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A project of "impure" enquiry—Williams' historical self-consciousness

Miranda Fricker

Department of Philosophy, New York University, New York, New York, USA

Correspondence
Miranda Fricker, Department of Philosophy, New York University, 3-5 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, USA.
Email: miranda.fricker@nyu.edu

Abstract

Bernard Williams' philosophy is shaped by a distinctive and abiding interest in the borderlands between Philosophy and History. He famously considers moral philosophy, and particularly moral theory, to over-step the border that marks the real 'limits' of the discipline, and in his later work he explicitly advances the idea of doing 'impure' philosophy, by which he meant philosophy that mixed itself with history. By examining the complex impression left on Williams' historical self-consciousness by his engagements with two very different figures in the history of philosophy, namely Descartes and Wittgenstein, I will explore a number of ways in which philosophy and history are closely intertwined for Williams. This will draw out the positive vision he modelled for us of 'impure' philosophy—a philosophical style he took to contribute to nurturing philosophy as a humanistic discipline.

The fate…of the theoretical issue of objectivity reminds us in one way of the impurity of philosophy; if it is to have anything to say about that question, it will have to address a lot more than philosophy.

"Saint-Just's Illusion," Williams, 1995, p. 148

1 | *STYLES* IN PHILOSOPHY

In this year's Mark Sacks Lecture, which it is my privilege to deliver, we honor a philosopher who did perhaps more than any other to promote, in a lasting way, shared conversation between the often mutually suspicious traditions of English-language philosophy on the one hand, and European philosophy on the other. Accordingly, in my lecture today I would like to share some thoughts about another philosopher who considered that traditional mutual

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suspicion quite unfounded: Bernard Williams. I was particularly pleased, then, to learn that it was Williams who supervised Sacks' doctoral thesis at Cambridge—something I hadn't known before preparing this lecture. It's no interpretive leap to reflect that Williams would have greatly valued and admired Sacks' achievements in this matter of cross-cultural intellectual *entente*. Williams found tiresome and essentially false the alleged great division of philosophical cultures, regarding it as largely a matter of style rather than content.

Philosophical style admittedly goes deep for Williams, in ways we shall explore, but not "deep" in a way that might properly prevent conversation between different philosophical camps, whose questions and problems are after all substantially shared. Williams—who had a wry gift for combining levity and acuity in a single philosophical remark—famously observed that dividing philosophy into "analytic" and "Continental" involved "a cross-classification between the methodological and the geographical: it is like classifying cars as Japanese and front-wheel drive" (Williams, 2006a "What Might Philosophy Become" p. 201). Moreover, the cross-classification is "doubly unfortunate," since the geography—as he reminded us Michael Dummett had pointed out—isn't even historically accurate, as some of the greatest progenitors of analytic philosophy "came from the German-speaking world" (p. 201). In intellectual culture, an active sense of *them* and *us* is rarely helpful, but moreover this particular error is grist to Williams' mill as a cautionary example of how a lack of historical sense can easily lead us astray.

Williams died on June 10, 2003—20 years ago, uncannily almost to the day as I deliver this lecture. It is hard to believe that two decades have since passed, given how present he remains in our philosophical conversations. It is poignant that we must now reluctantly begin to think of his work as part of the fabric of the *history* of our discipline. Doing so is, I find, far from straightforward, not least because there are a number of special challenges in doing exegetical work on Williams that stem from his deceptively conversational style of writing, and his avoidance of those -isms that might have emboldened one to fix him in this or that philosophical mold.[1] Of course, that was precisely why he avoided them, as he preferred to proceed in a more piecemeal and suggestive fashion. I suspect this is one of the features of his style that means his work will endure, outliving this or that vogueish taxonomy of positions.

Aside from these features of his style, another of the difficulties in starting to think of Williams' work as part of the history of our subject is simply a matter of personal philosophical history. I knew him as a teacher, since like Mark Sacks I too had the good fortune of having Williams as one of my supervisors for my doctoral thesis, albeit a decade later in Williams' career, when he was now at Oxford rather than Cambridge.[2] Although one can engage perfectly well in exegesis of the work of a living philosopher, as we often do, in cases where the philosopher whose work one hopes to interpret was relatively recently such a central and lively contributor to the conversation, it can feel like it is forever too soon to be taking up the focused exegetical stance. One may for this reason resist for a while, uneasy with the prospect of actively pressing them into the past, as if in fear of prematurely stilling an animated body of thought.

The impulse to avoid active participation in any such process of intellectual stilling is particularly acute in relation to a philosopher like Williams, whose thinking and conversation and writing were somehow essentially animated: agile, funny, erudite, candid, rather free with delicious anecdote or ironical comment. (Perhaps this explains why so few of the photographs on the dust jackets ever seem to actually look like him—they are too still.) Williams' skeptical and sometimes satirical mood when it came to certain schools of thought in moral philosophy is not a superficial feature of his philosophical style, for it speaks of a Voltairian instinct to puncture that which struck him as misguided because overblown, or moralistic, or phony, or "academic" in the pejorative sense of detached from the lively reality of human culture. This spirited sense of the human personality of different schools of thought in moral philosophy, and an occasionally mischievous stroke of the caricaturist's pen when it came to representing them on the page, was a quintessential feature of his philosophical style, whether he was portraying the moral purism of the Kantian "morality system," the petty moral accountancy of act utilitarianism, or the "government house" forms of rule utilitarianism whose moral colonialism he found "deluded."[3]

If this spirited skepticism was a characteristic of his philosophical style, we might ask how did it square with the attitudinally neutral style of modern analytic philosophy and its penchant for certain kinds of purity? Williams' views about the analytical style are instructive. He found that it had a number of important virtues. First, a carefulness regarding matters of accuracy (an epistemic virtue which he later cast, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, as one of the two

cardinal "virtues of truth"[4]); second, a sound aspiration to conceptual clarity; third, a penchant for somewhat plain prose, though in this connection he also noted the tendency for excessive technicality, along with an occasional self-congratulatory narrowness about what philosophical clarity can involve. In his essay "What Might Philosophy Become?," Williams takes up this last critical point and expands upon it throughout, describing the main purpose of the paper by declaring: "what I want to call in question is the idea that there is a style which defines fairly clearly and uniformly across the range of philosophy what counts as clarity and precision and getting it right, and that this style has been defined by the typical procedures of analytic philosophy" (Williams, 2006a, p. 203). He found this particular one-size-fits-all assumption moreover to manifest a *scientism* that he abhorred.

He called this the "scientism of style"— a species of purism he characterized particularly in relation to the idea that the *form* of a philosophical text makes no contribution to its philosophical *content*. Finding this to be quite false, he entreated us to consider the writings of key figures in the broadly analytic tradition and ask ourselves whether they can reasonably be read as putting forward content wholly independently from features of style. He put the point as a rhetorical question:

> When we turn, in particular, to moral and political philosophy, and we look at the canon of past philosophy that even analytic philosophy agrees on, does it look like this? Plato, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, indeed John Stuart Mill, not to go into more disputed territory: do we really suppose that their contributions to the subject are independent of the imaginative and expressive powers of their work?
>
> (Williams, 2006a, 205)

In contrast, Williams argued, what is needed in philosophy is not merely a focus on whether or not the content is accurate and true, but whether it "*rings* true" (Williams, 2006a, p. 206), and this question calls upon style in the sense described, of employing techniques of persuasive power and imagination to constitute the philosophical vision as a compelling one.[5]

In order to ring true and convince the reader of its argumentative force, a philosophical text may, quite properly and ordinarily, appeal to metaphors, thought experiments, and other fictional scenarios, as a proper part of its arguments for the picture it aims to imprint on its reader's mind. This is actually, if we're honest about it, the normal mode of analytic philosophy, whose canonical texts might invoke, in epistemology for instance, the captivating Cartesian figure of the Evil Demon, or the brain-in-a-vat scenarios dreamed up by Harman or Putnam; or in moral philosophy for example, the many and fabulous trolley problem scenarios conjured up by Foot or Kamm. We might reflect too on the power simply of metaphor, for instance, in Rorty's attempt to smash the idea of philosophy as a "mirror of nature." The thoroughly fictional scenario of the State of Nature is another literary-philosophical conceit that involves the reader's imagination in explicit and inexplicit ways. And this particular example reminds us—if I may digress for a moment—that part of analytic philosophy's denial about its own uses of socially loaded metaphors and other imaginative mechanisms long had the effect of actively obscuring the sometimes crudely gendered nature of those imaginary tropes, to name just one dimension of imaginative exclusion. I vividly remember, when I was a graduate student in the early 90s, hearing Michèle Le Doeuff talk about Hobbes' State of Nature, and how the *philosophical imaginary* he employed seemed to picture people—all apparently ready-made adult men—sprouting spontaneously like mushrooms from the ground overnight, so that the women who in any halfway realistic imagining would have given birth to them and nurtured them to sustain their lives were not imagined as co-populating the State of Nature at all, but at best implicitly imagined as part of its natural resources (Le Doeuff, 1990).

