Part 1. Articles

Reflection and the Limits of Philosophy

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In this essay I briefly examine two aspects of Bernard Williams' thought, and argue that they are important in the attempt to give a unitary interpretation of his philosophical enterprise. These are the ideas that philosophy is an eminently reflexive activity, and the significance Williams recognised to the value of human beings considered as individuals. It is my contention that these two aspects were strongly interrelated in Williams' philosophical production. By focusing on them, Williams' philosophy proves to be a unitary and positive project, in spite of what some of his critics maintain, with clear limits, and a precise direction of enquiry which I believe deserves to be pursued further.

Just a Negative Philosopher?

Readers who are new to Bernard Williams are likely to feel disoriented upon first approaching his work, which appears to be at once extremely engaging and philosophically unsettling. What we find is a sparkling mind, a thinker who would take a line of reasoning to its extreme conclusions, who made the best use of the technical equipment of philosophy, and entertained constant exchange with its most eminent protagonists, past and present. But it is also apparent that Williams' thought eludes a univocal and systematic elucidation. The deeper one goes into his reflections, the more it seems as if Williams himself cuts the ground from under his readers' feet, suggesting that it is in the very nature of philosophy not to provide any firm point of reference. What seems to be missing is an "Archimedean point" (to use the efficacious expression Williams introduced in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* to deny the existence of any neutral justification of the ethical life) that will allow us to assess the balance of the issues at stake, and also to mark the boundaries of philosophy as a circumscribed and recognizable discipline (1985, ch. 2).[1]

In this sense, Williams appears to betray the expectation with which the analytic philosopher, as Williams regarded himself (1985, preface; 2003, 2006a), is usually met: to furnish an effective interpretive key that will bring clarity to our attempts at making sense of things. Analytic philosophy did present crucial strengths for Williams; after all,

> [i]n its insistence, at its best, on the values of unambiguous statement and recognizable argument; its patience; its lack of contempt for the familiar; its willingness to meet with the formal and natural sciences; its capacity for genuine and discussable progress – in all this, and despite its many often catalogued limitations, it remains the only real philosophy there is (2006a, p. 168).

But Williams also believed that analytic philosophy lacks certain specific characteristics which, even though they can be seen as opposed to each other, are often both put forward as its distinctive peculiarities. Firstly, analytic philosophy is presented as "being *higher-order*" (2003, p. 25), that is, as being able to conduct its investigations by occupying a "meta" position which is conceived as theoretically detached with respect to its matter of study. Secondly, analytic philosophy is frequently thought of as being in principle assimilable "to the aims, or at least to the manners, of the sciences" (2006b, p. 182).

Williams' distrust in the capacity of analytic philosophy to exercise any sovereign or scientific status has earned him the label of a "destructive" or "negative" philosopher (Chappell, 2010). Williams, that is, may be seen as very good at bringing to the surface the internal fallacies of philosophical reasoning, and at checkmating those who believe in the constructive powers of philosophy. However, he would to critics be unable to propose any convincing alternative theoretical edifice to the debris produced by his brilliant and razor-edged acumen. However, a closer look reveals this to be too simplistic a view. In what follows I shall suggest a possible interpretive line, to be developed more fully, to attempt a unitary reading of Williams' philosophical enterprise by referring to its intrinsic reflexive features, and to the uninterrupted interest Williams showed in the value of individuals, throughout his entire career.

As I shall argue, notwithstanding his continual emphasising of the "limits of philosophy" and of its incapacity as an independent branch of knowledge to answer by itself to the basic Socratic question "how one should live" (1985, p. 1), Williams was not the inconclusive theoretician he is frequently portrayed as. His thinking discloses a uniformity of purpose and a methodological direction which I think are worth investigating, in the hope of providing a convincing starting-point from which both to perceive Williams' work as a coherent whole, and to stress its originality in the current philosophical landscape.

Reflection and History

For Williams, the evident strength of doing philosophy in the analytical tradition was that of proceeding according to a precise and reliable method of framing philosophical reasons and arguments. In doing this, analytic philosophy appears to be committed to the central value which a proper way of doing philosophy must follow, that of truthfulness. However, such a rigorous, i.e. truthful, way of doing philosophy (to which Williams dedicated an entire book, *Truth and Truthfulness* [2002]), is not the offshoot of any constitutive characteristic of philosophy, which is peculiar to it and elevates it above the rest of human knowledge and practices. On further inspection, this higher theoretical status of philosophy turns out to be just a chimera, since philosophy itself, be it analytical or otherwise, appeared to Williams to all effects to be compromised with the objects of its enquiry.

