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Abstract

This paper explores the synergy of Humean and Nietzschean positive and negative energies in Williams ethical philosophy. The discussion concentrates attention somewhat on *Truth and Truthfulness*, the book in which Williams developed his innovatively hybrid philosophical method—that of State of Nature Genealogy. This distinctive combination of naturalism and historicism concentrates the Humean and Nietzschean influences into a philosophical structure that separates the basic practically necessary features of human social life, such as the proto virtue of truthfulness, from its culturally realized forms, which are irreducibly historical and contingent. A key feature of the overall exegetical thesis is that while Nietzsche increasingly gained explicit emphasis in Williams' work as time went on, the essential combination of stabilizing and destabilizing, naturalistic and historicist, impulses remained a constant.

Williams' 'Philosophical Anthropology': A Humean and Nietzschean Synergy

'Everyday truths are important, and their importance should be stressed, for several reasons. One is a central concern of this book: their role in an account of truth and meaning, and in constructing a philosophical anthropology' (Truth and Truthfulness, 2002; p. 10).

Introduction

There is an energy about Williams' philosophy that draws one into the rhythms of his thought. The agility of his writing is substantially due to his deceptively conversational style, which is

particularly characterized by the compression and allusion that typify conversation.[1] But it is also due to a certain resistant quality consistently displayed by the philosophical texts he produced, through which he would effectively short-circuit ready-made interpretations in relation to this or that existing school of thought or *–ism*. The conversationalism and the theoretical resistance of his writing are of course connected, in that the first facilitates and somewhat disguises the other, permitting philosophical delicacies to be observed but passed over swiftly, or perhaps merely alluded to obliquely.

These qualities of style helped Williams develop a resolutely piecemeal set of commitments whose interrelations were often deliberately left underdetermined, or unfixed, and therefore open to renewably perspectival interpretation. This is central to what sometimes makes his philosophical writing both unexpectedly difficult and rewarding in equal measure. It is also a stylistic means of *manifesting* the contingency of our ways of making sense of life, aiming to achieve through style what he considered Plato's dialogues achieved through their form: that is, (as Williams put it) *not* 'to control the minds of his readers, but to open them' (Williams 2006; p. 179). Williams applauded this Socratic aim, and I believe we should see his own resistant philosophical style as directed towards the same end of stimulating his readers' thought, rather than controlling it. This does not mean that Williams is all about creating *aporia*. On the contrary, he frequently intends to drive home some assertive philosophical conclusions, putting plenty of argumentative energy into explaining, along the way, how some ideas are plain 'errors' or 'delusions' or otherwise 'seriously misguided', and so on. My point is rather to emphasize his deliberate resistance to the allure of joining everything up, and in particular to representing substantive and contestable lines of thought as if they were quasi-formally derivable conclusions of a historically delocated thinker, let alone binding his conclusions into anything resembling a philosophical 'system'. When it came to moral philosophy, at least, he regarded this mindset as bound to lead to one or another wholesale misconception, and he preferred a more historicist, contingentist stance.

I propose to explore an interpretive idea that is closely related to Williams' resolutely non-systematic approach, for it concerns the combination of positive and negative currents in his

[1] On Williams' compression as a common stylistic feature with Nietzsche, see Babiotti (2020).

meta-ethical thinking. The idea is that Williams' meta-ethical commitments were the product of an energy generated through the interplay (as any school pupil of Physics will know) of negative and positive poles. Specifically, I will pursue the interpretive conceit that the positively charged *anode* to Williams' meta-ethics was Hume; and the negatively charged *cathode*, Nietzsche. Together these opposite philosophical poles gave Williams the push and the pull respectively of *vindicatory* and *debunking* forms of genealogical explanation, equipping him to generate the extraordinary hybrid method that was the culminating invention of his philosophical career: *State of Nature Genealogy*. This hybrid method is at once an expression of naturalism and historicism. It uses the State of Nature thought experiment, long tried and tested in various philosophical justifications of the State, in strange alliance with the method of genealogy which came, from Nietzsche through Foucault, to signify a relentlessly historicist, critical and indefinitely 'problematizing' spirit.[2] The hybrid method is therefore—by either set of normally opposing methodological lights—a quite fantastical creature, a methodological Centaur whose upper- and lower-body might not seem to belong together at all. Its lower-body a rump of self-consciously mythical construction of 'original' ethical functions, carefully derived from a hypothesis regarding our most basic needs, is fabulously conjoined with the front-facing head and torso of human ethical culture in all its contingency and social art, representing that aspect of human nature which Hume so aptly captures in his characterization of human-kind as 'the inventive species' (Hume 1969, p. 536).

