.lrb.co.uk/v03/n06/bernard-williams/how-shall-we-sing-the-lords-song (accessed 6 June 2012).

Chapter Six

Realist Liberalism

*Acceptance of common values (at any rate some irreducible minimum of them) enters our conception of a normal human being.*¹

At the end of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams insists that despite his critique of morality a belief in the meaningfulness of individual lives and the value of truthfulness is possible (*ELP*, pp. 198–9). His writings on what we can broadly refer to as moral psychology sketch a portrait of agency in which something akin to a notion of authenticity is central.² This picture of the conditions of living a meaningful life seems to imply a kind of politics which, as a kind of *prima facie* presumption, gives people the freedom to live their lives in accordance with their most deeply-held projects and commitments. There is consequently in Williams's wider ethical thought a sense in which a defence of liberalism can be articulated that focuses on the things that it makes possible.³ However, in his late political work Williams does not defend liberalism in these terms, instead choosing to defend a 'liberalism of fear' with regard to the evils it guards against. I therefore focus here on the defence of the liberalism of fear that Williams advocates in his late political writings. More particularly, I critically scrutinise Williams's suggestion that the liberalism of fear can be reflectively stable for the reasons outlined in the previous chapter, and defend his claim that we can endorse a certain kind of liberalism in a way such that while

¹ Isaiah Berlin, 'Introduction', in Henry Hardy, ed. *Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 24.

² This commitment is summed up at the end of *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* when Williams endorses D.H. Lawrence's claim that one should 'find your deepest impulse, and follow that'. Williams continues by saying that 'the notion that there is something that is one's deepest impulse, that there is a discovery to be made here, rather than a decision; and the notion that one trusts what is so discovered, although unclear where it will lead – these ... are the point' (*M*, pp. 79–80).

³ The only sustained discussion of this, as far as I am aware, is Nakul Krishna's unpublished manuscript, 'Liberalism and Authenticity in the Philosophy of Bernard Williams', which was presented at the 2012 MANCEPT Workshops in Political Theory.

being ‘offensive to pure Platonic or Kantian reason’⁴ (to borrow a phrase Williams uses in a different context) is compatible with his scepticism about ‘morality’ and his ancillary critique of political moralism. I then detail the argument Williams makes in his paper ‘The Liberalism of Fear’ before moving on to explain how Williams’s accounts of toleration and human rights fit within this account. I conclude by defending the liberalism of fear from some of the more commonplace criticisms that have been levelled against it.

1. Realism and Liberalism

In his late political essays Williams argues that we can be political realists of some kind and nonetheless rescue liberalism from the untenable moralism of contemporary liberal theory. As we saw in Chapter Two, while some purported solutions will fail to satisfy the BLD precisely because ‘might does not imply right ... [and] the power of coercion offered simply as the power of coercion cannot justify its own use’ (*IBWD*, pp. 5–6), Williams acknowledges that there ‘manifestly have been, and perhaps are, LEG non-liberal states’ (*IBWD*, p. 4) because ‘a given historical structure can be ... an example of the human capacity to live under an intelligible order of authority. It *makes sense* to us *as such a structure*’ (*IBWD*, p. 10). It is emphatically not the case that liberal regimes alone are capable of securing legitimacy and Williams is adamant that we cannot endorse the ‘imperialistic’ claim ‘that reason itself is liberal reason, and that an ethical practice which is other than the morality of autonomy involves the refusal to listen to reasons at all’ (*IBWD*, pp. 22–3). Williams accuses liberal political moralists of forgetting this because they have an implausible understanding of ethics as a ‘mere moral normativity’, the result of the kind of ahistorical exercise of reason-giving that he criticises in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. We therefore cannot hold that liberalism alone respects the antecedent set of

⁴ Williams, ‘Seminar with Bernard Williams’, p. 258.

moral principles they claim morally ground the right to rule, because these self-conceptions of liberalism lack a theory of error. In this respect, we cannot offer what Williams terms a ‘cognitive’ vindication of liberalism which sees the historical path we have taken as a history of discovery.

One condition of seeing a historical account as a history of discovery lies in the idea that ‘the latter theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the latter, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the latter) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement’ (*PHD*, p. 189). As I noted in Chapter One, Williams argues that for liberal ideas to have won an argument in this sense ‘the representatives of the *ancien régime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society. They would have had to agree that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better expression’. However, he is adamant that there is little reason to think that our transition to liberalism can be understood in such a way because ‘the relevant ideas of freedom, reason, and so on were themselves involved in the change. If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail – that is to say, among other things, how these came to be our ideas – are not vindicatory’ (*PHD*, pp. 190–1).⁵ Accordingly, to the extent that liberalism has foundations these lie in the extent to which it can answer the perennial first political question in a way that citizens ‘now and around here’ will consider an acceptable

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre similarly claims that because there are no neutral or given standards of correctness that exist in the kind of case Williams alludes to, ‘the protagonists of a defeated tradition, may not be able to recognize that such a defeat has occurred ... they will still take themselves to have excellent reasons for rejecting any invitation to adopt the standpoint of any rival and incompatible tradition’: ‘Prologue to the Third Edition’, *After Virtue*, p. xi.

manner. However, this is not because ‘some liberal conception of the person, which delivers the morality of liberalism, is or ought to be seen as correct’ (*IBWD*, p. 8).

Williams puts this most schematically when he writes that LEG + Modernity = Liberalism. ‘Now and around here’ we only permit liberal solutions because ‘other supposed legitimations are now seen to be false and in particular ideological’ (*IBWD*, p. 8), but in making this claim Williams is not committing himself to the view that liberalism is either the political expression of a set of timeless moral truths or that all previous legitimization stories were false. So why can we hold that liberalism makes sense to us ‘now and around here’? By allying himself with Judith Shklar’s liberalism of fear Williams argues that we can defend liberalism if we think about the evils that liberal regimes guard against. Shklar stresses that we must view liberal democracy as ‘more a recipe for survival than a project for the perfectibility of mankind’⁶, and contrasts the liberalism of fear with a Lockean liberalism of natural rights ‘which looks to the constant fulfilment of an ideal pre-established normative order’ and a Millian liberalism of personal development which holds that freedom is necessary for ‘personal as well as social progress’.⁷ Both lack ‘a strongly developed historical memory’, and ‘it is on this faculty of the human mind that the liberalism of fear draws most heavily’.⁸ Given our lived experience of the present and our memories of the past, Shklar claims that the cruelty the liberalism of fear seeks to prevent is ‘overwhelmingly generated by governments ... and while the sources of social oppression are indeed numerous, none has the deadly effect of those who, as the agents of the modern state, have unique resources of physical might and persuasion at their disposal’.⁹ To this end, the liberalism of fear does not consider ‘the basic units of political

⁶ Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 4.

⁷ Judith Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago IL, Chicago University Press, 1998), pp. 8–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

life ... discursive and reflecting persons, nor friends and enemies, nor patriotic soliders-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful. And the freedom it wishes to secure is freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenceless'.¹⁰ In this sense it is 'entirely nonutopian'¹¹ as it does not offer a *summum bonum* but begins 'with a *summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself'.¹² Although any system of law implies a certain amount of fear, the liberalism of fear does not dream of the end of coercive government but rather seeks to prevent fear caused by 'arbitrary, unexpected, unnecessary, and unlicensed acts of force and by habitual and pervasive acts of cruelty and torture'.¹³

Shklar recognises various elementary objections that may be raised against the liberalism of fear. Some people will claim that it is 'reductive', but Shklar insists that 'there is nothing reductive about building a political order on the avoidance of fear and cruelty unless one begins with contempt for physical experience'.¹⁴ Others will say that its fearfulness of state power lends it a logical affinity with anarchism, but Shklar disputes this claim when she counsels us to remember the Hobbesian point that 'the actualities of countries in which law and government have broken down are not encouraging'.¹⁵ In this sense the 'original first principle of liberalism', the rule of law, differentiates the two views.¹⁶ Finally Shklar argues that the liberalism of fear is not simply a recasting of a rights-based liberalism, because it does not encourage us to see rights 'as fundamental and

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹² Ibid., pp. 10–11.

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁵ See also Bernard Yack, 'Introduction', in Bernard Yack, ed. *Liberalism Without Illusions: Essays on the Liberal Theory and Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 3–4.