Williams, I believe, understood these subterfuges—or he was ready to. One might characterize them as tricks of the purist fantasy that philosophical works are not *texts*, their argumentative structures being imagined as free-floating from all that being a text implies, such as the socially and historically situated author, an imagined reader with certain specific social characteristics, and then some real readers too, who may or may not resemble the imagined one. In "What Might Philosophy Become?," Williams gave a brief but stout defense of feminist philosophy

against Warnock's comments in the preface to her 1996 edited collection, *Women Philosophers* (Warnock, 1996), where she echoed a standard analytic philosophical trope of the time, asserting the alleged impossibility of feminist philosophy. In a nutshell, she wrote that philosophy as such addressed human universals, and feminism as such did not, *ergo* there can be no feminist philosophy. Williams wrote of this entrenched, and to my mind self-deceiving piece of purism: "There is a rather rapid reply to this argument in more or less its own terms—that among things which are humanly universal are the sorts of practices and attitudes that are the concern of feminist philosophy" (Williams, 2006a, p. 211). Quite.[6]

Williams practised what he preached when it came to the literary form of our philosophical writing sometimes contributing to its intellectual message. A moment's reflection quickly provides examples: his use of the State of Nature in *Truth and Truthfulness*, his invocation of the fictional Gauguin's moral luck, his dilemmas of moral integrity where the protagonist might be a botanist on an expedition or a research scientist facing an impossible choice. I have been suggesting that this mingling of form and content, this interweaving of argumentative structure and imaginative attitudinal color in his writing, constitutes a first important dimension of impurity in his philosophy—which he self-consciously embraced, as opposed to doing it while pretending to some fantasized pure persuasion of reasons. But let's now ask what, if anything, we might find in Williams' style that is especially pertinent to his lasting fascination specifically with the borderlands of philosophy and history?[7] In order to explore this question, let's take as our starting point his conception of the history of philosophy—his conception, that is, of the very fabric into which his own writing must now gradually be woven. Doing so will not only lead us to the borderlands we wish to explore, it will also enable us to ground our exploration firmly in Williams' own conception of the history of philosophy.

In the Preface to his 1978 book, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Williams contrasted the history of ideas with the history of philosophy. The first sort of endeavor focuses on the work considered in its own historical context, and aims to reconstruct, albeit inevitably through a veil of textual indeterminacies, what it meant at the time. For this sort of enterprise, the central interpretive question is "What did it mean *then*?" He describes such a project as proceeding "horizontally" through time, being first and foremost one of historical enquiry, so that the genre of the resulting study is, as he puts is, "unequivocally history" (Williams, 1978, p. 9). Naturally, the history of philosophy also focuses on *the work* itself, and again considers its significance to be under-determined by its own time, but recognizes in this an opportunity to creatively uncover what the work can mean to us in the present. For this sort of enterprise, the central interpretive question is "What does it mean *now*?"[8] Williams' study of Descartes' philosophy firmly self-identified as taking this latter approach, and he described his project as preferring "the direction of rational reconstruction of Descartes' thought" (Williams, 1978, p. 10). In this, he was a modernist, not only as a matter of scholarly focus but also on account of the fact that his approach to Descartes' text exemplified the energetic modernist spirit of historically self-conscious creativity in the now.[9] I hope that his embrace of this robust modernist attitude may transfer to us a certain aesthetic permission to rationally reconstruct Williams' work in similar spirit, and to use the historical self-consciousness that it bequeaths us as a way of augmenting our own sense of the past, as one that is coming to contain Williams' philosophy.

We have seen that Williams' conception of the history of philosophy was as a rational reconstruction that contributes to a conversation in the present, free-spirited but disciplined by the obligation to remain carefully accurate regarding the facts of the historical work. In this conception, we may recognize a two-tier structure. One of basic and epistemically plain facts in the first tier, overlayed by intrinsically contestable interpretive activity in the second. This two-tier model of interpretation was a constant in Williams' philosophical imagination. Having put it forward in the Descartes book as his conception of what he was doing with Descartes' texts, it received at last its fullest expression in his final monograph, *Truth and Truthfulness*, no longer specifically in relation to the history of philosophy, but rather in relation to the discipline of history quite generally. There the two-tier structure is how he pictured the whole enterprise of truthful historical interpretation and explanation. He argued that history must rely on a "chronicle" of events—that is, a series of events ordered in time but without causal relations or explanatory structure of any other kind (Williams, 2002, p. 238). One might speculate that many of the items in such a chronicle would be what he had earlier introduced as "plain truths" (2002, pp. 45–53). Facts which are epistemically plain, not in the sense of

necessarily being simple or immediately perceptible facts, but in the sense of being evidentially plain in the context. At any rate, on Williams' conception, history proceeds with a series of agreed event-facts in chronological order, but then the interpretive business of history gets started, positing causal and explanatory priorities and orderings, thereby already catapulting us into the realm not of truth—for there can be no single historical truth—but rather of *truthfulness*. As he expressed the point:

> …there is no such thing as "the truth" about the historical past, though as with the universe or Caesar there are many truths about it… [This] means that while we must demand that interpretations of the past should tell us the truth, in the sense that they should not lie or mislead, what we need them for is not to tell us something called "the truth about the past." We need them to be truthful, and to make sense of the past—to us.
>
> (Williams, 2002, pp. 257–258)

In this way, Williams' conception of history of philosophy now shows up as all of a piece with his conception of history quite generally. They have in common a two-tier structure: a first tier of plain truths constituting the historical "chronicle" or, alternatively, the philosophical text to be interpreted; and a second tier at which some plurality of truthful and essentially contestable interpretations is generated. This two-tier structure, considered as a general model for philosophical interpretation, strikes me as yet another example of a kind of impurity in philosophy that Williams explicitly championed. When it comes to philosophical interpretation, there is no one true story.

The project of *Truth and Truthfulness* marks the culmination of Williams' conception of the intertwined relation of history and philosophy, and in particular what this can mean for philosophical method. The method of the book combines them, and so stands out—as does his brilliant exploration of ancient Greek ethical culture in *Shame and Necessity*—as an exemplar of what impure philosophy can be like. I should make clear that, unlike Nietzsche's genealogy, Williams' State of Nature scenario with which *Truth and Truthfulness* begins is not itself one iota historical, but a thoroughly and self-consciously *fictional abstraction*, which hands over to vignettes of intellectual history only after the fact, once the universally necessary proto virtues of Accuracy and Sincerity have been established in the State of Nature. Williams' distinctively *hybrid* State-of-Nature-genealogy combines in one philosophical method the a priori speculative pursuit of universal necessity that is so habitual in analytic philosophy, with the historical exploration of contingent development that is so distinctively characteristic of the European tradition.