My primary focus will be on Williams' final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, though this will enable us, as befits the genealogical mindset, to trace one or two clues backwards in time to Humean and Nietzschean imprints on Williams' earlier thought. I will organize things thematically, because I find the constructive and deconstructive energies of Hume and Nietzsche respectively to be so completely synergized in Williams's philosophy. As the metaphor of anode and cathode is intended to suggest, the positive and negative energies are transformed into something new through the connection they find in Williams. This is, in one sense, merely to state the obvious—namely, that all of Williams's thought is Williams's thought. And yet, it is at the same time to suggest something intrinsically contestable that I hope to make persuasive—namely, that if we read his resistant philosophical texts in the light of Hume and Nietzsche

[2] I allude to Colin Koopman's helpful characterization of Foucault's critical purpose (Koopman 2013).

considered as anode and cathode to his thinking, we will find the set of connected philosophical motivations that ultimately led Williams's philosophy to its remarkably hybrid destination. Temperamentally, the potent mix includes, on the one hand, an interest in the natural practical necessities of human social life as considered a priori from the armchair, yet combined, on the other hand, with an unmistakably restless and spirited debunking challenge to the moral philosophical conceptions of his time. I will also argue, more generally, that while Williams' Humean proclivities were ever-present in his work—most notably in the internalist interpretation of reasons, and in his broadly virtue-oriented approach to ethical life—Williams' affinity with Nietzschean questions somewhat grew and deepened over time, becoming increasingly explicit towards the end of his life, as an essential catalyst and perhaps curious solace in his work.

The Origins of Our Ethical Values: Can there be 'stability under reflection'?

Williams' organizing meta-ethical concerns had long featured the question of how far ethical life could be rendered transparent, so that we might confront its history and, particularly, its contingency in a clear-eyed fashion without experiencing the authority of our ethical convictions as thereby undermined. He touched on this issue in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, for instance, in his discussion of Kant and the intrinsically misleading psychological form of reverence for the moral law. In characterizing it as intrinsically misleading, Williams is alluding to the fact that the categorical imperative is experienced by human beings *as if* it had an *external* source when in fact it could only originate from something *within*, on pain of incompatibility with freedom. That the rule we submit to is *self*-rule is the whole point. Williams goes on to observe that, on Kant's construction, the authority of our moral experience never the less remains quite stable under reflection that reveals its true normative source:

> On Kant's assumptions…one can at least come to understand how, and why, such an experience is bound to be misleading, and this [understanding] will help to make it stable to reflection. If Kant is right, I can come to understand what the "sense of reverence for the law" is, and not lose my respect for it or for the moral law (Williams 1985; p. 190).

Williams was, on multiple counts, no Kantian in his own theoretical convictions. He embraced an 'internal' interpretation of ethical reasons and a non-objectivist meta-ethics, on the grounds, roughly speaking, that no attempt to show reasons and value as any kind of external or objective had proved successful.[3] That was the comprehensive critical project that came together in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*—his central book, which engaged in a substantial process of elimination regarding the candidates for ethical objectivity (not *eudaimonia*, not utility or wellbeing, not pure practical reason…). However, the possibility of a self-transparency sufficient for stability under reflection, which he appreciated in the Kantian construction, was a perennial point of interest for Williams.[4] This was because he regarded our modern age as distinctively prone to critical reflection about the authority of its own practices and norms—excessively so, in his view, partly because he understood such reflection to usher in an increasingly conceptually 'thin' moral culture. He believed this because he took it that reflection tended to replace our 'thick' ethical concepts (such as our everyday virtue and vice concepts) with the 'thin', more juridically styled concepts of right and wrong, entitlement and obligation. He also saw this projected dwindling of thick concepts as posing a knock-on threat to our capacity for what he called ethical 'confidence', which he characterized as a justified psychological state of confidence in how our thick ethical evaluations normatively shape our shared way of life. They do so partly through our identification with them in the (not necessarily reflective) sense that they are *ours*, and partly through their capacity for truth-aptitude. For it is a feature of thick concepts, as he understood them, that sentences using them can be