¹⁶ Shklar, 'The Liberalism of Fear', p. 18.

given' but rather as 'licenses and empowerments that citizens must have in order to preserve their freedom and to protect themselves against abuse'.¹⁷

While some commentators have claimed that it is unclear how Williams's political realism and the liberalism of fear link up,¹⁸ this brief summary of Shklar's position enables us to see why Williams claims an affinity between his political realism and Shklar's view. The central thought is that the liberalism of fear is best placed to fit with his conception of the political legitimacy because it does not have to invoke a set of contestable moral claims in the way Williams claims the liberal moralist must, as its normative impetus derives from the fact that it 'takes the condition of life without terror as its first requirement' (*IBWD*, p. 61). To wit, in his papers on human rights Williams claims that his conception of legitimacy and something akin to a liberalism of fear spell out universal constraints of acceptable state action, because certain coercive acts 'are abuses of power that almost everyone everywhere has been in position to recognize as such' (*IBWD*, p. 26). He accordingly argues that:

Our conceptions of human rights are connected with what we count as a legitimation; and our most basic conceptions of human rights are connected with what it is for the supposed solution, political power, to become part of the problem. Since – once again, at the most basic level – it is clear what it is for this to happen, it is clear what the most basic violations of human rights are. In the traditional words of the Catholic Church, the most basic truth on this matter is quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est [that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all].
(*IBWD*, p. 63)

Under such a conception Williams insists that we class as among the most blatant denials of human rights acts including 'torture, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, and murder: the world of Argentina under the junta, the story, only partly ever to be told, of those who disappeared' (*IBWD*, p. 69).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 19. As Katrina Forrester argues, Shklar holds that rights talk is realistic because rights are one of the most potent political tools that we enjoy at this time: 'Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2012), p. 265.

¹⁸ Matt Sleat, 'Making Sense of our Political Lives – The Political Philosophy of Bernard Williams', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2007), p. 396.

We will discuss Williams's conception of human rights in greater detail shortly but the important point for now is that Williams's account of legitimacy enables him to pick out a set of constraints on the exercise of political power that transcend the ideological commitments of liberal moralism, because answering the BLD is a genuinely universal requirement of political rule. The point is not that this set of rights exhausts the conditions of legitimacy that we liberals affirm in modernity but that they are basic to any purportedly political solution to the first political question. Now and around here we reject non-liberal solutions to the first question which hold that such rights should not be accorded to all subjects (perhaps on the basis of race, gender, religious identity or other arbitrary characteristics) because they deny the basic precept of *disenchantment*: 'the retreat from believing that the order of how people should treat one another is somehow inscribed either in them or in the universal realm'.¹⁹ The problem with such stories is that they endorse a discredited metaphysics, which is incompatible with the kind of scepticism about the limits of philosophy that Williams endorses. Hence, non-liberal solutions which hold that a set of subjects can be denied the basic protections associated with answering the first question, as in the Sparta/Helot case, for arbitrarily discriminatory reasons are unconvincing precisely because they deny the basic fact of Weberian disenchantment. Thus we may say that we employ what Williams refers to in his pre-realist paper 'The Idea of Equality' as *the reasonably weak principle*; 'for every difference in the way people are treated, a reason should be given' (*IBWD*, p. 107), and once such reasons are given we begin the business of assessing them.²⁰

Similarly, Williams claims that we now accept that various hierarchical structures which are premised on the creation of disadvantage for a set of subjects are not inevitable

¹⁹ Williams, 'A Mistrustful Animal', p. 200.

²⁰ According to the gloss I am putting on this here, which is not explicit in 'The Idea of Equality', we might say that this 'weak principle' makes particular sense 'now and around here' precisely because of the disenchanted conditions in which we find ourselves.

and hence not self-legitimizing: ‘once the question of their legitimacy is raised, it cannot be answered simply by their existence (this is a necessary proposition, a consequence of the axiom about justification: if the supposed legitimation is seen to be baseless, the situation is one of more coercive power)’ (*IBWD*, p. 7). Williams thus endorses the historical proposition that in modernity these legitimation questions have been raised which is why we get a ‘constraint of roughly equal acceptability’ from the BLD. This explains why liberty is such a special value for us; as we reject transcendental justifications of hierarchy ‘in telling our legitimation story we start ... with less. In interpreting and distributing liberty we allow each citizen a stronger presumption in favour of what he or she certainly wants, to carry out his or her own desires’ (*IBWD*, p. 95).

Williams refers to this kind of sceptical unmasking as the *negative narrative of the enlightenment* – the spirit of critique which led people to suspect calls to traditional justifications of hierarchy (*SP*, p. 329). However, this cannot be seen as the grand unfolding of reason, for reasons that are central to Williams’s attack on morality. But when we ask what *makes sense* to us – which is to say, when we ask which political values we can confidently endorse in spite of our scepticism about morality – this does not prohibit us from holding that liberal regimes, regimes which aim ‘to combine the rule of law with a liberty more extensive than in most earlier societies, a disposition to toleration, and a commitment to some kinds of equality’ (*TT*, p. 264), *make sense* as the most appropriate answer to the first political question once we pay attention to the historical and sociological circumstances of modernity (roughly: pluralism, bureaucratic forms of control, individualism, cognitive aspects of authority) (*IBWD*, p. 9). In this sense, by focusing on the nature of political legitimation in the conditions of modernity Williams claims to offer an account of how we can reject the fallacious arguments of liberal moralism without this collapsing into a kind of political nihilism.

This defence of the liberalism of fear does not offer a comprehensive justification of every aspect of liberal practice that we may affirm ‘now and around here’, and necessarily underdetermines what positive features a state must have. But to criticise it on these grounds would be to misunderstand its significance: it enables Williams to sketch ‘the least ambitious and most convincing justification of liberalism’ (*TT*, p. 208) by focusing on the basic problem of political legitimation. Williams’s argument is thus remarkably similar to his post-metaphysical defence of truthfulness. To wit, just as Accuracy and Sincerity are thin universals that would be intrinsically valuable in any hypothetical state of nature, Williams insists there are some ‘universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities’ (*IBWD*, p. 59) which relate to his conception of legitimacy. Moreover, just as the ways in which Accuracy and Sincerity develop historically have been, and will continue to be, the result of various historical contingencies, so will the various solutions to the first political question that *make sense* to the subjects whom they constrain in the historical context within which the demand for legitimation arises. However, what matters for us is that we can endorse the liberalism of fear without invoking a set of contestable moral claims. Although the enlightenment spirit of critique may have ‘destroyed’ some of the justificatory stories that liberals like to tell about liberalism’s emergence, the resources of the liberalism of fear ‘which work everywhere, may keep it afloat’ because liberal societies are ‘more successful in the modern world than others in helping people (at least in their own territories – their influence elsewhere has been less benign) to avoid what is universally feared: torture, violence, arbitrary power, and humiliation’ (*TT*, p. 265).²¹ Hence, although the demand

²¹ As Robert Pippin remarks, in the nineteenth century many Western European societies, despite their failings, ‘seemed to start paying off the Enlightenment’s promissory notes – reducing human misery by the application of its new science and technology, increasing the authority of appeals to reason in public life, reducing the divisive public role of religion, extending the revolutionary claim of human rights to an ever-wider class of subjects, accelerating the extension of natural scientific explanation, and more and more

for a cognitive genealogy of liberalism – viewed as reason uncovering the *correct* moral solution for politics (a historical story which views our attachment to liberalism as a ‘discovery’) – cannot be met, ‘a lot can be said in favour of liberal society’ even though ‘at other times and places these things have been effectively controlled by other political means’ (*TT*, p. 265).

This is the principal benefit Williams’s approach has over the more (metaethically) ambitious moralist accounts of legitimacy. When we take the problem of political legitimation seriously, as Williams understands it, there is a naturalistic and distinctively political reason for putting cruelty first because when the state violates the protections that the liberalism of fear outlines it fails to treat the subjects whom it coerces in a political manner, as such acts merely restate the ‘first question’ that politics is meant to solve. For this reason we can commit to liberalism, in a reflectively stable manner, despite the recognition of its historical contingency because from a historical perspective we can confidently hold that liberal institutions are reasonably good, even if by no means perfect, at curtailing the horrors the powerful inflict on the powerless and answering the first political question in acceptable ways.²² Thus, Williams’s realist conception of legitimacy promises an account of why liberalism makes sense which avoids the pitfall of attempting to develop an account of legitimacy that ultimately hangs some objective conception of ethical truth. By offering an avowedly internalist conception of legitimacy, in the spirit of Hume and Weber, which holds that the conditions of legitimacy lie in the opinion of the citizens over whom political power is exercised, Williams does not need to provide an

actually gaining what Descartes so prophetically promised, the mastery of nature’: *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy*, p. 122.