The definitive agenda of the book, and in an obvious way the historical dimension of its method, is Nietzsche's. Williams was entirely explicit about that. The book's animating concern is our fundamental interest in achieving truthfulness with ourselves concerning the nature of our value commitments. *Truth and Truthfulness* is an experiment in how far our deepest ethical commitments (and in particular our commitment to truthfulness itself) can withstand transparency about their instrumental origins.[10] For this reason, and many others besides, Nietzsche's presence will be felt throughout my lecture today, though only as a specter at the feast, for space demands that we reserve the riot of impurities served up in Nietzsche's genealogical text for another occasion. I propose instead to read Williams—to rationally reconstruct him, I suppose—in relation to two very different philosophers: Descartes and Wittgenstein. I find this a surprisingly fruitful combination for accessing some of Williams' deepest motivating commitments, and ultimately his conception of what philosophy needs to be. My hope is that by retracing the ways in which these two historical figures shaped Williams' thought, rather less explicitly than the way Nietzsche did, some previously hidden contours of his own historical self-consciousness as a philosopher will show themselves to us.

2 | DESCARTES AND WILLIAMS' "ABSOLUTE CONCEPTION"

In a late essay, Williams said: "Unselfconscious modernism is a contradiction in terms" (2006b p. 120).[11] I have so far suggested that Williams—a classicist by first training, and an ancient scholar whose philosophical understanding of

the Homeric imagination was second to none—presented as a modernist in at least three ways. One was his literarily self-conscious attitude to producing a philosophical text, and the insistence that if philosophy was to "ring true" to its readers it had better make more honest use of the fact that form can contribute to content. Another was his self-consciously bold rationally reconstructive stance regarding the practice of history of philosophy. And the third—now using "modernist" in the more simply historical sense—was that he had written a scholarly book about a philosopher of the early modern period. This last was mentioned only in passing, so let me now take up this aspect of his modernism and ask: What did Williams take from Descartes' "project of pure enquiry" that shaped his own thinking?

The first thing I would like to mention about the Descartes book, but will quickly set aside, is that in it Williams explores the (hardly Cartesian) idea that the concept of knowledge naturally arises in a very basic human social situation of needing to gain information from others: Who can tell me whether *p*? (pp. 37–47 and passim[12]). Williams himself did not further elaborate this idea until the final stage of his career, some years after Craig had produced his immaculate monograph *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, which offered a "practical explication" of the concept of knowledge using (as Craig makes clear) the same starting conception (Craig, 1990). A decade or so after that, when Williams was writing *Truth and Truthfulness*, it was Craig's epistemic State of Nature that he used to ground the project. The point I wish to bring out here is simply that the seed-thought for *Truth and Truthfulness* was already sown in the Descartes book. And this presents us with a salient example of what a surprisingly synchronous thinker Williams was, in that the arc of his whole philosophy over time can seem to be already contained, prism-like, in any suitably chunky moment of it.[13]

However, it is Williams' underlying conception of mind and world that I wish to focus on for present purposes. This conception is drawn far more directly from Descartes' own thinking, and it is anchored in the idea of "the absolute conception of the world." Williams diagnoses Descartes' skeptical interrogation of knowledge as indicating his commitment to a basic idea: namely, that if we have knowledge, then it is at some level knowledge of what is there *anyway*. Knowledge, that is, of something mind-independent—albeit *chez* Descartes, ultimately guaranteed by a benevolent God. This is represented as implicitly driving Descartes' sense that the category "knowledge" has an intrinsically problematical character conducive to skeptical anxiety. Williams describes this anxiety as stemming from:

> …a very basic thought, that if knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed (except for the special case where the reality known happens itself to be some psychological item) independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there *anyway*. One might suppose this thought to be incontestable, but its consequences can seem to be both demanding and puzzling.
>
> (Williams, 1978, p. 64)

Demanding and puzzling indeed.[14] In a natural progression of propositions that Williams finds to be recurrent in Western thought, he rehearses the idea that if A and B each have some representation of a patch of the world, where these are both items of knowledge, then there must be some more inclusive representation in which A and B and their different representations both feature, and which explains how these differing items of knowledge are related. Individuals (or groups) with different color vision would be a case in point, where the more inclusive representation reveals what it is about the different parties' genes (as per the typical case) that explains their cognitive differences. This process can, as he says, be iterated, and the maximally inclusive conception of the world as containing what is there *anyway* plus all knowledge-representations of it, related coherently to one another, *is* the absolute conception of the world. As he expressed it: "The absolute conception should explain, or at least make it possible to explain, how the more local representations of the world can come about—it is this that would enable us to relate them to each other, and to the world as it is independently of them" (Williams, 1978, pp. 245–246).

To be sure, at this point Williams is primarily presenting something he finds implicit in Descartes' view rather than expounding his own. On the other hand, it is clear that Williams finds compelling some, only slightly slimmed

down, version of the absolute conception discerned in Descartes's project of radical doubt. Indeed, he says that almost as much is "involved in the distinction between primary and secondary qualities" (1978, p. 246) understood so that it is only primary qualities that "characterize the material world as it really is." And he adds, "I believe that these ideas are not incoherent, and have some faith that they are correct. But certainly they involve extensive intellectual commitments, not easy to fulfil" (1978, p. 246). Later, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams employs his own idea of the absolute conception—one liberated both from Descartes' condition of absolute certainty (1978, p. 247) and also from what Williams dismissed as the "positivist fantasy" of a "cumulative, convergent, self-vindicating unified science of man and nature" (1978, p. 302). The version of the absolute conception he advanced there, however, is clearly still an evolution of the idea first discerned in the Cartesian engagement with the preconditions of knowledge.

In the *Ethics and the Limits* discussion, Williams' purpose was no longer to problematize the concept of knowledge, but rather to emphasize and develop a more general positive metaphysical and epistemological picture, which we might cast as a kind of perspectivalism (with apologies for the superimposed –ism[15]). At any rate, on this issue his main purpose by this time was to advance an ethical cognitivism according to which we can know many perspectival things—for instance, that the grass is green, or the action cruel—by employing concepts and required aspects of sensibility which are more or less local, more or less perspectival. His strategy is to disaggregate: we should stop talking about knowledge *en masse* as if it related mind to world in a uniform way, and instead allow that some kinds of knowledge are more perspectival than others. Metaphysically and epistemologically, he effectively posits a continuum rather than a dualism, and he arrives at this continuum of perspectives as the way out of an apparent dilemma, which he formulates as follows:

> On the one hand, "the world" may be characterized in terms of our current beliefs about what it contains; it is a world of stars, people, grass, or tables. When "the world" is taken in this way…our conception of the world as the object of our beliefs can do no better than repeat the beliefs we take to represent it. If, on the other hand, we try to form some idea of a world that is prior to any description of it, the world that all systems of belief and representation are trying to represent, then we have an empty notion of something completely unspecified and unspecifiable. So either way we fail to have a notion of "the world" that will do what is required of it.
>
> (Williams, 1985, p. 138)

But the dilemma is only apparent, for Williams next offers a third way, a way out of the impasse of choosing either a conception of the world that is a mere function of our beliefs or, alternatively, a conception of a world whose radical independence renders it wholly unreachable in cognition. Instead, he observes:

> Each side of this dilemma takes all our representations of the world together… But there is a third and more helpful possibility, that we should form a conception of the world that is "already there" in terms of some but not all of our beliefs and theories. … We can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim *to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities*. The resultant picture of things, if we can carry through this task, can be called the "absolute conception" of the world.
>
> (1985, pp. 138–139; italics added)

In this switch to (what I find to be) a new use for the phrase "absolute conception" he moves from the previously maximally inclusive use—a conception that contains *all* the features of the world, *and* all our representations of them, coherently related to one another—to an apparently minimalist use—a conception that contains only those features of the world that find representation in our concepts and beliefs that are maximally non-perspectival, non-local, or non-"peculiar," to use another term he often employed in this connection. As I tend to think of it, this more minimal

absolute conception will represent only primary qualities (though this is probably best treated as a rough approximation only, given the complexities of the primary-secondary distinction[16]). At any rate, he seems to be switching to a use of "absolute conception" as a conception of a sub-stratum of the world that is maximally mind-independent, and to which we become implicitly committed as soon as we entertain the idea of knowledge, no matter how peculiar or local the perspective of that knowledge—for instance, the knowledge that the grass is green, or (moving up the continuum) the knowledge that the action was cruel.