Williams seemed to think, in other words, that on his or her part, the philosopher is in no position to assume an external perspective from which to emit his or her verdict on reality, since he or she is fatally embedded within reality, and philosophical investigation is necessarily an activity to be conducted from within those bounds. This doesn't deprive philosophy of its capacity of explaining and giving proper sense. In fact, philosophy can obtain for Williams the argumentative efficacy we seek by developing a specific form of truthfulness, one which displays the two basic virtues of Accuracy and Sincerity. These are the virtues whereby "you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe" (2002, p. 11). But what is quintessential to the practice of philosophy is that it comprehends an honest and serious exercise of the imagination. "[B]eing soberly truthful does not exclude,"

Williams stated in "Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look," "but may actually demand, the imagination" (2003, p. 34). As he clarified in "What Might Philosophy Become?," "philosophy will not speak to our concerns unless it sounds right, unless the manner of the work itself expresses what the writer feels is living or alternatively derivative and phony, and that is likely to be an imaginative achievement" (2006c, p. 212). So this confusion of different levels, that of the *explanans* and that of the *explanandum*, is in fact only apparent. It corresponds instead to a precise and positive way of conceptualising philosophy and philosophical activity, which Williams presented in "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" as "part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves" (2006b, p. 182). Philosophy, that is to say, reveals itself to be an eminently reflexive activity; reflexive in the sense that the principles with which philosophy engages in its pursuit of sense enjoy no privileged status, but are instead the product of the reality to which they are applied.

Williams' point is that whereas natural science may well be guided by the ideal of an "Absolute Conception of the World" in its attempt to get things right and describe the world "as it is in itself," or "as it is anyway" (2006b, p. 184; 1978, 1985), in doing philosophy this same ideal may lead us dangerously astray. This is because from the viewpoint of philosophy "there simply is no conception of the world which is not conceptualized in some way or another," since "when we reflect on our conceptualisation 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" (2006b, p. 185).

In turn, this inescapability from a conceptual dimension fundamentally depended, for Williams, on the fact that philosophy simply cannot be conceived separately from an historical consideration of the notions it makes use of, and the main problem of much contemporary analytic philosophy is recognized by Williams to be precisely the lack of any historical consciousness of its conceptual categories. As becomes clearer especially in the collection of essays entitled *The Sense of the Past* (2006d), the study of philosophy conflates with that of the history of philosophy; in other words, "philosophy itself must involve more than abstract argument, and [...] it must engage itself in history. In this

and in other respects, philosophy cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do" (2002, p. 39).

The outcome of this synthesis is a form of critical reflexivity which presents two interconnected aspects. On the one hand, our present philosophical conceptions are continuously brought into question by Williams in the light of those from the past, so that an increasingly aware and deeper comprehension of the ideas by which we observe reality is reached. On the other hand, conceptions from the past are never seen by Williams from an atemporal point of view, "as though they had appeared in last month's issue of *Mind*" (2006e, p. 258; see also 2006f, p. 344). On the contrary, "[w]hat we must do is to use the philosophical materials that we now have to hand, together with historical understanding, in order to find in, or make from, the philosophy of the past a philosophical structure that will be strange enough to help us to question our present situation and the received picture of the tradition, including those materials themselves" (2006e, p. 264).

The upshot is a renovated perspective which far from being just mocking and dismissive toward analytic philosophy, takes instead the form of a programmatic manifesto:

> the reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding. Here history helps philosophical understanding, or is part of it. 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, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry. (2006b, p. 192)

Thus, for Williams philosophy surely consists in a rigorous conceptual analysis, but this cannot be obtained in the absence of a consciousness of the historical dimension of philosophical activity. In turn, this activity unfolds as a reflexive scrutiny to which the practice of philosophy submits itself in the course of time. Eventually, this scrutiny involves an effort of imagination that, as I will hold, calls directly upon human beings as single individuals.

Reflection and Individuality

Williams' intellectual curiosity was wide-ranging, and went well beyond the boundaries of pure philosophical speculation. One thinks for example of his interest in classical Greek philology, or of his passion for opera (1993, 2006g). Nonetheless, he was eminently a moral philosopher, and his idea of the reflexive nature of philosophy visibly appears in his treatment of ethics. In the course of its history and through to this day, the ambition of much philosophical ethics has been to devise a theory for the resolution of ethical dilemmas. This would be a method which, even if it were not to have a substantial effect on the conduct of individuals, might still aspire to validity in affording definitive and coherent justification to morality. This has been the aspiration in particular of the two "methods of ethics" provided by Kantianism and Utilitarianism, both of which had Williams as one of their most intransigent critics. In both of these great ethical systems, "ethics" has been translated in terms of "morality," *i.e.* in terms of a philosophical, principle-based structure organising the good and the right, put forward to give some legitimating order to an otherwise purportedly chaotic ethical realm (1985). Williams was persuaded that any such project was destined to failure.

That disbelief is clearly expressed in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, but can be found in almost all of Williams' work, from the papers collected in *Problems of the Self*, *Moral Luck*, *Making Sense of Humanity*, and *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, to other works such as *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," the introduction to *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, and *Shame and Necessity* (1972, 1973a, 1973h, 1981a, 1995a, 2005a; Williams & Sen, 1982). Unwilling to seal himself off within the confines of any doctrine that aspired to stand as the final word, Williams never relented in his scepticism towards the authoritative claims with which moral philosophy handles the ambiguities that preside over the ethical sphere. One is able to appreciate the meaning Williams attributed to ethical thinking in the light of this fundamental distrust; whereas it cannot have absolute validity, ethics gains its full significance when it places the person in his or her concrete singularity at the centre of its concerns. The point of departure for ethics must be the individual being, conceived as irremediably finished, embodied, and projected into contingent circumstances that do not

appear to be structured according to any recognisable and coherent order, but are only governed by chance. The more we become able to appreciate the tragic essence of this condition, the more our value as individuals is amplified.