²² Of course, non-liberals may insist that because liberalism is so imperfect in these respects this claim cannot ring true. However, as I argued in Chapter Two, they face the daunting task of justifying the view that viable alternatives do exist that will be as good at ensuring order and the conditions of cooperation ‘now and around here’.

error theory because his account of why liberalism *makes sense* avoids the question of whether or not earlier peoples were in moral error according to some objectivist standard. When we ask which legitimization stories we can endorse here and now there is consequently a sense in which we avoid the sort of metaethically dubious pronouncements favoured by liberal moralists like Nagel and Dworkin, because when we focus on the perennial problem of answering the first political question in a way that makes sense to us we do not need to offer the kind of universalist answer the moralist pursues. In fact, when we make practical judgements about how we should act here and now:

We do not need the idea of an ultimately objective answer – the answer, for instance, that would imply, if it were expanded enough, an account in terms of a universal moral psychology of where exactly at least one of the disputants had been in error. We need only something more restricted, the idea of the acceptable answer to this disagreement, an answer that might be reached in actual historical circumstances ... That question belongs to what might be called a theory of persuasion, and the essential point about it is that it would be itself an ethical discussion: a discussion of the proper role of rhetoric, and loyalty, and disinterestedness, and the value of truth – plain truth, the truth of historical and social truthfulness, rather than the phantasm of ultimate ethical truth. (MSH, p. 147)

This claim is at one with Williams's view that there are more resources we can marshal in these discussions than is acknowledged by the moralist tradition when it myopically pursues a moral theory purged of all historical and empirical contingency (or what he elsewhere calls all 'impurities': *PHD*, pp. 155–69). As philosophers we must reflect on where our commitments come from, how (if at all) we can make sense of them, and whether or not we should continue to use them in our first-order disagreements (*PHD*, p. 192), but we should never forget that when it comes to politics, as citizens we have to judge the legitimization stories we are offered in terms of the best judgements we can muster. This is not the arbitrary exercise of mere preference articulation, as Richard Rorty sometimes implies, but the practical and philosophical activity of deciding which stories make sense in light of our best reflective standards.

The negative universals of the liberalism of fear accordingly promise a grounding of liberalism that avoids the problem of discussing liberalism as the liberal moralist does, ‘in terms of liberalism’s various accounts of itself’. Such internal accounts give ‘the impression of a self-contained moral vision’ (*TT*, p. 264), subsequently running up against the theory of error charge and in so doing failing to adequately make sense of our commitment to liberalism. We cannot represent our attachment to liberalism ‘as a triumph of moral understanding’ because, as we saw in the first chapter, Williams insists that we do not have any reason to think that such claims can be grounded by a philosophical understanding of the nature of ethics. To this end, we can only regard the emergence of liberalism as reflecting improved knowledge and understanding on our part in negative terms, in the sense that we now know that ‘earlier legitimations of power depended on conceptions that were false’ (*TT*, p. 264).²³ However, when we understand liberalism in the terms favoured by the liberalism of fear, we can speak to a very wide constituency of people, certainly a wider constituency than ironists like Rorty suppose, because we can confidently hold that liberalism is uniquely placed to answer the fundamental political question we face ‘now and around here’; the question of what constitutes an acceptable answer to the first question, both *philosophically* in that it makes reflective sense, and *realistically* in that we can politically achieve it in the historical situation we inhabit.

2. The Liberalism of Fear, ‘Now and Around Here’

In his paper ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, which was originally delivered as the Isaiah Berlin Lecture in the History of Ideas at Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1994, Williams also extols the benefits for political practice of the liberalism of fear over other iterations of

²³ It is to this extent that the enlightenment ‘carried some truthfulness with it’: *TT*, p. 264.

liberalism. The most important point he develops is structured around the idea of the *audience* of political philosophy. Williams insists that political theorists need to think more reflectively about whom they are addressing and for what purpose. A work of political theory has a variety of ‘listeners’, that is, the people to whom the text is purportedly addressed. For example, the prince struggling to impose form on the vicissitudes of *fortuna* is purportedly the *listener* of Machiavelli’s text, but his *audience* is a far wider constituency, namely anyone who is interested in understanding politics. It is on these grounds that Williams objects to what he refers to as the *founding father political philosophy* of Rawls’s and Dworkin’s conceptions of liberalism. He writes that Rawls’s theory of justice presents itself to people who seem to be tasked with something akin to founding a political society. The inhabitants of the original position are thus its listeners but its audience, Williams notes, is taken to be ‘the concerned and well-disposed citizenry of a modern pluralist state’ (*IBWD*, p. 57). Dworkin on the other hand seems to be addressing a constitutional court and trying to persuade ‘the listener that a certain set of provisions would be the best and most harmonious interpretation of a set of values that the writer and listener are taken to accept’ (*IBWD*, p. 58). Williams asks why such audiences should be interested in a text that addresses that sort of listener. Rawls’s answer is that ‘those founding, indeed Pilgrim fathers, the listeners, are the audience’s own Kantian selves’ (*IBWD*, p. 57), but Williams is sceptical about addressing these imagined listeners if one is genuinely concerned with addressing the public at large. The real problem is that both essentially address ‘someone who has power, [and] who could enact what the writer urges on him’ and who is also ‘a very patient listener with a great appetite for argument and very few political restrictions on what [they should do]’ (*IBWD*, pp. 57–8). We are being told how best we can ‘start from the ground up, perhaps not in the state of nature, but at least having just got off the boat’ (*IBWD*, p. 58). This ensures that a dislocation exists between the empowered

listeners whom Rawls and Dworkin address and the typically unempowered audience to whom they allegedly speak. It follows that they both imagine away the politics of the situations to which they speak because ‘no audience in the world is in that position, not even the Supreme Court’; they thereby alienate ‘politics from political philosophy’ (*IBWD*, p. 58). In contrast, because the liberalism of fear ‘takes seriously power and the surrounding distributions and limitations on power in any given situation’ it is better placed ‘to remind its listener of the existence of politics’ (*IBWD*, p. 59).

This criticism is not intended as a straightforward refutation of this *founding* focus. Rather, Williams uses the audience/listener distinction to question whether or not *founding* approaches are helpful ways to address the political concerns we currently have. The key point is that the liberalism of fear has a very broad set of listeners:

Its relations to its listeners and its audience are the reverse of the other traditional options. Its listeners, unusually, form a much larger group than its expected audience. It speaks to humanity. And it has a right to do this, a unique right, I think, because its materials are the only certainly universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities.

(*IBWD*, p. 59)

To this end ‘it is better placed to recognize the actual limitations of state power than are political theories addressed to listeners assumed to be, within a given state, at the relevant level (the level set by the theory) omnipotent’ (*IBWD*, pp. 59–60).

Furthermore, by taking seriously the existence of politics the liberalism of fear acknowledges that ‘the particular arguments that carry forward liberal policies in particular situations must be not just practically but conceptually a matter of those circumstances’ (*IBWD*, p. 60). This bottom-up, anti-theoretical approach ‘treats each proposal for the extension of the notions of fear and freedom in light of what locally has been secured’ and ‘does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances and then apply it’ (*IBWD*, p. 61). It consequently recognises that any act of political reform begins from a specific point and builds this recognition into the act of

political theorising, and hence of political prescription, by focusing on the inevitable political constraints in place. In contrast, by adopting the founding father perspective, Rawls's and Dworkin's top-down theories ignore the centrality of such political considerations.

Williams explains how adopting the liberalism of fear has implications for current practice via an examination of two central concepts in contemporary political theory: human rights and toleration. He emphasises the centrality of thinking 'politically' about human rights violations and insists that our understandings of human rights 'had better get slightly nearer to being what their traditional defenders always took them to be, that is self-evident, and self-evidence should register more than the convictions of their advocates if the claims to human rights are to escape the familiar criticism that they express only the preferences of a liberal culture' (*IBWD*, p. 19). Williams claims to bypass these problems because, as we saw earlier, he argues that his conception of legitimacy and something akin to a liberalism of fear spell out universal constraints of acceptable state action. The best conceptualisation of human rights focuses on the nature of political legitimation and the problem of when a purported solution to the first question itself becomes part of the problem it is meant to solve. Focusing on these core violations is 'sensible, both philosophically and politically' because we ought 'to make our views about human rights, or at least the most basic human rights, depend as little as possible on disputable theses of liberalism or any other particular ideology' (*IBWD*, p. 74). He insists that we cannot ultimately separate the question of 'whether it is a matter of philosophical good sense to treat a certain practice as a violation of human rights, and whether it is politically good sense' precisely because it is a 'question of *political* sense, how widely the accusation should be distributed' (*IBWD*, p. 72). This is a corollary of his take on the Goethian principle *in the beginning was the deed*, the idea being that philosophical claims about politics

cannot be insulated from political action.²⁴ For this reason we should not count as rights violations ‘every practice we reject on liberal principle’ (*IBWD*, p. 72).