The absolute conception, then, is now a conception of a substratum of material features of the world, which will feature at the base of any explanation how two different knowledge-representations are both perspectives *on the same world*. The absolute conception has become a conception of that underlying *same world*. And therefore a conception, as Williams put it, "of the world that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us" (1985, p. 139). The main pressure on us all to form the absolute conception is *explanatory*. We need to explain the differences between different knowledge-perspectives as being perspectives on the same world (otherwise they couldn't both be knowledge). However, all this being said, Williams' chief point and purpose in this discussion is not in fact to affirm our necessary commitment to a shared, mind-independent stratum of reality, but rather to indicate and emphasize an exhilarating implication. What's emphatically indicated is that the vast extent of the world that we know is perspectival to a greater or lesser degree. *Most* of our knowledge is enabled by more or less perspectival concepts and accompanying sensibility, and the features that figure in such knowledge—such as colors, or values, or social norms and institutions, or aspects of personal relationships—definitively do *not* figure in the absolute conception, though Williams' view is that they must be intelligibly related to it.

What Williams was aiming to achieve in this discussion in *Ethics and the Limits* is really two things: he aimed to reject any dualism of fact and value, while conserving and vindicating what he held to be important differences between the knowledge delivered by the physical sciences and other kinds of knowledge, such as historical or ethical knowledge. The great asymmetry between scientific knowledge and ethical knowledge is of particular importance to Williams, because the same scientism he found repellent as a matter of philosophical style—where it involved a pretense that philosophy in general is, or ought to be, like the empirical sciences—is at work in the idea that the only real knowledge, the only knowledge proper, is knowledge gained of worldly features figuring in the absolute conception. Not so, says Williams; and against this scientism, he aimed to show that science itself is indeed distinctive, difficult, and important; but that there are other kinds of knowledge that are also distinctive, difficult, and important, for there are great expanses of the world—*our* world—that cannot be known through scientific inquiry.

Collapsing the dualism of fact and value in this way, by effectively positing a continuum of increasingly perspectival types of representation of the world, is another way in which I interpret Williams as insisting on a kind of impurity, a mingling of elements often kept separate. Whereas positing a binary fact-value dualism insists on black and white; positing a continuum insists on a graduation of subtly changing shades in between. A perspectival representation of the world—whether a color perception or an ethical cognition—involves a cognitive grasp of some feature of the world discerned using a concept (and its associated sensibility) that is local. It might be species-local to most humans, as in the case of color perception; or it might be highly culturally and historically local to some *us*, where "us" might indicate a small ethical or political subcommunity within a moral culture.

In the particular case of ethical knowledge, Williams offered us an account of how the very concepts in which such items of knowledge were couched were themselves inseparable admixtures of fact and value. "Thick" ethical concepts as he called them are both "action-guiding" and "world-guided," both descriptive and evaluative.[17] Williams expressed agreement with John McDowell with regard to the inseparability of the two aspects.[18] The thought is, one cannot pretend that a thick ethical concept is an item of merely descriptive content to which we have added a positive or negative moral valence—as if it were "guided round the world by its descriptive content, but [with] a prescriptive flag attached to it," as Williams critically cartooned Hare's prescriptivism (Williams, 1985, p. 141). To the contrary, Williams believed that the ability to discriminate situations in which one might properly apply an evaluative concept, such as "selfish" or "vain" or "generous" or "churlish," requires already also grasping the evaluative point of the concept in question.

This leads us directly to an important stretch of philosophy's border with history. In a case where critical reflection, or indeed any other influence, has alienated us from concepts that were formerly our "own" in the sense that we lived by them and had internalized their action-guiding authority, then they cease to be the sort of concept that couches "ethical knowledge" for us. Instead, the knowledge of how to get around our social world—perhaps "you have blasphemed," or "she is not chaste," or whatever it may be—is no longer action-guiding for us, and, as Williams theorizes it, therefore no longer ethical knowledge for us. If philosophy seeks to understand our ethical concepts—including their role in motivating action and framing our ethical evaluations—then it had better take a historicized conception of them. As he puts it in "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline": "…philosophers cannot altogether ignore history if they are going to understand our ethical concepts at all. One reason for this is that in many cases the content of our concepts is a contingent historical phenomenon" (Williams, 2006a, p. 191). In a case where it is indeed reflection that has alienated someone from a concept—for instance, when Oscar came to the view that "blasphemy" was not one of his concepts, or when Nora came to the view that "wifely obedience" was no longer one of hers—then what we are confronted with is the destruction of ethical knowledge by reflection. This is one of Williams' more notorious ideas, but I do not think it should be as problematical as all that, given what he meant by "ethical knowledge."

The relevant idea of "ethical knowledge" is a product of Williams' particular form of moral cognitivism, which is nonobjectivist. He argues that we can have ethical knowledge by correctly applying thick ethical concepts whose values we have internalized and live by in practice. If we hadn't internalized them as practical reasons *for us*, they would (trivially) have no intrinsic action-guiding force for us. For Williams, ethical knowledge is knowledge within a moral outlook—with any luck, an outlook that offers us some tools to think critically about what aspects of it we want to retain, which concepts we want to continue to live by. Coming to a sufficiently collective critical attitude toward a thick ethical concept presses that concept out of general ethical service. Elsewhere I have described the resulting situation as analogous to what happens after a currency such as shillings and crowns is put out of circulation (Fricker, 2000). One can still count costs using them if one wants to—we don't suddenly lose the relevant arithmetical competency—but doing so no longer has the same social function or meaning. Functionally speaking it's just not our money anymore; we can't buy anything with it. The knowledge we once had using such concepts is no longer knowledge of what things cost around here, but only of what they used to cost.

Thus, ethical knowledge whose concepts are pressed out of service becomes (I surmise) some other kind of knowledge—presumably, historical knowledge (Williams doesn't say). Thus the destruction of ethical knowledge involves no damage to our grasp of the evaluative point of the now-redundant thick ethical concept, but only its action-guiding force. A nineteenth-century woman who grew up instilled with a concept of "wifely obedience" may rebel against it at some point, but in so rebelling she loses no conceptual competence and no grasp of evaluative point—indeed she may feel she is only now seeing what its more complex evaluative point really is. What she loses in rejecting the concept, in dissociating herself so far as possible from its hold on her, is its action-guiding and wider normative force. On this conception, moments of moral progress will likely involve some destruction of ethical knowledge, and its automatic conversion into historical knowledge. Thus (I further surmise) there is no net loss of knowledge when we make improvements to our patterns of moral motivation and evaluation.

Williams' general conception of thick ethical concepts and what it takes to have competency in using them is one of the areas of his philosophy that has a secret passageway from Wittgenstein. In a footnote in *Ethics and the Limits* Williams observes: "The idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest is basically a Wittgensteinian idea" (1985, p. 218, fn. 7). (In this respect, we see it is Wittgenstein that provided Williams and McDowell with a rare point of meta-ethical agreement.[19]) The eschewal of any dualism of fact and value is something Williams admired in Wittgenstein, whom he elsewhere described as producing "some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy" (Williams, 2006a "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline," p. 181). It is time to consider Williams' critical engagement with Wittgenstein directly, so that we may not only reflect anew about issues of style, scientism, and the conception of the world, this time through the prism of Wittgenstein's

extraordinary philosophical writing; but ultimately also on the broadest question of what, from Williams' point of view, philosophy might become.