[3] Williams' internal interpretation of reasons is very close to Hume's conception, albeit with crucial distinctive features, notably his emphasis on the complexity and cognitive content of many motivational states, the role of the imagination in deliberation, and crucially the degree of psychological indeterminacy that results in an equal degree of normative underdetermination. These important differences being noted, however, I think it is accurate to regard Williams' conception of practical reasons as basically Humean. This marks a dimension of Williams' relation to Hume that I will not, however, be able to explore here, as it must be set aside to make room for the present discussion, which primarily concerns Hume's non-reductive naturalism and its place in Williams' hybrid genealogical project. (I offer an interpretation of internal reasons in Fricker 2020. On Williams as a Humean, see Greco (2007). For discussions of his shifting attitude to Hume, see Sagar (2014) and Russell (2018); also Owen (forthcoming) for a reading in which the movement charted is more decidedly away from Hume and towards Nietzsche. My own interpretation offered here would not deny but does de-emphasize that movement, and instead urges a consistent intertwining of the two figures in Williams' thought, albeit one where the Nietzschean strand grew increasingly explicit and important in Williams' writing as time went on.)

[4] The ideal of transparency was for Williams one value among others. In addition, he often emphasized the importance of not confusing it with complete explicitness: 'I hope I have made it clear that the ideal of transparency and the desire that our ethical practice should be able to stand up to reflection do not demand total explicitness, or a reflection that aims to lay everything bare at once' (Williams 1985; Postscript, p. 200).

straightforwardly truth-apt. For instance, given we use the concepts of 'selfish' or 'generous' or 'vain', it might be truly or falsely believed that a certain action was selfish, or generous, or vain.[5] This recommended them as a source of some stability in the face of anxious meta-level reflections concerning the truth or otherwise of our ethical beliefs.[6]

The worry about the detrimental effect of excessive reflection on our ability to live a confident ethical life is echoed in a point he much later attributes to Nietzsche. In his Introduction to *The Gay Science*, Williams wrote:

> Nietzsche is nothing if not reflective: he represents reflection carried to the point at which he recognizes that reflection itself and the self-consciousness of modernity can weaken or destroy the power to live confidently. In this respect, as he also knew, he is in a battle with his own philosophy (2006 p. 329).

I am tempted to think this was also somewhat true of Williams, and self-consciously so. For it will not have escaped him that there is a tension between philosophy's insatiable demand for reflection and the fact, repeatedly emphasized in his work, that one must *live*, that *living* comes before reflection and is, as he so memorably put it in *Ethics and the Limits*, 'the only serious enterprise' (Williams 1985; p. 117). For Williams, any moral philosophy that forgets this will be labouring under a dramatically misguided conception of how it relates to its own subject matter. I take this to be the chief significance of the quote from Goethe's *Faust* which Williams cites on more than one occasion (noting at one point that Wittgenstein does too[7]): 'Im Anfang war die Tat'; In the beginning was the deed.

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[5] For some key papers in the expansive literature on thick ethical concepts, see Kirchin ed. (2013), Moore (2006), and Roberts (2011).

[6] See Williams 1985, Postscript, pp. 199-200.

[7] 'Hegel believed that we can see behind us [backwards through history] because we are higher on the historical mountain of progressive freedom and reason. Nietzsche precisely does not believe this, but for him, all the more, there is no way in which, in these fundamental respects, the understanding of life can get ahead of life itself. There is a marvellous line of Goethe's Faust, which is quoted more than once by Wittgenstein: "Im Anfang war die Tat [In the beginning was the deed]. It is never, so far as I know, quoted by Nietzsche, but it might well have been' (Williams 2006 '"There are many kinds of eyes"'; p. 328). In *The Beginning Was The Deed* was aptly taken as the title of the posthumous collection of Williams' essays in political philosophy, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Williams 2005).