Although there are various other claims made in modern liberal states, such as claims about the equality of treatment between the sexes and the right of a woman to have an abortion, which ‘resemble the clear cases of human rights in this sense, that their basis is not positive law but a moral claim which is invoked in arguments about what the positive law should be’ (*IBWD*, p. 65), Williams insists that they should be understood differently. While we may think that members of a various societies are ‘jointly caught up in a set of beliefs which regulate their lives and which are indeed unsound’ we should not necessarily see such practices as violating human rights because this way of life can be ‘shared in ways that move the society further away from the paradigm of unjust coercion’ (*IBWD*, p. 71). The core violations are immune to this charge because they are blatant examples of unmediated coercion which transgress the ‘might is not, in itself, right’ axiom at the core of Williams’s account of the political because they are paradigmatic examples of ‘people using power to coerce other people against their will to secure what the first people want simply because they want it’ (*IBWD*, p. 23). It is consequently problematic to regard ‘theocratic conceptions of government and patriarchal ideas of the rights of women’ as necessary violations of human rights, because such legitimations may be accepted by the citizens in these states. Indeed, how far such situations fall into the violation paradigm is best seen as a matter of social understanding: ‘up to certain point it may be possible for the supporters of the system to make a decent case ... that the coercion is legitimate. Somewhere beyond that point may come a time at which the cause is lost, the legitimation no longer makes sense, and only the truly fanatical can bring themselves to believe it’. In this scenario ‘there will be no great change in the

²⁴ Forrester, ‘Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism’, p. 266.

argumentative character of the legitimization or the criticisms of it. The change is in the historical setting in terms of which one or the other makes sense' (*IBWD*, p. 71).²⁵

Hence, Williams claims that we can reject the kind of (untenable) liberal universalism which holds that 'if certain human rights exist, they have always existed' (*IBWD*, p. 65) without surrendering an account of liberalism and an account of human rights themselves. He notes that it is tempting to reason in the following way (which he describes as 'queasy liberalism'):

If one does not think of one's morality as universally applicable to everyone, one cannot confidently apply it where one must indeed apply it, to the issues of one's time and place. Some people do seem to think that if liberalism is a recent idea and people in the past were not liberals, they themselves should lose confidence in liberalism. (*IBWD*, p. 67)

But the mistake the queasy liberal makes is precisely to endorse the transhistorical universalism inherent in this liberal outlook. In this respect Williams's account of human rights can be seen as part of the project of his late work, which I described in Chapter Five; namely, thinking about how we might foster some kind of confidence in various judgements of ours without recourse to the discredited justificatory strategies and fictions of the morality system.

None of this should be taken to suggest that this is not problematic territory, or that the boundaries are not contestable, or that Williams could have been clearer at various points. For instance, one might be less prepared than Williams to consider racism and the subordinate role of women (among other things) as some of the non-paradigmatic cases of

²⁵ For further discussion of Williams's work on human rights and a thorough explanation of its relationship to his work in ethics see Alex Bavister-Gould's 'Bernard Williams: Political Realism and The Limits of Legitimacy', *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming), DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0378.2011.00464.x. Bavister-Gould succeeds in his expository aims but it is unclear why he thinks it is surprising that Williams's refusal to count any non-liberal practice as a rights violation springs from his wider ethical thought. Indeed, this surprise seems to spring from the very misplaced desire of many writers on contemporary political realism to offer a political theory that eschews any normative or ethical claims as a matter of methodological principle (so that there is, allegedly, something deficient about it as a 'realism' if it tacitly or otherwise implies or endorses such claims). As I explained in the Introduction, given that Williams was not committed to this misconceived understanding of 'realism' in political thought, the fact that his account of human rights is related to his wider ethical thought is not only utterly unsurprising but in no way problematic.

illegitimate coercion, precisely because we have perfectly good reasons for considering such practices deeply incompatible with the disenchanted nature of modernity.²⁶ However, it is intuitively compelling to think that any convincing account of human rights must recognise a basic distinction between the complete set of normative claims one is prepared to endorse and a more circumscribed set of human rights violations. Williams's focus on the nature of legitimation has notable merits here because it relates to a genuinely universal claim about the nature of politics which transcends liberal ideology. In this sense it can be vindicated in a different way from the kinds of allegedly universal claims liberal moralists like Nagel claim to uncover simply by 'think[ing] systematically in ways that anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognise as correct',²⁷ which we should be sceptical of for the reasons Williams elaborates.

Similarly, Williams writes that rather than favouring a 'strongly moralized conception of liberalism as based on ideals of individual autonomy' liberals ought to adopt 'a more sceptical, historically alert, politically direct conception of it as the best hope for humanly acceptable legitimate government under modern conditions (*IBWD*, p. 138). The moral grounding of toleration that he seeks to replace focuses on the idea that a moral right, reflecting a notion of autonomy, must underlie liberal practice and holds that although people may act in ways which we oppose, it is not our place to force them to take another course of action as their morality is in their own hands (*PHD*, p. 132-33 and *IBWD*, p. 131). However, Williams claims that we ought to reject this as a political grounding for toleration and 'be careful about making the assumption that what underlies a practice of toleration must be a personal virtue of toleration' (*PHD*, p. 127). One reason for this, as we have seen, is that Williams notes that other liberal routes which appeal to a conception of autonomy are echoes of earlier religious conceptions that no longer make

²⁶ As Williams notes, it is not hard to apply to critical theory principle to these cases: *IBWD*, p. 7.

²⁷ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 5 (cited by Williams in *IBWD*, p. 66).

sense. Second, he rejects the idea that an autonomy-based defence of toleration could stop liberalism becoming *just another sectarian doctrine* as it clearly involves substantive moral commitments. Third, liberal attitudes which prioritise considerations of autonomy have problematic understandings of what kinds of disapproval are permissible and for what reasons.²⁸

For these reasons Williams stresses that we should view toleration in distinctively political terms by focusing on the problem of legitimation, and argues that a more plausible route to toleration may be ‘supported by Hobbesian considerations about what is possible or desirable in the matter of enforcement, or again by scepticism about the issues of disagreement and their eventual resolution’. To this end, we can make persuasive claims about the necessity of toleration by appealing ‘to the misery and cruelty involved in intolerance’ which can ‘have some effect even with those who are not dedicated to toleration as an intrinsic value’ (*PHD*, p. 133). This approach centres on the ‘manifest and immediate human harms created by intolerance’ and holds that it is not appropriate for the power of the state to enforce certain outcomes, ‘not because the people affected have a right under the good of autonomy to choose their way of life without undue external influence, but because state power should not be used for that kind of purpose’ (*IBWD*, p. 134). This may rest ‘on some moral ideas in particular about the nature of the state’ but he insists that ‘the political consideration does not follow as a special case from a moral doctrine which is more generally and also intrinsically related to toleration even outside

²⁸ In particular, Williams claims that such views employ an impoverished understanding of ‘untoward pressure’. As he puts it, ‘the concept of autonomy is supposed to leave the other free from external, causal, “heteronomous” influences which may cause him to change his opinion for non-moral reasons ... but if the agent who disapproves of the other’s values and is committed to the attitude of toleration is cut off from all such expressions, it becomes increasingly unclear what room is left for the agent genuinely and strongly to disapprove the other’s values. The idea of a strong, moral disapproval which can be expressed in (something like) rational argument and is otherwise required by the demands of toleration to remain private, seems too thin and feeble to satisfy what has been agreed to be the requirement of a tolerant attitude, namely that the agent does in fact strongly disapprove of the practices about which he is being tolerant’. For this reason, Williams concludes that ‘it is in fact impossible to draw any clear, or perhaps reasonable, line between kinds of influence ... supposedly compatible with the ideal of autonomy, and those that are not’: *IBWD*, p. 132.

politics' (*IBWD*, p. 131).²⁹ When we worry about intolerance in these terms Williams argues, as I noted in Chapter Two, that it becomes very hard to 'discover any one attitude that underlies liberal practice' because toleration requires 'social virtues such as the desire to co-operate and to get on peaceably with one's fellow citizens and a capacity for seeing how things look to them ... some scepticism, the lack of fanatical conviction on religious issues [and so on]' (*IBWD*, p. 138).

In this sense, his work on toleration is a compelling example of how the liberalism of fear promises a more plausible defence of a core liberal value than very moralised accounts can, because it helps us to see that we do not need a morally ambitious (and contestable) moral principle – such as the liberal belief in autonomy – to underlie our political practice. Rather, we can politically commit to toleration as a requirement of legitimacy because it can be seen as a necessary defence against the unwarranted excesses of state power given the concatenation of factors of which our legitimisation stories must make sense, 'now and around here'.

3. Is Williams's Liberal Realism Realist?

In Chapter Two I argued that when various states act in ways as did the Argentinian state under the junta, the relationship between the state and its 'disappeared' citizens cannot be classed as political in kind because legitimisation is an identifying category of politics and these kinds of coercive acts are incapable of legitimisation. I argued that there is reason to endorse Williams's claim that a minimal set of prohibitions can be seen as universal requirements of legitimate political rule because they are necessary bulwarks against

²⁹ We should not get distracted into thinking that the use of the word 'moral' refutes this argument in favour of seeing toleration in political rather than moral terms. As I read it this is simply an early expression of the core evaluative claim at the heart of the BLD which, as we have seen, Williams insists does not 'represent a morality which is prior to politics': *IBWD*, p. 5.

violations of the ‘might is not right’ axiom at the heart of his conception of politics. However, this only gets us as far as saying that the Argentinean state (say) did not treat its subjects in genuinely political manner, in much the same way that the Spartans did not treat the Helots as political subjects. Various commentators have noted that Williams’s liberalism, which I have outlined above, extends beyond this descriptive claim and is premised on some kind of normative claim about to whom the state must legitimate itself (namely, each subject). This is taken to problematise his commitment to a kind of realist liberalism because, as Baderin argues, ‘it is clear that Williams thinks that the political is to be preferred to the non-political situation: it is a good thing if the state justifies its power to each subject’ and it is impossible to explain how this claim can be justified with ‘some deeper moral commitment ... [that] underpins the demand that power be justified to each citizen’.³⁰ Indeed, Matt Sleat argues that realists should accept that the justificatory net ‘does not have to be cast this wide. It could include, and has done in the past, only those who hold certain religious beliefs, from a certain ethnic group or from a particular class, or those individuals who have access to specialist knowledge (usually religious), a particular skin colour or belong to a certain tribe’.³¹

In Chapter Two I argued that Williams’s account of the BLD is perfectly compatible with such reminders about the breadth of the justificatory net and hence that insofar as such claims are intended as general refutations of Williams’s understanding of politics they fail. As I put it there, the primary purpose of Williams’s account is to enable us to understand the nature of politics itself (and thus to appreciate the normativity inherent to it) and nothing he says when outlining what I termed the internal legitimising ethic of political authority should be taken to imply that all legitimate states have stood in political relations with all those they have coerced. Yet the worry persists that by defending the

³⁰ Baderin, ‘Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory’, p. 9.