3 | WITTGENSTEIN: AND WILLIAMS' AMBIVALENCE

Earlier I suggested a number of respects in which we might see Williams as a modernist, including with respect to style in philosophy. In a wonderful essay on the composer Leoš Janáček, Williams offered some reflections on the modernist style in music, though swiftly moving to a comparative discussion with philosophy. Here, Williams explores the significance of the ellipses in Janáček's minimalist style of musical composition, making a revealing and somewhat disobliging comparison with Wittgenstein's own disjoined cadences and cumulating motifs. The comparison goes like this:

> In some modernist philosophers there is an analogy to Janáček's ellipses, the elimination of transitions: with them, juxtaposition and repetition provide the structure. But it is not clear how well this can work, indeed how well it does work even in the greatest of such philosophers, Wittgenstein. The problem perhaps lies in this, that even if the loss of large-scale development in Janácek is counted a loss, the result is unquestionably music, and very powerfully so; but philosophy without argumentative development, philosophy in which all the *therefore's* have been replaced by *and's* or by spaces, is dubiously philosophy at all. Or rather, if it is philosophy, as Wittgenstein's quite certainly is, it is so because it is about earlier philosophy, even if it does not say so: in his case, the earlier philosophy was often his own. That other aspect of modernism, historical self-consciousness, has to sustain the identity of the enterprise altogether.
>
> (Williams, 2006b, p. 119)

Here, we glean something of Williams' deep interest in Wittgenstein's philosophy, and equally some insight into his still deeper ambivalence toward it. This ambivalence, I believe, was partly about its gnomic style, but more importantly about two independent concerns: the conception of the world, as delivered in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language; and, more generally, the conception of philosophy as *quietist*—as an enterprise which, properly understood, leaves everything as it is.

Let me, first, address the ambivalence regarding style. Williams, as I read him, respects Wittgenstein's stylistic modernism, and seems even to consider its self-conscious concern with written form as distinctively Wittgensteinian. In "What Might Philosophy Become?," having just expounded the need for philosophy to seek to "ring true" to its readers by embracing literary techniques that allow form to contribute to philosophical content, Williams remarks that "The demand on philosophy that it should listen to what it says leads to the concerns of Wittgenstein" (2006a, p. 207). Williams doesn't explain exactly what he has in mind here in the idea that philosophy "should listen to what it says," but I interpret him as alluding to Wittgenstein's antisystematic, fragmented cadences of philosophical prose as an example of a philosopher who does listen to what he says, in the sense of deliberately producing a text whose form manifests the content of his philosophical view. In Wittgenstein's writing, one might say the in-between gaps that separate the short, aphoristic paragraphs are as integral to the work as the rests in a musical composition.

On the other hand, it is with a certain caution that I air this thought, conscious that the explanations of Wittgenstein's fragmentary texts are surely multiple. The *Tractatus*, comprising a series of short numbered paragraphs ordered to "indicate the logical importance of the propositions" is one thing[20]; but the form and presentation of the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* quite another, having a more complicated editorial backstory.[21] We should pay attention, for instance, to Wittgenstein's seeming disclaimer in his 1945 Preface to the *Investigations* which reads:

> Originally it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times. But it seemed to me essential that in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence.
> After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks....
> (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 3)

On the other hand, however, this sentence (which itself may be as much ironical pretext as sincere admission) continues with the thought that the explanation why the task proved impossible was the very nature of its subject matter: "...my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. –And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 3). Perhaps, then, my suggestion that Williams appreciated in Wittgenstein a remarkable self-conscious harmonization of literary form and philosophical content is sufficiently attuned to the editorial facts, even allowing for the possibility that the gappy modulations of the text may have been partly in spite of, rather than because of, Wittgenstein's avowed best efforts.

In addition, I think we have reason to speculate that Williams found in Wittgenstein's fragmentary form an apt implicit entreaty to do what, at paragraph 66 of the *Investigations*, he famously instructs philosophers to do more generally, namely to "look and see" what our various different "language games" are actually like, rather than proceeding on the basis of habitual essentialist assumptions.[22] This chimes with Williams' own anti-theoretical, anti-systematic stance—though I would also emphasize that, in Williams' case, he adopted this stance specifically in ethical and to some extent political philosophy for the reason that these particular areas of philosophy take highly historically contingent spheres of human life as their subject matter. He did not dogmatically assume that the same anti-theory stance was called for all across the different areas of philosophy. In this particular one might find Williams to be the more consistent adherent of the injunction to "look and see," for he did not assume that all areas of philosophy call for the same approach.

These two moments of harmony being noted, however, it is clear from the slightly unfavorable comparison with Janáček's musical ellipses that Williams found Wittgenstein's style rather *too* elliptical. This was not owing to any undiscriminating distaste for the rhythms of aphorism. Williams after all relished similar in Nietzsche, but found that Nietzsche successfully "mined or booby-trapped his works against being assimilated" (Williams, 2006a p. 208). And when it comes to other Wittgensteinian tropes such as compression and allusion, Williams himself embraced these conceits in his own philosophical writing.[23] Rather, what Williams found problematic in Wittgenstein's style was that in his particular use of these conceits he left his text so wide open, so minimal in discernible argumentative development that it was left vulnerable to misappropriation. Not unrelatedly, he also detected a certain self-absorption in Wittgenstein's historical self-consciousness, given that the critical responsiveness seems largely to be in relation to his earlier self. Indeed, Williams described the later work as Wittgenstein "talking to himself." Not quite an objection, I would suggest we hear Williams as offering a mischievously expressed yet genuinely problematizing observation about the distinctive voice of Wittgenstein's work, and the unusually self-referential diachronic self-consciousness it embodied. In this, Williams was not really saying anything that Wittgenstein might not have agreed with, and indeed almost said himself. There is, for instance, that charming moment in the Preface to the *Tractatus* where he writes:

> How far my efforts agree with those of other philosophers I will not decide. Indeed what I have here written makes no claim to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought before me by another.
> (Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 23)[24]

We also know that Wittgenstein thought the vision of the *Investigations* could not come upon one except by seeing it as a rejection of the picture theory he had presented in the *Tractatus*. This was why he wanted them published together. Seen from this angle, it is manifestly true of Wittgenstein that he was, in a straightforward if limited sense, "talking to himself"; but on the other hand, of course, one can hardly miss Williams' gently lampooning turn of phrase, which was, as ever, a sonorous proper part of his philosophical point.

What of the metaphysical and epistemological differences between the two thinkers—their conceptions of mind and world? Williams was also ambivalent—I think deeply so—about Wittgenstein's philosophy in this regard, and getting clear about why will ultimately lead us to perhaps their greatest disagreement, which concerns the very nature of philosophy and what it can do. But let's start with their conceptions of our cognitive relation to the world. Here, Williams' ambivalence stems significantly from what he considers to be Wittgenstein's stance toward science. On the face of it, there is some harmony between the two thinkers in this regard, since Wittgenstein was vehemently anti-scientism, detesting any effort to assimilate the philosophical enterprise to the scientific one. In this particular, Williams was ready to recognize something of a kindred spirit, and it is principally for this reason that he described Wittgenstein as an "anomalous" figure in analytic philosophy (2006a "What Might Philosophy Become?" p. 207). On the other hand—and here comes the source of the ambivalence—in "Wittgenstein and Idealism" (Williams, 2006c[25]) Williams describes Wittgenstein as having a "hatred of the cockiness of natural science" but adds the heavy qualifier that this is "something which seems to me not easy in his case to distinguish from a hatred of natural science" (2006c, p. 375).[26] Williams continues: "to adapt a remark of Kreisel's, when the child asks why the people on the other side of the world don't fall off, many would give an explanation in terms of gravity acting towards the centre of the earth, but Wittgenstein would draw a circle with a pin man on it, turn it round and say, 'now *we* fall into space'" (2006c, p. 375).[27]

Williams was suspicious, then, that Wittgenstein's anti-scientism was a veneer that concealed, perhaps even from himself, a metaphysically cheap anti-scientific attitude. This, as we have already seen, Williams most certainly did not share, not least because it encouraged an *a prioristic* mindset in analytic philosophy which served to banish history from the other direction. In this regard, *a priorism* was and remains the equal and opposite prejudice to scientism, and both are the enemies of the sorts of humanistic impurity that Williams prized and advocated in philosophy. Williams had no doubt about the importance of science, and its genuinely overlapping relation to certain areas of philosophy. His respect for the real challenges of attaining scientific knowledge saw him make a firm but fair distinction between philosophy that honestly engages with relevant scientific research, as opposed to philosophy that merely displays a vain pretension to the manners of science. He quipped, for example, that some "People can perhaps persuade themselves that if they fuss around enough with qualifications and counter-examples, they are conducting the philosophical equivalent of a biochemical protocol" (Williams, 2006a, p. 184). His respect for science was also surely a driving force behind his commitment to the absolute conception as populated exclusively by the objects of physical scientific knowledge. For the absolute conception *was*, I would emphasize, a conception of something physical, *not* metaphysical. (This is one of the respects in which Putnam mischaracterizes the absolute conception in *Renewing Philosophy*, where he describes Williams as viewing "physics as giving us the ultimate metaphysical truth…" (Putnam, 1992, p. 108), something Williams explicitly denied.[28]).