But Williams' concern with meta-level reflection was not only that there could be too much of it, or that it could encourage us to conceive of life and philosophy in the wrong order. For he also believed in the importance of at least one kind of meta-reflection that threatened to destabilize ethical conviction (and which one might argue—though I am unsure how far Williams does—to be necessary for achieving the desired confidence in our concepts and values[8]). The relevant kind of meta-ethical reflection scrutinizes the origins of our values, and we will be drawn to this question insofar as we are concerned not to live in a fantasized version of the ethical. Williams believed that we do, still, and to a significant (if incoherent) extent, live in a fantasized, because *moralized* idea of the ethical, and he found that much modern moral philosophy reflected and encouraged this. That was why concerns about how far we are capable of *revealing* the fantasized aspects to ourselves, and moving beyond them while retaining a sufficiently stable ethical outlook, remained *the* central focus of Williams's work. Indeed, if we fail to appreciate this problematic, then most of what he was trying to say—whether about reasons, or moral luck, or moral theory, or the morality system, or our relationship to the ancient world—will be lost on us. It is why he remained fascinated to the last by the question how far modern ethical life, properly understood in metaphysically non-objectivist terms, could withstand a clear-eyed view of its own history.

With this, we arrive at the fundamental philosophical motivation for the project of *Truth and Truthfulness*. Williams frames the book in precisely these terms when he says:

> Our ethical ideas are a complex deposit of many different traditions and social forces… However, the impact of these historical processes is to some extent concealed by the ways in which their product thinks of itself. The most general reason for this is that a *truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions*. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are *not obviously related to them in a way that vindicates them* against possible rivals (Williams 2002; pp. 20-21; italics added).

[8] I argued that ethical confidence needs this kind of critical reflection in Fricker (2000). A case for the view that a form of 'left' Wittgensteinianism can be developed to support ethical confidence is made in Cueni and Queloz (2021).

Just how destabilizing or otherwise a historical genealogy of our values might turn out to be will not only depend on the moral and psychological content revealed, but also on *us*, the reader—in particular, on what pre-existing ideas we may bring to the table regarding what it would take for our moral ideas to have authority for us. Having said that, my own suggestion in this paper will be broadly that in *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams achieved an explanatorily powerful naturalistic account that does, to a significant extent, offer us the level of stable reflective transparency he had attributed to Kant's moral philosophy: that within a non-objectivist and naturalistic picture, we *can* indeed come to understand what the origins of our ethical commitments and values are, without necessarily losing our identified respect for them. But Williams does not insist, for his main purpose is to pursue the question. This book is an elaboration of what such an explanation might involve, at least for the value of truthfulness. In particular, there is no pretence that a satisfied response to the account would not depend on a certain predisposition towards non-reductionist naturalism in ethics.

There is a great deal in this book that is Humean in temper and substance. However, the motivating *question* is *not* a Humean one. Decidedly not. Hume, the great sceptic with respect to so many hard-wired associative habits of the human mind—induction, the self, the necessary connection between cause and effect—seems not to have found much in human morality itself to exercise his sceptical sensibility on the page. He explicitly argued against rationalistic moral philosophical accounts, of course, and his scepticism regarding religious underpinnings of morality made itself heard between the lines. My point is that Hume did not conceive of human moral experience as intrinsically involving any subterfuge in order to retain its authority for us.[9] Unlike the error theorists he was to inspire centuries later (notably, Mackie 1977), Hume himself treated human morality as a non-self-deceiving natural-social phenomenon that could be explained by reference to human sentiment and the social interest. Adopting the quasi-scientific stance, he depicted moral virtue as deriving from a wealth of human sentiments, many 'natural', and some 'artificial', all rendered appropriately disinterested through correction for the biases of physical and personal proximity and 'partiality'. This impartiality underwrote the idea that in

[9] I thank Paul Guyer for a helpful exchange on this point, which led me to further qualify my formulation.

moral response and judgement, as he famously put it, 'we fix on some steady and general points of view; and always in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation' (Hume 1969 Bk. III Pt. III. Sect. 1; p. 632). Accordingly, Hume's ethical naturalism proceeded largely from purported observations about traits that human beings universally admire, or that human societies are bound to cultivate for basic reasons of cooperation and social utility. This being so, in order to identify the source for the essentially troubled problematic that motivates Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*—that is, the presumed immense *difficulty* concerning the truthful confrontation with the origins of our values—we must look to another philosophical presence altogether. The energy of that troubled problematic emanates distinctively, and explicitly, from Nietzsche.