³¹ Sleat, ‘Bernard Williams and the Possibility of a Realist Political Theory’, p. 495.

claim that ‘now and around here’ the state must offer a justification to each subject, Williams’s liberal realism cannot be distinguished from liberal moralism because on his account politics is subject to various external moral conditions about the conditions of legitimacy.

These complaints are revealing insofar as they exemplify a worrying feature of certain understandings of what it means to adopt a realist perspective in contemporary political theory, namely that when we think about the relationship between morality and politics there are two positions; (a) the moralist view of morality before politics and (b) a realist view of politics as an autonomous domain without recourse to any moral claims or considerations. It should be clear that while Williams rejects the moralist position in the way in which the enactment and structural models conceive of it, his understanding of realism in political thought is not captured by the above delineation of a realist perspective. Rather, as I argued in the Introduction, Williams endorses a certain kind of realist attitude in both ethics and politics which I described as the ethical commitment to exposing various kinds of wishful thinking that plague much contemporary moral and political philosophy. Hence in this thesis I have argued that in his late work Williams’s concern is chiefly with thinking about how we might foster some kind of confidence in various judgements of ours without recourse to the discredited justificatory strategies and fictions of the morality system.

When it comes to reflectively thinking about politics it follows that he contrasts political moralism, which prioritises the kinds of understanding of morality that he will not countenance, with ‘an approach which gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought’ (*IBWD*, p. 3). This approach claims that politics contains its own internal legitimatising ‘ethic’ because political authority demands a particular kind of allegiance from those agents it claims to incorporate as political subjects. Williams places this

problem of legitimation at the heart of his political realism and tries to make some ethical sense of politics in light of this; hence he claims that, as political theorists, we should reject the moralist view of ‘morality before politics’. Yet this does not commit him to the view that political realists must approach politics as an autonomous domain with *no* reference to further moral considerations. In fact, when we ask what makes sense to us Williams is adamant that this is a normative question, but it is a question that is distinctively political as it relates to the question of political authority. It should therefore be distinguished from both the structural and enactment models of political moralism, which essentially apply competing understanding of first-person ethics to the political domain.

Hence Williams recognises the role that moral considerations play in political argument but holds that they do not pre-empt the act of answering the first political question. If we understand this we can understand why the complaints we are examining here are mistaken. When we come to judge a legitimation story ‘now and around here’ we will utilise various normative judgements. However, these judgements relate to, and derive from, our judgements of the acceptability of the legitimating justifications on offer and should not be conceived as being prior to the political act of claiming authority. Accordingly, Williams maintains that they should not be understood as foundations of liberalism as they are ‘a product of the same [historical] forces that lead to a situation in which the BLD is satisfied only by a liberal state’ (*IBWD*, p. 8). Thus, although Sleat and Baderin are correct to note that normative beliefs, along with various other practical considerations, will always determine our judgements about how widely the justificatory net should be cast, Williams’s account makes room for this recognition (as any persuasive

realism must).³² They are consequently wrong to claim that we should see such moral considerations as prior to politics, in the way Williams's political realism objects to, because they (a) arise within politics when we ask which forms of authoritative rule make sense to us, and (b) cannot be disentangled from the history that both generated these beliefs of ours and the world in which they make sense.

Williams claims that 'now and around here' there is a basic presumption in favour of the view that the state should offer a justification of its power to each subject because we can be *confident* that this claim makes sense to us given the 'disenchanted' nature of modernity for the reasons outlined in Section 1. The kinds of exclusionary political practices that Sleat elucidates – i.e. excluding those who hold certain religious beliefs, or who are from certain ethnic groups or particular classes, or those with a particular skin colour – fail to make sense. Williams's focus on the nature of legitimation in modernity has notable merits because it relates to a genuinely universal claim about the nature of politics and only makes use of a small number of hard-won normative supplements. Hence, even though it is a normative claim that all persons within a territory must be offered a legitimation, we are capable of appreciating the conditions of its historical emergence and its relation to the rise of egalitarianism in the modern period. In this sense it can be vindicated in a different way from the kinds of allegedly universal claims that liberal moralists like Nagel and Dworkin invoke, and which we examined in the previous chapter. Or, to put it another way, unlike many liberal arguments of the sort enumerated by moralists, it merely relies on a minimal and rather uncontroversial set of claims about the negative narrative of the enlightenment. To this end, *contra* the arguments we have

³² The complaint under consideration is puzzling in this regard. If any theory of politics must accept that the width of the justificatory net is always a normative consideration, then rather than claiming that Williams's approach is not realist because it accepts this why not hold (as Williams does) that any coherent realist theory must accept this too? As I've said the misplaced desire of many commentators on realism to think that a truly realist approach will not invoke *any* moral claims surely undergirds this insistence, but this is peculiar and unsustainable understanding of 'realism' itself.

examined here, there is no problem with seeing this as realist liberalism, provided we do not endorse an untenable understanding of realism in the first place.

4. Defending the Liberalism of Fear

Thus far I have explained the reasoning behind Williams's endorsement of the liberalism of fear both in philosophical terms – as offering the best reflective explanation of our continued commitment to liberalism – and practically, to the extent that it has notable advantages for liberal political practice. However, the liberalism of fear has been criticised by philosophers and political theorists on various fronts and in this section I assess the merits of these complaints. This is important because it enables us to better appreciate the Shklarian/Williamsian claim that the liberalism of fear offers a distinctive grounding of liberalism.³³ I move through the complaints in turn.

Negative Politics is Incoherent

The most common source of complaint is typified by Michael Walzer's insistence that the liberalism of fear cannot 'possibly form the substance of a political position' because there cannot be 'such a thing as a purely or simply or even largely negative politics'.³⁴ Walzer is

³³ Because I only focus on the most challenging criticisms I choose not to dwell on Thom Brooks's claim that the liberalism of fear is less persuasive than republican conceptions of freedom, in 'Bernard Williams, Republicanism, and the Liberalism of Fear', *Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2011), p. 59. Robert Talisse has persuasively replied to Brooks by showing that, as part of the point of the liberalism of fear is 'to never forget the fragility of this achievement [i.e. the conditions of order]', its aspiration 'to keep discontent alive, so to speak, requires the rejection of the republican conception of freedom'. Talisse notes that the liberalism of fear 'requires us to refuse the view that there could be exercises of power that are not freedom-lessening. It requires us instead to regard every exercise of political power as fundamentally coercive, intrinsically freedom-lessening, and thus deserving of suspicion. This keeps the threshold for political justification high, burdensome, and firmly focused on the powerful. This in turn serves as an important constraint on legitimate action by political actors and institutions': Talisse, 'Freedom, Fear, and Domination', *Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2011), pp. 61–3.

³⁴ Michael Walzer, 'On Negative Politics', in Bernard Yack, ed. *Liberalism Without Illusions: Essays on the Liberal Theory and Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 17.

adamant that any conception of liberalism must be committed to a positive morality which gives it its direction and purpose:

Liberalism is a particular social-historical construction, and it isn't made by throwing up bulwarks around a piece of social space. It requires work within that space. Insofar as this work is intentional, it will be driven by some positive vision of its purpose. So the liberalism of fear depends upon what we might call the liberalism of hope.³⁵

Walzer is right that there is a sense in which a negative focus on what we must protect ourselves against does *sometimes* entail a non-negative account of goods and values. For example, opposition to arbitrary imprisonment clearly implies some value of freedom. But in spite of this, defenders of what we might call the negative approach deny the Walzerian claim that this derails the liberalism of fear, arguing that even though a symmetry between fear and hope pertains in some cases, there are other cases in which we can coherently fear *p* (and thus want to prevent *p*) without this committing us to any parallel positive claims about what we should hope or aspire to in general (except for the banality that we would hope for a world where *p* does not occur).