Williams' science-led realist instinct is what drives his critical concern with Wittgenstein's conception of our relation to the world. In "Wittgenstein and Idealism," he argues that Wittgenstein's language-oriented conception is haunted by the specter of idealism. Wittgenstein famously declared in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: "Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing" (Wittgenstein, 1978, p. 325, VI-23). Agreed, and Williams' concern was that the desired realism was not obviously achievable given other of Wittgenstein's commitments. Williams agreed with Hacker[29] that the anti-solipsistic guarantees of the Private Language Argument successfully fend off phenomenalism, and any merely aggregative species of idealism whose conception of the world simply adds my language-world to yours, and yours… and so on. Such a view, says Williams, would amount to a non-transcendental or "empirical" idealism, committed to the incoherent idea that the world is dependent on minds that are themselves part of the empirical world. However, he goes on to argue that there remains a residual worry: even

on the compelling nonprivate conception of language, we still have a view that seems very close to some other kind of idealism.

It is tempting to re-express Williams' concern here in terms of the worry that Wittgenstein's philosophy is unable to sustain something that Williams after all believed to be entailed by the very idea that we know anything, namely, the absolute conception. But in doing so I admit such a rational reconstruction would over-reach the textual evidence for the form of his worry, and certainly would not make it any more compelling to those of Wittgensteinian sensibility. Recording the temptation, however, is useful if only to mark the fact that in Williams' own thought the absolute conception is the imaginative anchor for his realist commitments as regards our knowledge of the material world, and particularly scientific knowledge, and that it underpins the essential contrast between scientific and ethical knowledge. Be that as it may, the explicit form of Williams' worry concerning the conception of reality available in Wittgenstein's philosophy was that the world came out looking too much like a function of linguistic practice. Specifically, he argued, albeit in a markedly qualified manner, that the later-Wittgensteinian idea that the limits of *our* world are the limits of *our* language still contained distinct elements of a *transcendental* idealist position. If there is nothing that could count for us as the world except the world as it is intelligible to us in language, then that at least seems very close a transcendental idealist position, or may be indistinguishable from one.[30] Williams summed up his concern as follows:

> The fact that in this way everything can be expressed only via human interests and concerns, things which are expressions of mind, and which themselves cannot ultimately be explained in any further terms: that provides grounds, I suggest, for calling such a view a kind of *idealism* (and not of the stupid "aggregative" kind).
>
> (Williams, 2006c, pp. 369–370)

Another way of bringing out Williams' science-inspired realist inclinations in relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy is to consider that Wittgenstein effects a metaphysical *leveling* of all domains of knowledge—notably, scientific and ethical. If all regions of knowledge are equally to be understood in relation to the contours of our "language games," then there are no significant asymmetries when it comes to their metaphysical status. This leveling, impressively built upon by Wittgensteinian ethical realists who effectively consider it a leveling *up* for ethics,[31] is precisely what Williams believed we needed to resist in order to make sense of the mind-independence of the basic physical features of the world, and indeed to locate the contrast with the historical contingency of ethical thought. This concern finds a more straightforwardly normative expression in his paper "Pluralism, Community, and Left Wittgensteinianism":

> [On the later Wittgensteinian picture] whether in mathematics, in our ordinary language, or in ethics, everything equally is a matter of practice, of what we find natural. It is mistaken, on this picture, to try to ground our practices, whether ethical or cognitive; we must rather recognize that our way of going on is simply our way of going on, and that we must live within it, rather than try to justify it.
>
> (Williams, 2005 p. 34)

But Williams took this to be unsustainable, because in the modern era the domain of the ethical and political is characterized by an array of *alternative* actual and possible ways of going on, so that the injunction to keep on *going on* is hopelessly under-determinative. This normative point finds expression once again in relation to the Wittgensteinian insistence on the universal use of "we" and "our":

> When Wittgensteinians speak of "our" form of life, they characteristically use that expression in what linguistics calls an inclusive rather than a contrastive way: the "we" represents not us as against others, but an "us" that embraces anybody with whom we could intelligibly hold a conversation. It is obvious why this should be appropriate to matters of meaning and of understanding, and why also it

> is plausible to say in those connections that we have no way of standing outside "us." But we cannot simply take this idea over into ethical and social thought….
>
> (Williams, 2005, p. 36)

Here, Williams is talking about "Wittgensteinians" rather than Wittgenstein himself; but in this particular I think it makes little difference. The metaphysical leveling effected by Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is found problematic by Williams on at least two scores: it sells short the objective reality of the physical world, thus by implication also under-selling the difficulties of science; and it trades in an insufficiently "historically and socially realistic"[32] conception of the ethical, gliding over the potentially intractable difficulties and lacunae in determining how to *go on* in the midst of conflicting value commitments.[33] We saw in Williams' discussion of the absolute conception that he took us to be confronted with an apparent dilemma concerning the idea of a mind-independent reality—an all-or-nothing dilemma we could however escape by embracing his perspectivalist "third way." He said there that (as I put it) we need to *disaggregate* our representations of the world and see that some, but only some of them are the minimally perspectival representations of features in the absolute conception. For Williams there is plenty of *our world* round and about us, knowledge of which is in some degree perspectival; but given we know anything at all, this must be intelligibly related to a substratum which is there for any knower—"there *anyway*." This metaphysical picture is obviously quite anathema to the leveled Wittgensteinian landscape where the two regions of thought are on a par. The issue reveals a fundamental metaphysical difference between the two thinkers, and one that is moreover expressive of two utterly different philosophical temperaments. Williams' asymmetrical commitment, on the one hand, to a science-oriented realism about the physical world of which we are a part, and on the other, to a historicist social constructionism concerning the ethical, is the heart of the second respect in which I am suggesting we should see him as deeply ambivalent about Wittgenstein's philosophy.

The third and final feature of Wittgenstein's thought that I wish to address from Williams' point of view concerns the idea that sometimes our processes of reasoning and justification run out, so that we come to a point where we can but affirm that our spade is turned, "This is simply what I do."[34] With this thought, Williams regards Wittgenstein as having offered us one of the greatest insights of modern analytic philosophy. However, once again the universal application of the idea meant that Williams was not in any straightforward agreement. He thoroughly agreed with its application in value contexts, where he felt we urgently still needed some way of making sense of the fact that some values are for us *unhintergehbar*—he used the German word as a label to crystallize the ethical-psychological impossibility of renouncing certain of our most deeply held values. Take the fundamental ethical idea that all human life has equal moral worth. For such a conviction, philosophy needs to be able to articulate (for some "us") the idea that "for us, it is simply there" (2006a, p. 195), and the Wittgensteinian insistence that the reasons and justifications for such commitments inevitably soon run out so that we arrive at bedrock is a game-changing philosophical advance. Williams not only agrees with it, and considers it a great insight, he also explains how this very fact that we arrive at justificatory bedrock in such matters is part of what makes a historical perspective in philosophy so valuable, since we need it to help us understand which values have this special status for us, and why this might have come about. He says, in "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline":

> Above all, 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. This brings us back to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein influentially and correctly insisted that there was an end to justifications, that at various points we run into the fact that "this is the way we go on."
>
> (Williams, 2006a, pp. 195–196)

Once again, however, Williams would not have agreed with the blanket application of this idea, and in particular, he explicitly disagreed with the implication that since all our ways of going on are as they are, there is no significant

normative or explanatory job left for *philosophy* to do. On the contrary, he asserted that "Even with regard to those elements of our outlook for which there are no further justifications, there can still be explanations which help to locate them in relation to their rivals" (2006a, p. 195). Philosophy need not and should not fall quiet, leaving everything as it is, even in those cases where we have run out of justifications for the proposition, for instance, that all human lives possess equal moral worth. For there is other work to be done besides tracing direct lines of justification. There is, for instance, critical work to be done in relation, as he puts it, to comparing our ethical ideas with their rivals, or refining exactly what it is that we find *unhintergehbar*. Moreover, his historicism allows—insists—that what is *unhintergehbar*, for a given "us" in a moral culture, can change over time.