The polar opposite of Hume in this regard, Nietzsche takes (something called) morality to be shockingly *other* than what it presents itself to be. Nietzsche dares us to look beneath the surface to confront the truth about where our values come from, and what they express about us. His irreverent challenge is that we play the 'Mr Nosey Daredevil' who 'has enough pluck' to hold their nose and brave the 'bad air' to 'look down into the secret of how *ideals are fabricated* on this earth' (Nietzsche 2006 First Essay; p. 27). This is the underground workshop in which miserable timidity and failure are repackaged as humility and virtue under the idea of pure moral superiority and the deferred gratification of eternal bliss. Nietzsche dares us; and there's a sense in which Williams accepts the dare—but on rather different terms. Williams will not be finding the fakery that Mr Nosey Daredevil finds. Why? Because in this book the object of Williams' determined gaze is not in fact anything he regarded as a sub-terranean workshop of fabricated moral ideals at all. Not in *Truth and Truthfulness*.

That recognizably Nietzschean dare—the exposure of something fake in moral ideas—is to be found somewhat earlier in Williams' oeuvre, when he first offered his critiques of utilitarianism, and of what he called 'the morality system', most notably in *Moral Luck* and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. That was where he offered an implicitly Nietzschean treatment of an ethical and meta-ethical outlook he characterized as finding its apotheosis in Kantianism (though he was careful never to identify the outlook straightforwardly with that of the historical Kant). The title of the concluding chapter of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

was ‘Morality, the Peculiar Institution’. This allusion to the Nietzschean ‘slave revolt’ in morality by way of the euphemism used for slavery in the antebellum American South is a clear signal.[10] The implication is that Williams’ own critique of the defining commitments of the ‘morality system’ revealed it as placing moral subjects under a false controlling idea of moral authority, one whose internalization he took to resonate in some way with the morality that Nietzsche wished to expose and discredit.

The immediate content of Williams’ critique of the morality system, however, was importantly different from Nietzsche’s critique of the morality of Good and Evil. For one thing, they were, I take it, not criticizing the same things. If the object of Nietzsche’s critical genealogy was primarily the life-denying ascetic morality he attributed to Judeo-Christian religion, then it was first a cultural phenomenon and second a philosophical phenomenon. When Nietzsche says, in the Second Essay of the *Genealogy*: ‘…this world has really never quite lost a certain odour of blood and torture? (not even with old Kant: the categorical imperative smells of cruelty…’ (Nietzsche 2006; p. 41), he is drawing Kant’s ideas into the purview of his wider moral-cultural critique. With Williams, I would suggest the emphasis is the reverse. The primary focus of his criticisms was a philosophical composite: a construct of objectivist moral ideas, in some of which utilitarianism was implicated, but where the central commitments were all identified as broadly Kantian. This composite was therefore closely historically connected to the religious influence that Nietzsche had in his sights, but certainly not confined to it. Williams’ ‘morality system’ was rather presented first and foremost as a set of moral philosophical ideas, and it was addressed as such. But these ideas were also claimed to be at least part of our everyday moral outlook.

Not surprisingly, then, the *content* of Williams and Nietzsche’s diagnoses are significantly different. Nietzsche’s aim is to expose the historical subterfuge by which the punishing and self-punishing constructions of Judeo-Christian morality were invented, internalized, and glorified by way of the ascetic ideal. He presents us, for instance, with

[10] As is noted, for instance, by Stephen Darwall in his 1987 paper, ‘Abolishing Morality’, which is a response to the critique of morality characterized as the ‘morality system’ that is advanced by Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Darwall 1987).