Such an interest in the individuality of people stands as the leitmotiv of many of Williams' favourite ethical themes, as his various examples make clear. One thinks of his recognition of the centrality of the bodily aspect and mortal nature of human beings in the definition of their personal identities (see "Personal Identity and Individuation," "Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity," "Imagination and the Self," "The Self and the Future," "Are Persons Bodies?," "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality" [1973b, 1973c, 1973d, 1973e, 1973f, 1973g]). There is then the significance Williams attributed to notions such as character and moral luck for the appreciation of these identities in properly moral terms (see "Persons, Character and Morality" and "Moral Luck" [1981b, 1981c]). This concern for the individuality of people also stands in the background of his famous objection in "A Critique of Utilitarianism", that the theory did not give proper weight to personal integrity (1973h, pp. 108-118). Moreover, Williams' idea that all reasons are internal and not external, and have to be taken back to the "subjective motivational set" of the agents, can again be understood in line with a fundamental solicitude for the uniqueness of persons (see "Internal and External Reasons" and "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame" [1981e, 1995b. See also 1995f, pp. 186-94; 2001]).

The relevance of individuals then appears in all its seriousness in Williams' more specifically political writings, collected in his *In the Beginning Was the Deed*. Much of his observations there are against those forms of "political moralism" (2005b, p. 2), (epitomized by many modern Kantian liberal theories, for example that of Rawls) which for Williams do not possess a proper consciousness of the inevitably historical origins of their normative claims. The result of this ingenuity is that they miss the important truth, whereby the central, pre-theoretical problem in political philosophy is to deal with "the 'first' political question" of "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the condition of cooperation" (2005b, 3). Only by giving a convincing answer to this primarily "Hobbesian" constraint is it possible for Williams to put a check on the violence some human beings can arbitrarily exercise on other human beings, and therefore guarantee the favourable conditions in which the value of truthfulness can fully flourish (2002, ch. 10).

Given this, a promising way to see Williams as advancing a positive philosophical program is to recognise, alongside reflexivity, the full importance of what he mentioned as "formal individualism." As Williams explains in "Making Sense of Humanity," formal individualism consists of the idea whereby "there are ultimately no actions that are not the actions of individual agents, [and] the actions of an individual are explained in the first place by the psychology of that individual" (1995d, pp. 85-86). In "Formal and Substantial Individualism" Williams noted that "'formal individualism' roughly says that intentional action is individual, and that its explanation involves a consciousness, potential or actual, that refers to the agent" (1995e, p. 126). So formal individualism was primarily presented by Williams as a methodological approach to human psychology. But I believe formal individualism can be taken as a wider underlying criterion running through the whole of his philosophical production. For his individualism and the reflexivity which emerges from his general philosophical approach can be seen as the two sides of the same coin. In fact, if it makes any sense to talk about philosophy as a reflexive activity, and if this implies a serious use of the human imagination, then philosophical practice has to be understood as "a particular kind of reflexive sensitivity" (2006a, p. 167) exercised by single individuals in their efforts to freely and progressively clarify their condition of specific human beings placed in contingent socio-historical realities.

Hence, it is in ethical (and political) reflection that for Williams the "limits of philosophy" become most clearly manifest. Conversely, for philosophy to acquire some degree of pertinence to our condition, it has to be conceived in the terms of a "humanistic discipline," as a form of reflexive historical understanding of the human condition, which is the same as saying that philosophy is perpetually engaged in the process of redefining the meaning of its propositions and of its own history. This was a re-elaboration that in Williams' later philosophy (especially in *Truth and Truthfulness*) was to assume the form of a peculiar genealogy of concepts.

Giving his preference to an idea of philosophy that never loses sight of the domain of human existence,

Williams is in company with giants of thought, such as Aristotle, David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche. This might give rise to the temptation to read Williams as nothing more than one of their epigoni. As a matter of fact, at times Williams appears to be a follower of Hume, especially if one considers the "sub-Humean model" concerning the nature of internal reasons he presented in "Internal and External Reasons" (1981d, p. 102). At other times he seems to have something in common with neo-Aristotelians, at least in relation to his antitheoretical spirit, for which he has been catalogued among the exponents of contemporary Virtue Ethics (Crisp & Slote, 1997). Lastly, his pursuing a "vindicatory" genealogy (2002, pp. 36-38), and the preference he granted to a "minimalist" moral psychology sheds what can be seen as a Nietzschean light on his philosophical convictions (see "Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology," 1995c). Williams was surely indebted to the teachings of all these authors, and many traces of their influences can be encountered in his writings. Nonetheless, he remained a profoundly autonomous thinker, whose originality definitively deserves, and still has yet, to be fully appreciated.[2]

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations refer to the works of Bernard Williams.
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