The associated Wittgensteinian idea that there are no genuine deep philosophical problems, but only problems conjured into existence by philosophy itself, is also an element that Williams found problematic because overgeneralized. He was not averse to drawing this verdict in particular cases. He himself argued, for instance, that the problem of freewill was exactly like this. In *Shame and Necessity*, he effectively advocated *quietism* on the freewill issue, though sourcing the relevant attitude in Nietzsche rather than Wittgenstein, and praising the Greeks for having the right idea:

> The traditional metaphysical problem of the freedom of the will…exists only for those who have metaphysical expectations. Just as there is a "problem of evil" only for those who expect the world to be good, there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened. In truth, though it may be extended or contracted in various ways, it can hardly be deepened at all. What threatens it is the attempt to make it profound, and the effect of trying to deepen it is to put it beyond all recognition. The Greeks were not involved in those attempts; this is one of the places at which we encounter their gift for being superficial out of profundity.
>
> (Williams, 1993, p. 68)[35]

But the point is that freewill was, for Williams, a special case, indeed an exception proving the rule.[36] As ever, he resisted the universal, proceeding in a more piecemeal fashion—insisting, in his own terms, on "looking and seeing." Wittgenstein of course had his own distinctive reasons for coming to his quietist conception of philosophy, and they were undoubtedly general in nature. But Williams believed that Wittgenstein's dramatically chastened conception of what philosophy can do for us stemmed significantly from the idea—the false idea—that it is an essentially and radically peculiar intellectual activity. Worse, this essentializing conception of philosophy as radically peculiar is possessed of an unfortunately self-fulfilling power. Williams says:

> …some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy, notably in the work of Wittgenstein, remain undeveloped—indeed, at the limit, they are rendered unintelligible—precisely because of an assumption that philosophy is something quite peculiar, which should not be confused with any other kind of study, and which needs no other kind of study in order to understand itself. Wittgenstein in his later work influentially rejected essentialism, and spoke of family resemblances and so on, but at the same time he was obsessed—I do not think that is too strong a word—by the identity of philosophy as an enterprise which was utterly peculiar compared with other enterprises.
>
> (Williams, 2006a, "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline," p. 182)

By contrast, when it came to the nature of philosophy and its relation to other forms of enquiry or intellectual activity, Williams was basically on Descartes's side. Unlike Wittgenstein, Descartes saw philosophy as continuous with other forms of enquiry, both science and of course history. In the *Descartes* book, just after recounting Descartes' comment to Princess Elizabeth that philosophical enquiry should be undertaken at most only once in a lifetime, and by most not at all, Williams explains:

> [T]his is not at all because Descartes holds, as some modern views hold, that philosophy has a quite special subject-matter, or is in some other way quite discontinuous from the sciences; on the contrary he thinks rightly, that philosophy and the sciences are continuous with one another, and he expresses one version of that idea in his image of the tree of knowledge, of which the roots are metaphysics, the trunk physics, and the branches, the other sciences….
>
> (Williams, 1978, p. 34)

4 | CONCLUDING REMARK

Williams believed in philosophy's obligations to science, for all the reasons we have been discussing; but above all, he advocated that philosophy needed history. This is the chief impurity that our enquiries need in order to make sense of our world as it has come down to us, including the modes of understanding it that we have inherited into the bargain. History can assist philosophy by preventing us from reinventing the wheel, or indeed the square wheel,[37] but Williams was equally aware, of course, that history can undermine our philosophical efforts by discrediting the conceptions they employ.[38] In this connection, he most often mentioned Rorty, because Rorty so vehemently and explicitly argued against the so-called "epistemological" conception of philosophy as a "mirror of nature," which he rejected wholesale, presuming it essential to the enterprise (which is not what one might expect from a philosopher who professed contingency in all things). Rorty's own alternative conception of philosophy, or at least of ethical and political thought, was that height of peculiarity: "liberal ironism." This conception required the philosopher to be possessed of dual personae, operating as public liberal "out there" in life, and private skeptic when in the study. But Rorty aside, the point I want to make is that Williams might just as naturally in this connection have referred to Wittgenstein's equally disillusioned conception of philosophy as turning out to lack (and after such a promising debut too) *any* genuine puzzles to solve, a match only for those of its own fantasized making, so that the best place we can find for philosophy is, if not shut in the study exchanging self-undermining reflections with the ironist, perhaps sat in the corner simply keeping quiet.

Williams found that both Rorty's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of what philosophy should be were catastrophically misguided. I would suggest that they both have the form of a counsel of despair after a disillusionment with philosophy that would never have happened were it not for misguided ambitions for it in the first place. As ever, the way to avoid disillusionment is to start out with a more realistically conceived idea of how philosophy is related to other forms of enquiry, most particularly (for Williams) science and history. Both scientism and *a priorism* squeeze out historical self-consciousness, and so squeeze out the prospect of philosophy being able to really help us make sense of our practices in the present in the light of the past. That is not something we can do in science, and it is not something we can do exclusively *a priori* either. So let me end with Williams' own way of stating the present challenge for philosophy in its self-conception as a humanistic discipline, for it seems to me that over 20 years after he wrote these words of warning, they are, if anything, more urgently applicable, even portentous, in our time:

> We run the risk…that the whole humanistic enterprise of trying to understand ourselves is coming to seem peculiar. For various reasons, education is being driven towards an increasing concentration on the technical and the commercial, to a point at which any more reflective enquiry may come to seem unnecessary and archaic, something that at best is preserved as part of the heritage industry. If that is how it is preserved, it will not be the passionate and intelligent activity that it needs to be.
>
> (Williams, 2006a, p. 199)

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ENDNOTES

[1] I explore these features of his style in Fricker (2020).

[2] I had the double good fortune of being supervised in my doctoral work on feminist philosophy both by Sabina Lovibond—whose work at the *avant-garde* of feminist philosophy was my reason for applying in 1991 to go back to Oxford to see if I could, in my decidedly half-baked state, write a doctoral thesis on what I was calling "perspectival realism"—*and* by Bernard, who was now dividing his time between Oxford and Berkeley. With every year that goes by, I appreciate each of their distinctive, brilliant, and benevolent influences on me with increasing clarity and gratitude.

[3] "Government House utilitarianism had at least the merit of one kind of realism, inasmuch as it tried to find the theory an actual social location. It placed it in a particular body of people, the utilitarian elite (though it had a deluded idea of what such people might be like in reality)." (Williams, 1985, p. 110).

[4] "I shall call Accuracy and Sincerity the two basic *virtues of truth*" (Williams, 2002, p. 44).

[5] On this issue, see also his remarks in "Descartes and Historiography" (Williams, 2006c, p. 258), and in *Shame and Necessity* (Williams, 1993, p. 13).

[6] Similarly robust points regarding the coherence of the idea of feminist philosophy were made in some reviews of the Warnock collection (for instance, Fricker, 1996). I also vividly recall a review by Jennifer Hornsby which rounded off with a wry observation that it was fitting for a collection with *that* editorial premise that it should be appearing in its publisher's "Everyman's Library" series—though alas neither she nor I have been able to trace it.