Derek Edyvane has made this case very persuasively. He argues that Amnesty International's slogan 'Protect the Human' is an example of a negative claim that is not sustained 'by the vision of a better future, but simply by the sense of disgust and abhorrence that naturally attends human rights violations'. Indeed, in this case 'to require an ideologically grounded hope for [positive] radical change *as well* would be ... to require one thought too many'.³⁶ With this in mind, Edyvane insists that there are certain negative claims which do not have a symmetrical 'hope' as Walzer alleges. This enables us to distinguish the liberalism of fear from what has come to be known as 'non-ideal' liberalism. Non-ideal liberalism is 'concerned with the problem of implementing liberalism in circumstances that fall short of the ideal', which ensures that it cannot be

³⁵ Ibid., p. 19. See also Yael Tamir, 'The Land of the Fearful and the Free', *Constellations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1997), p. 299.

³⁶ Derek Edyvane, 'What is the Point of a Public Morality?', *Political Studies*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2012), p. 151.

‘wholly independent of ideal theory’ for the obvious reason that ‘non-ideal’ or ‘less happy’ conditions are defined by reference to an antecedently specified ideal. However, when we understand the liberalism of fear as a preventative doctrine we can see that does not have to have this relationship with ‘the ideal’. It is not therefore ‘just a more extreme or more “fact-sensitive” expression of non-ideal theory; it is rather to be associated with an entirely different style of political activity – it serves an entirely different master’.³⁷ Contrary to Walzer’s surmise, then, there is little reason to hold that negative approaches to politics, like the liberalism of fear, must be parasitic upon ‘aspirational’ or ‘ideal’ approaches.

Jonathan Allen’s perceptive reminder that critics of the liberalism of fear often ignore the differences between the two functions that political theory can have – the justificatory and the educative – also gives us further reason to reject Walzer’s complaint.³⁸ While much political theory focuses on the idea of principled philosophical justification, the educative approach instead draws upon ‘the moral and political world and the dispositions, passions, and experiences that recur in that world’.³⁹ Allen insists that the educative role of political theory does not ‘add up to a moral system or decision procedure’ but is better understood as a ‘moral and political sensibility’.⁴⁰ In Shklar’s case he claims that this sensibility (1) gives explicit attention to negative dispositions and experiences to gain a better understanding of their dynamics and relations to positive moral ideals, (2) attempts to understand and bring to light the system of distributing evils

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 157–8.

³⁸ Jonathan Allen, ‘The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory’, *Political Theory*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2001), pp. 344–5.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 345.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 349.

that exists in any given society, and (3) recognizes the importance of identifying and responding to the perspectives of victims of social evils.⁴¹

Allen's argument can help us to recognise why Williams would have been drawn to the liberalism of fear. As we saw in Chapter One, his scepticism about the prospects of philosophical justification has two significant implications for his understanding and articulation of a kind of liberalism. First, Williams would consider it implausible to think that the aversion to cruelty on which the liberalism of fear is grounded is amenable to philosophical justification in the way that the defender of the morality system – and her political counterpart, the liberal moralist – might hope. To wit, just as he insists that anyone who tried to theoretically justify the statement 'You can't kill that child' would fail to understand the injunction at hand, because the felt need here is simply 'more convincing as a reason than any reason which might be advanced for it being a reason' (*ML*, p. 81), he would find peculiar the idea that as liberals we could adequately justify (in the way the moralist pursues) our aversion to cruelty. For this reason, the demand that the liberalism of fear must be at each moment a justificatory doctrine demands *one thought too many*. Second, precisely because of this scepticism about the prospects of philosophical justification, it seems sensible to suppose that once we see our job as political theorists as that of addressing a specific 'audience' in ways that will 'make sense' to them we should devote more time to the educative task because as Allen notes, it 'tells us what to think about rather than what to think. It proposes a mode of thinking about morality that is realistic, is sensitive to experience, and adds analytical depth to the elaboration of positive concepts, ideals, and decision procedures'.⁴² This reorientation chimes well with Williams's defence of the liberalism of fear as being a kind of liberalism that is better placed than its rivals to speak to the actual concerns of the audience whom it addresses.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 349.

Walzer therefore does not rebuff the idea that the liberalism of fear – and, for that matter, other iterations of negative politics – can be seen as a distinctive and coherent approach to political theorising that addresses a different set of concerns than the aspirational approaches.

The Vacuity of Focusing on Cruelty

It has also been claimed that the suggestion that we must put cruelty *first* itself needs justification, even if we accept that to ask for justification as to why we should care about cruelty in general is to have one thought too many. John Kekes makes this argument in typically trenchant terms when he remarks that the slogan that ‘a liberal is one who believes that cruelty is the worst thing we do’ is ‘mere verbiage that cannot withstand the most elementary questioning’. Why not hold that one (or a mix) of ‘genocide, terrorism, betrayal, exploitation humiliation, brutalization, tyranny’ is the worst thing we do? Kekes insists that if one replies that ‘all serious evils are forms of cruelty’, this merely registers the widely-held belief that serious evil is the worst thing that we do, and this undermines the liberalism of fear as a distinctive approach to politics.⁴³

These seem to be powerful points, but they are not insurmountable. For Shklar, putting cruelty first is ‘a first principle, an act of moral intuition based on ample observation’, and she maintains that ‘because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal’.⁴⁴ This may invite Kekes’s complaint, because he is right to note that this claim requires some further explanation. However, the ability of the Shklarian to offer a compelling response to Kekes is of less relevance to the aims of this chapter than is Williams’s ability to do so, and it is precisely at this point that the distinct advantages of Williams’s liberal realism become clear. Rather

⁴³ John Kekes, ‘Cruelty and Liberalism’, *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 4 (1996), p. 835.

⁴⁴ Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, p. 11.

than basing his account on a ‘moral intuition based on ample observation’ Williams links his endorsement of the liberalism of fear to his account of legitimacy and underlying conception of politics. Making this link reveals a perfectly cogent reason for putting cruelty first – namely that when the state violates the protections that the liberalism of fear outlines it fails to treat the subjects whom it coerces in a political manner; as I argued in Chapter Two, such acts merely restate the first question that politics is meant to solve and thus violate the ‘might is not right’ axiom. Once we take this conception of the political seriously and merely add the normative supplement that, as liberals in modernity, we want to accord the protections that go with this account of legitimation to all subjects, we have ample reason for taking seriously the importance of minimising the acts of public cruelty that Shklar outlines. As I argued when examining Williams’s conception of human rights, this normative supplement is not a problematic feature of this account because he is trying to rescue liberalism from the specious (and untenable) moralism of much contemporary political thought (i.e. by looking for a vindication of our commitment to liberalism that can work without the illusory notions of justification that the morality system pursues). This is precisely the kind of judgement in which we can be confident given the disenchanted nature of the epoch that we are trying to make sense of – that is, modernity.

Practical Limitations

The final major criticism of the liberalism of fear that I will examine concerns the practical limitations of its negative orientation. Andrea Sangiovanni writes that ‘there is little warrant for concluding that the energies of political theorists and practitioners should be expended in merely preventing the worst’ because this would only follow if ‘it were true that any attempt in politics to go beyond securing freedom from fear, want, cruelty is

likely to end in disastrous results'. Sangiovanni acknowledges that such schemes often do go wrong but insists that on the whole this claim is overstated. He argues that:

There is a risk to accepting the 'liberalism of fear' as the last word in politics. There are places and times where such a narrow focus on bare physical and psychological security is exactly what is required, and we do well to keep it in mind in such circumstances. But the argument does not generalize well. Should we abandon our concern for more high-reaching political values – such as, say, social equality – in, for example, relatively stable, rich constitutional democracies? To cope with questions like these, the liberalism of fear might try to point to more articulated (and controversial) conceptions of domination, for instance. But the more content and scope the liberalism of fear tries to pack in to its restricted range of values, the less it will be distinguishable from the project's attempts to articulate its own range of political values.⁴⁵

Sangiovanni makes three claims here that must be unpacked: first, that the only warrant for political theorists focusing on preventing the worst is if all attempts at improvement lead to disaster; second, that this focus on preventing the worst has little to tell us about what to do in stable constitutional democracies; and third, that if the liberalism of fear tries to pack more into its restricted range of values to bypass the worry expressed in the second claim it becomes less distinctive (the implication being that there is less reason to affirm it as a viable *alternative* grounding of liberalism).