[7] For a discussion of the importance of historical understanding in Williams' philosophy, with an emphasis on the meaning-laden nature of the subject matter of both disciplines, see Moran (2016).

[8] Williams reaffirms this conception in his 1994 paper "Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy," posthumously reprinted in Williams (2006c, p. 257). There Williams also talks of the history of philosophy in relation to the aim of "making the familiar seem strange, and conversely" (p. 259). For a discussion of this aspect of Williams' approach, helpfully labeled as the "alienation effect," and for a defense of methodological pluralism, see van Ackeren (2019).

[9] For a landmark articulation of this modernist spirit, see Berman (1982).

[10] On the social construction of truthfulness as an intrinsic, rather than instrumental, value, see Williams (2002, pp. 90–92).

[11] A short piece on Janáček, originally published in 2003; reprinted in 2006 in *On Opera*.

[12] Williams' phrase at p. 47 "our original primitive truth-gatherer" in particular anticipates Craig's more fully articulated State of Nature scenario of inquirers and "good informants"—on further aspects of this anticipation see Queloz's discussion in Queloz (2021, pp. 135–137). When Williams first handed me his copy of Craig's book, kindly lending it to me as his student, he said with an ironical smile (just because this was a funny thing to be saying of any philosophy book) "Here, read this. Everything in it is true."

[13] I have pursued this idea as an interpretive conceit in Fricker (2020).

[14] For an independent and fully articulated theoretical elaboration, see Moore (1997). For purposes of our understanding of Williams, it is also worth noting that in "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline," he describes Moore's book (in a singularly unusual-for-him superlative) as "an outstanding discussion" (Williams, 2006a p. 185, fn. 8). For Moore's later discussion of Williams' idea, see Moore (2007a).

[15] Almost. "Relativism" was a notable exception, though it was always partnered with a signature qualifier: Williams called his view the "relativism of distance."

[16] Putnam, however, seems to take it as exactly what Williams intended (Putnam, 1992, p. 98 and passim). For a helpful complicating discussion of the history of the primary-secondary distinction in this connection, and a partial defense of Williams against Putnam's overall critical view, see Blackburn (2009).

[17] Foot had advanced such a view of ethical claims and beliefs in her "Moral Arguments" (Foot, 1958).

[18] Williams notes, in this connection: "McDowell is above all concerned with the state of mind and motivations of a virtuous person, but I understand his view to have the more general implications discussed in my text. The idea that it might be

impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest is basically a Wittgensteinian idea. I first heard it expressed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s" (p. 240; fn. 7). For some critical discussions see, for instance, Moore (2006), Heuer (2012), the papers in Kirchin (2013), and for a full-length study Kirchin (2018).

[19] For a discussion of Williams' relation to McDowell and Wittgenstein, see Lang (in press).

[20] Wittgenstein's note reads "The decimal figures as numbers of the separate propositions indicate the logical importance of the propositions, the emphasis laid upon them in my exposition…." (Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 25, fn. *).

[21] See, in particular, the Editorial Preface to the Fourth Edition, Hacker and Schulte (Wittgenstein, 2009).

[22] "Don't say: 'They must have something in common, or they would not be called 'games''—but look and see whether there is anything common to all" (Wittgenstein, 2009, paragraph 66).

[23] On the question of compression as a stylistic feature common to Williams and Nietzsche, see Babiotti (2020).

[24] He continues: "I will only mention that to the great works of Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell I owe in large measure the stimulation of my thoughts" (Wittgenstein, 1922, p. 23).

[25] Reprinted from *Moral Luck* (Williams, 1981).

[26] But see Mulhall (2009) for some defensive counterpoint in this regard, and indeed with regard to Williams' broader interpretation of the later Wittgenstein as containing elements of a transcendental idealist position, which Mulhall suspects of being "in the service of constructing an objection to those who might wish to take Wittgenstein's later conception of philosophy with any seriousness" (p. 387). For an alternative perspective—one more sympathetic with Williams' interpretation—see Moore (1985, 2007b); and for a robust rebuttal of Mulhall's interpretation of Williams' attitude to Wittgenstein, see Queloz and Krishnan (in press).

[27] Georg Kreisel, the celebrated Austrian logician and mathematician, was born in Graz, 1923. There is a widely circulated anecdote according to which, in his years teaching at the University of Reading, he would habitually take a certain train to London to go to the theater. That train stopped running, but Kreisel discovered there was an equally well-timed train from Bristol which paused at Reading station strictly to take on water, not passengers; and yet (the story goes) he repeatedly snuck on board. When, on one occasion, he was accosted by the guard telling him "This train doesn't stop at Reading, Sir," he is reputed to have replied "If it doesn't stop here, then I didn't get on here." I do not know if it was this particular storied remark that Williams had in mind in his own adaption.

[28] Williams retorts: "Now I have never held any such view, and I agree entirely with Putnam in rejecting it. However, I have entertained the idea that science might describe the world 'as it is in itself', that is to say, give a representation of it which is to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of enquirers, a representation of the world, as I put it, 'as it is anyway'. Such a representation I called in my jargon 'the absolute conception of the world'. Whether it is attainable or not, whether the aspiration to it is even coherent, are of course highly disputable questions" (Williams, 2006a, pp. 184–185).

[29] Williams references Hacker (1972).

[30] But see Mulhall's critical discussion (Mulhall, 2009), in particular his suggestion that Wittgenstein's purpose may have been rather to show that we need to move beyond the fundamentally misleading contrast between realist and idealist positions ("that the very idea of a distinction between idealism and realism…turns out, when strictly followed through, to be simply and straightforwardly empty" p. 388).

[31] As Lovibond showed in her *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (1983), part of the appeal of constructing a realist view of both science and ethics by way of this leveling is that is highlights our inescapable responsibility for how we go on in all regions of intelligibility. In the relevant discussion in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams notes Lovibond's book. Other key figures in this connection are McDowell (for instance, McDowell, 1979), Diamond (see, for instance, Diamond, 1995), and, more recently, Crary (see, for instance, Crary, 2007).

[32] Williams does go on to identify the possibility of a "Left Wittgensteinianism," which would not be attended by these problems: "What we are left with, if we reject foundationalism, is not an inactive or functionalist conservatism that has to take existing ethical ideas as they stand. On the contrary, once the resultant picture of ethical thought without foundationalism is made *historically and socially realistic*, in particular by registering in it the categories of modernity, it provides a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions prejudices, and powers" (Williams, 2005, p. 37; emphasis added). But, as I understand Williams, this is considered to require renouncing the blanket use of the universal or inclusive "we" as part and parcel of an acknowledgement that the scientific and the ethical are not on a metaphysical par. The envisaged Left Wittgensteinianism would thus embody many of Williams' philosophical commitments; but it is not clear it would still embody all that many of Wittgenstein's.

[33] For a discussion of William's ideas of Right and Left Wittgensteinianism, and a defense of an expanded version of the latter using pragmatic resources rooted in Wittgenstein, see Queloz and Cueni (2021).

[34] "Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'" (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 91, paragraph 217).

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

[36] For a slightly different angle on this point, see Queloz and Krishnan (in press), who suggest that Williams' critique of the "morality system" in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* can itself be seen as a piece of philosophy-as-therapy, albeit with a powerfully critical bent (ms p. 29). On this, wider, conception of philosophy-as-therapy, one would naturally see a large portion of Williams' ethics as therapeutic—perhaps we should say "critical-therapeutic" to make explicit the anti-quietist, critical-theoretic purpose.

[37] "In general, one must take extremely seriously Santayana's warning, that those who are ignorant of the history of philosophy are doomed to recapitulate it (not just reinventing the wheel, but reinventing the square wheel)" (Williams, 2006a, p. 204).

[38] If we thought that our outlook had a history which was vindicatory, we might to that extent ignore it, precisely as scientists ignore the history of science. …But if we do not believe that the history of our outlook is vindicatory, then understanding the history of our outlook may seem to interfere with our commitment to it, and in particular with a philosophical attempt to work within it and develop its arguments (Williams, 2006a, "Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline," p. 192).

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