The first claim seems to rest on a basic misunderstanding of the liberalism of fear because neither Williams nor Shklar are committed to the view that the energies of political theorists should 'merely', as Sangiovanni puts it (although 'exclusively' seems to better capture his point), be focussed on preventing the worst. Rather, their talk about the importance of focusing firstly on acts of government cruelty is precisely that – a point about what should be attended to *first* in politics. This prescription is not a claim about what we should focus on *exclusively*. Consequently, neither Williams nor Shklar are committed to the view that preventing the worst is the *only* task for political theory even if they think that it is of *first* importance. After all, the first virtue I may look for in a

⁴⁵ Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Normative Political Theory: A Flight from Reality', in Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Theory and Internal Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 233.

girlfriend might be kindness (or something else, depending on one's taste) but this does not mean that I wouldn't also like her to be funny and beautiful (and much more besides). But Williams does find it important to remind political theorists of the first question of politics because, to use Stuart Hampshire's phrase, many recent contributions to political theory 'have a fairy tale quality, because the realities of politics ... are absent from them'.⁴⁶

There is an analogy here with a diagnosis of some failings of contemporary moral philosophy that Williams makes in '*The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics*':

There are areas of philosophy which might be thought to have a special commitment to not forgetting the horrors ... among them moral philosophy. No one with sense asks it to think about them all the time but, in addressing what it claims to be our most serious concerns, it would do better if it did not make them disappear. Yet this is what in almost all its modern forms moral philosophy effectively does. (SP, p. 54)

If one thinks of 'the horrors' as the horrors that answers to the first question are meant to solve, and substitutes 'moral' for 'political' philosophy, the reason for focusing on the liberalism of fear is apparent. It is not, as Sangiovanni says, that Williams and Shklar think that the liberalism of fear is the last word in politics, but rather that it must be the first.

This brings us to the second of Sangiovanni's claims. Williams himself addresses this charge by challenging the suggestion that the liberalism of fear has nothing to say to people who live in the politics of a 'better ordered society'. For one thing, he insists that it can remind people of 'what they have got and how it might go away' and thus warn us of the precariousness of our political achievement and in so doing prompt us to devise ever more secure ways in which acts of cruelty can be mitigated against.⁴⁷ He also insists that if 'the

⁴⁶ Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 12.

⁴⁷ Tony Judt's defence of social democracy can be seen in this tradition. As he writes, 'few in the West today can conceive of a complete breakdown of liberal institutions, an utter disintegration of the democratic consensus. But what we know of World War II – or the former Yugoslavia – illustrates the ease with which any society can descend into Hobbesian nightmares of unrestrained atrocity and violence. If we are going to build a better future, it must begin with a deeper appreciation of the ease with which even solidly-grounded liberal democracies can flounder. To put the point quite bluntly, if social democracy has a future, it will be

primary freedoms are secured, and basic fears are assuaged, then the attentions of the liberalism of fear will move to more sophisticated conceptions of freedom, and other forms of fear, other ways in which the asymmetries of power and powerlessness work to the disadvantage of the latter' (*IBWD*, p. 60). This is why he argues that despite its 'resolutely nonutopian' character the liberalism of fear is not simply a politics of pessimism: 'it can be, in good times, the politics of hope as well' (*IBWD*, p. 61).

It is easy to see why this might give Sangiovanni's third claim a foothold; it is intuitively compelling to think that the more attention we give to 'more sophisticated conceptions of freedom' the less distinctive and compelling the liberalism of fear becomes as an alternative to other iterations of liberalism. However, when the proponent of the liberalism of fear turns to these 'more sophisticated' conceptions they do not endorse the same kind of argumentative strategies that the liberal moralist favours. For Shklar and Williams, political theorists who take cruelty to be the worst thing we do should orientate their work away from the kind of idealised views that are popular at the moment and instead concentrate on how cruelty can be minimised. Accordingly, and to put it bluntly, rather than imagining a (purportedly) realistic utopia in which all citizens act in accordance with their sense of justice, Shklar and Williams advocate focusing on the world we inhabit, and the actual dispositions of people within it, so as to seek ways of mitigating the cruelty that permeates it here and now.⁴⁸ Hence we can see that a significant difference between the two approaches to liberalism emerges – which Sangiovanni ignores

as a social democracy of fear': Judt, *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents* (London, Penguin, 2010), p. 221. My thanks to Paul Sagar for directing me to this passage.

⁴⁸ For an engaging attempt to do this see Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996).

– when we grasp the force of Allen’s point about the ways in which the liberalism of fear takes seriously its *educative* task.⁴⁹

As a general point, then, nothing that Sangiovanni says touches on the key idea that rather than defending abstract notions of various political values, and seeking to justify them philosophically, the liberalism of fear instead focuses on enumerating the existing forms of fear and degradation at work in society and then ponders how they might be curtailed here and now. We consequently have sufficient reason to hold that the liberalism of fear is not susceptible to the most common criticisms that have been made against it. Its negative focus can be seen to offer what we, following Edyvane, can refer to as a ‘preventative’ politics which can stand free from other ‘aspirational’ claims that we might make as liberals, even if political life as a whole is likely to be mixture of both kinds of enquiry. Furthermore, the liberalism of fear does not have to reject the idea that ‘aspirational’ politics is important because by committing itself to putting cruelty *first* it does not commit itself to an impoverished conception of liberalism that has nothing to say to the inhabitants of reasonably well-functioning stable constitutional democracies. The point, however, as Williams’s emphasis on the first political question attests, is that this is always a secondary enquiry.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that our belief in liberalism can be reflectively stable in the way that was outlined in Chapter Five if we take seriously the problem of legitimation

⁴⁹ As Andrew Sabl notes, *The Faces of Injustice* is an excellent indicator of how the negative and aspirational approaches diverge on this score, as Shklar holds that ‘injustice is as basic a political category as justice, that mainstream theory tends to take up the standpoint of injustice’s likely perpetrators rather than its victims, and that realising this will lead us to listen more carefully to the concrete, possibly non-theoretical claims of those whom a “well-ordered” society leaves out’: Sabl, ‘History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies’, in Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, eds. *Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 164.

under the conditions of modernity. What Williams refers to as the ‘negative narrative of the enlightenment’ gives us resources to confidently think – from the inside, as it were – that a liberal regime that combines ‘the rule of law with a liberty more extensive than in most earlier societies, a disposition to toleration, and a commitment to some kinds of equality’ (*TT*, p. 264) *makes sense* ‘now and around here’ as the most acceptable answer to the perennial first political question without recourse to the universalist (or objectivist) kind of metaethics which he insists we must renounce. I showed how Williams’s accounts of toleration and human rights can be seen as examples of how the liberalism of fear reorients our understanding of some of the central political concepts we currently employ, and upheld the claim that his is an attractive realist conception of liberalism. I then defended the liberalism of fear from three common criticisms that have been made against it by showing how they either trade on common misunderstandings of the position or endorse excessively uncharitable interpretations of it.

Concluding Remarks

I began this thesis with a quotation that expressed a common appraisal of Williams's philosophical contribution, namely that while it is illuminating insofar as it is critically devastating, it is disconcerting and largely negative as Williams failed to articulate a positive theoretical account of how we might make sense of our place in the world or of how philosophical argument might help to reform it for the better. I hope that by now it is clear why such judgements are mistaken. While Williams is critical of much contemporary moral and political philosophy, and is notably more sceptical about the powers of philosophical argument than many of his contemporaries, I have argued that his late works (of which his political essays are an important part) are best seen as contributing to his attempt to explain how we can vindicate certain values of ours and how they might have political purchase without adopting the misconceived argumentative strategies of the moralists to whom he objects. To this end I have argued that Williams's political thought is best read as an attempt to make ethical sense of politics, and as an attempt to explain how we can continue to affirm a kind of liberalism, without recourse to what he sees as the wishful thinking that plagues contemporary moral and political philosophy.

Williams's 'realism' should be interpreted accordingly as a dual commitment to both unmasking the ways in which much contemporary moral and political thought often falls prey to the dangers of wishful thinking and to considering how we can make sense of ethics and politics without succumbing to the temptations of inappropriate and unhelpful idealisation.¹ This is revealing because although Williams objects to the view that, at the most basic level, political theorists should place morality before politics and conceive of

¹ Indeed, Williams once described his life's work in terms of thinking about how we can 'make *some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can't have the idealized version of it': Williams, 'A Mistrustful Animal', p. 203.

political theory as a form of applied ethics, his political realism is not committed to the implausible view that we can think about politics without recourse to any moral claims or considerations whatsoever. Rather, he makes space for normative judgements but, by relating them in the first instance to the first political question and by refusing to see them in the terms that moralists encourage, ensures that his political realism cannot be subsumed by the applied ethics view. In showing why this is so, and in offering the first systematic critical examination of his political thought, which explains its importance for the burgeoning realist countermovement by engaging with his critics, I hope to have made an original contribution to current debate about the ideal of realism in political thought, and to have illustrated why Williams is a significant voice in contemporary political theory.

1. The Argument of the Thesis

I have argued that Williams makes important contributions to our understanding of political legitimacy (and the centrality of it to politics and political theory) and modern political values like human rights and toleration. He also offers a distinctive and compelling account of how we can construct historically and politically realistic conceptions of political values and of the dangers that moralised conceptions of political argument may have for democratic political life, which are orthogonal to much mainstream contemporary political theory. Underlying all of these claims is a deep philosophical commitment to reflecting on how we can make sense of our political convictions if we accept that we cannot appeal to a supreme source of moral value to offer an ultimate justification of them, which undergirds Williams's attempt to rescue liberalism from the untenable liberal moralism of many of his contemporaries.

In Chapter One I set out the philosophical underpinnings of his rejection of 'morality', showing that despite his aversion to philosophical system-building there was a

certain unity of purpose in his work, and outlined certain commitments that can be extracted from it regarding how we should do philosophy. In particular, I argued that in his latter works Williams was interested in exploring how we can continue to confidently use and employ various commitments of ours without the illusory underpinnings of morality.

In Chapter Two I turned to Williams's political realism by focusing on his conception of legitimacy. I argued that Williams articulates a coherent internal standard of political evaluation which gives us reason to hold that political theory should begin with an understanding of the distinctive character of politics in order to comprehend the goods that are internal to it. I then defended his conception of legitimacy from a variety of criticisms that have been articulated in the secondary literature and concluded that Williams's characterisation of the 'basic legitimization demand' shows that the central questions of political morality arise within politics. This discredits the understanding of the relationship between morality and political practice inherent in much contemporary political theory because it compromises the conceptions of *application* many contemporary political theorists endorse.

In Chapter Three I argued that in spite of the attractions of Williams's arguments about the centrality of a realist understanding of legitimacy, his political realism and the kind of political ethics pursued by some contemporary political philosophers are conceptually closer than most realists concede. I examined the extent to which his wider thought gives us reason to reject the work of political ethicists and argued that while there are some important differences between the two approaches there are more important similarities than most realists have hitherto noted. In the Appendix to this chapter I assessed the extent to which G.A. Cohen's claim that facts do not constrain the truths of political philosophy has significant implications for issue of realism in political philosophy. I argued that even if we conceive of political philosophy as a straightforwardly normative

activity, Cohen does not give us reason to think that the ultimate principles of political philosophy can be uncovered absent the sort of consideration about the platitudes of politics that political realists, like Williams, urge political philosophers to take seriously.

In Chapter Four I examined Williams's views about how we can *make sense* of the political situation in which we find ourselves. By engaging with his papers on liberty I argued that we can extract a 'realism constraint' to which we must attend when we construct political values, and defended Williams's understanding of this constraint from a variety of criticisms that contemporary political moralists are likely to make against it. I then spelled out some of the consequences Williams's arguments have for our understanding of the demands of democratic coexistence and the implications these have this has for our reflexive understanding of the role of political philosophy in democratic settings.

In the final two chapters I turned to Williams's endorsement of liberalism. I showed that in contrast to many of the other theorists who are classed as 'realists' and whose realism functions as part of a trenchant critique of liberalism, Williams's late political essays can profitably be read as being guided by the concern to offer a philosophically plausible interpretation and defence of liberalism itself. In Chapter Five I explained that despite his attack on the idea of a universal grounding of our ethical and political practices, Williams thinks that we can achieve a kind of confidence in some principled commitments as they need not rely on a set of illusory philosophical claims. In Chapter Six I detailed how this leads Williams to offer a justification of liberalism that is congruent with his adoption of a Nietzschean pessimism of strength. I then defended the liberalism of fear by rebuffing some of the more commonplace criticisms that are levelled against it.

2. Future Research Directions

I now want to very briefly note some ways in which Williams's approach might be taken forward in political theory by both highlighting which areas of enquiry now appear more pressing for political theorists to address and by outlining which of the issues he discusses require further elaboration.

First, while Williams's focus on the first political question is an important corrective to much contemporary political theory which sees justice as the first virtue of politics, more work is required to make better sense of the set of distinctively political goods, including security, order and trust, which he associates with answering the first question. Although there have been some important moves in this direction,² there is scope for more sustained philosophical reflection on these goods and more prescriptive work which realistically considers how they can be achieved 'now and around here'.

Second, more specific attention could be paid to the question of which forms of authority make sense 'now and around here' which go beyond Williams's purposefully abstract and indeterminate account. Some recent work explores the possibility of rehabilitating *modus vivendi* solutions to the problem of legitimacy and these are promising to the extent that they do not see deeply a moralised or principled consensus as a fundamental requirement of legitimacy. However, some of the existent discussions of *modus vivendi* are excessively sweeping and are in need of further refinement and much more detailed explanation.³ It is also worth noting that given the resolutely anti-universalistic implications of Williams's account of making sense, there is little reason to

² See for instance John Dunn's work on 'trust': 'Trust in the Politics of John Locke', in *Rethinking Modern Political Theory: Essays 1979–1983* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 34–54; 'Trust and Political Agency', in *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981–1989* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 26–44; and 'Trust', in *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 91–100, and Jeremy Waldron, *Torture, Terror and Trade-Offs: Philosophy for the White House* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. chs 2–6.

³ I have in mind here the *modus vivendi* liberalism that John Gray sets out in his *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000).

think that a general theoretical account of the conditions of a *modus vivendi* solution is going to be forthcoming, precisely because any fleshing out of what makes sense must be inherently local, as it must satisfy the subjects to whom it applies in ways that will, in actuality, make sense to them in the unique context in which they are made. Hence it seems that the resources marshalled by a relevantly wide *modus vivendi* solution are likely to differ sharply in different contexts. This suggests that what the conditions of a *modus vivendi* solution are in any setting is likely to be a question ‘that belongs to the level of fact, practice and politics’ (*IBWD*, p. 17), rather than in the domain of general theoretical enquiry.

Third, as I argued in Chapter Three, many realists have too hastily denigrated various tools that political ethicists employ (for instance, hypothetical models of agreement) that may be indispensable to the task alluded to above. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which such tools may be rehabilitated in a more realist spirit. Likewise, it would be fruitful to examine more fully how liberal states might better fulfil the task of making sense to wide numbers of their subjects without adopting the more moralised public-reason views favoured by Rawlsians and without forgetting the inevitability of political disagreement and the need to institutionally manage it without compromising a basic commitment to liberty. As I intimated in Chapter Two, Humean conceptions of allegiance may be an invaluable philosophical resource in this regard, as they might give us reason to hold that some of the problems inherent in contemporary debates about how political stability and legitimacy can be achieved are spurious to the extent that they rely on excessively rationalistic conceptions of what kind of agreement or consensus is required.⁴

Fourth, more work is required to explain how realist conceptions of moral

⁴ For a very thought provoking discussion see Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England* (Princeton, NJ and Woodstock, Oxon, Princeton University Press, 2012).

psychology and the centrality of a historical understanding relate to questions of political possibility. Some of the argument of Chapter Four is relevant to this question, but more needs to be said about how (if at all) political improvement might come about without us falling prey to the dangers of wishful thinking if Williams's conception of making sense is to have the progressive political potential he claims it does (*IBWD*, p. 15).⁵

Finally, there is scope for offering an account of a particular tradition of British political thought that has been running parallel to the high liberalism of much recent American political theory and which puts some of the realist concerns Williams focuses on at the centre of its understanding of politics. This tradition is marked by figures including Isaiah Berlin, Michael Oakeshott, Stuart Hampshire, John Dunn and John Gray, as well as Williams himself. While these thinkers focus on a diverse set of questions in moral and political philosophy and differ along various axes with regards to the nature of the prescriptions they endorse, there are several family resemblances that enable one to reconstruct their work so that it constitutes a formidable alternative to the dominant legalistic American paradigm in political theory. My suspicion is that focusing on a set of themes that characterise the work of this group, including their claims about value pluralism, their sceptical assessment of the action-guiding potential of abstract moral theories in politics, and their writings on the nature of political conflict and political judgement, is likely to yield a distinctively British conception of liberalism which addresses the political concerns discussed in this thesis in a more illuminating way than the high-liberalism espoused by many contemporary American political philosophers.

3. A Final Comment

Towards the end of *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams remarks that 'it may be very unobvious

⁵ For an effort to explore this further see Galston, 'Realism in Political Theory', pp. 400–7.

whether a story is hopeful ... or not' (*TT*, p. 267). Is Williams's political thought hopeful in any meaningful sense? In this thesis I have claimed it is insofar as it enables us to make some ethical sense of the political, and insofar as it gives *us* reason to continue to commit to liberalism once we exorcise the wish that we might achieve the kind of theoretical justification that Williams is adamant philosophy cannot secure. However, it is important to note that while it is hopeful in this sense, Williams gives us little reason to think that we should expect to argue liberalism's committed opponents into liberalism, precisely because the hope concerning the power of philosophical argument implicit in such an aspiration forgets that 'One's relations to other people's interests will be a matter of temperament' (*TT*, p. 190). This may strike some as a very disquieting and pessimistic conclusion. However, this lament misses the fact that Williams's approach can enable us to achieve a more realistic understanding of what makes sense to us, why it does so, and how the exigencies of politics and history condition these commitments. Moreover, given that, as Thomas Nagel memorably put it, 'we have always known that the world is a bad place',⁶ we should not be surprised that some people will continue to fervently disagree with us about which forms of political authority make sense 'now and around here', for reasons we may well consider ill-founded, unreasonable and even abhorrent. Rather than wishing away this unwelcome fact with an act of idealised philosophical theorising, as citizens who are confident in liberalism and who care about making the world a better place in its image, we should see this for what it is – a call to action, which is to say, a call to politics, without forgetting that this calling brings responsibilities of its own.

⁶ Thomas Nagel, 'War and Massacre', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1972), p. 144.

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