transitions from practical notions of indebtedness, through self-punishing forms of bad conscience, and finally to the self-lacerating and irredeemable form of moral deficit that is *guilty conscience*.[11] By contrast, Williams' diagnosis of the 'morality system' is more multi-dimensional, theoretical in nature, and accordingly not polemical in purpose or tone. His chief finding is that the morality system constructs a moving fantasy of moral *justice*, played out in the attempt to render morality immune to luck through the invention of various fraudulent moral psychological items, chief among them a controlling rational will whose reach is co-extensive with the reach of responsibility. This construction Williams found to be brilliant but false, in effect a piece of wishful thinking in that it expressed a moving vision of human life as 'ultimately fair', but a vision whose 'philosophical errors' he regarded as 'only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life' (Williams 1985, p. 196). Regarding Williams' chapter title, then—'Morality, the Peculiar Institution'—what makes its oblique Nietzschean reference apt is not that the two thinkers were criticizing the same thing (they weren't), nor that they make exactly the same criticisms (they didn't). Rather what makes it apt is a shared deconstructive purpose in relation to what they variously considered a historically contingent and falsifying construction of the ethical.[12] What Williams' theoretical treatment most saliently shared with Nietzsche's polemical blast was the unmistakable debunking spirit of the attempt to expose a controlling moral fantasy.

The manner in which Williams comes to draw more substantively and directly from the Nietzschean well later in his career involves less this debunking spirit, and more specifically what Williams found to be Nietzsche's gift for posing questions that cut to what was fundamental and urgent. Near the start of *Truth and Truthfulness*, he writes 'The problems that concern this book were discovered, effectively, by Nietzsche' (Williams 2002; p. 12). Here the project of the book concerns the origins of the virtue of truthfulness—truthfulness, that is, both to ourselves and to others—and Williams' whole conception of this question is not so much Nietzsch*ean*, as simply Nietzsche's. Williams quotes him, for instance, on the importance and

[11] In putting it this way I am aligned with the interpretation offered by Maudemarie Clark in 'Immoralism and the Concept of Morality' (Clark 2015; Part I, ch. 1, p. 37).
[12] See Maudemarie Clark (2015) for a rich argument that Williams' critique of the morality system is 'deeply Nietzschean', and in a manner that finds further fruition in the comparative discussion of guilt and shame in *Shame and Necessity* (Clark 2015; p. 42 and passim.). For a historically inflected reading of the project of *Ethics and the Limits* that also positions it very close to a Nietzschean agenda, see Krishnan and Queloz (2023).

sometimes terrifying difficulty of living up to an unconditional will to truth, asking in *The Gay Science*, where the belief in an unconditional will to truth might come from. Nietzsche writes that it:

> must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of "the will to truth" or "truth at any price" is proved to it constantly. "At any price": we understand this well enough once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar!
>
> Consequently, "will to truth" does not mean "I do not want to let myself be deceived" but—there is no alternative—"I will not deceive, not even myself"; *and with that we stand on moral ground* (Nietzsche, quoted in Williams 2002 p. 14).

The credentials of the will to truth might seem implicated by Nietzsche's finding in the Third Essay of the *Genealogy* that it has the despised ascetic ideal at its base. However, as Williams reminds us, Nietzsche is keenly aware of this, and affirms that the association with the ascetic ideal does not discredit the will to truth in itself. On the contrary, Nietzsche exclaims: 'I have every respect for the ascetic ideal *in so far as it is honest*!' (quoted in Williams 2002 p. 15).

The motivating philosophical question addressed in *Truth and Truthfulness*, then, is explicitly Nietzsche's. However, as we shall see, the first part of the *answer* that Williams gives to the question—the first phase of the genealogical story he actually tells—is substantially Humean. Set in the ahistorical and thoroughly imaginary setting of the State of Nature, it is an explanatory, *naturalistic* story in precisely the sense of naturalism that (in his paper, 'Hume on Religion') Williams attributes to Hume. There Williams says: 'Hume did not regard religious belief as natural, in his special sense of that term—that is, as *something which human nature, by its very constitution, must embrace…*' (Williams 2006; p. 269; italics added). As we shall see, in Williams' genealogical story through which he answers the Nietzschean question of origins, he characterizes two proto-virtues of truthfulness, namely Accuracy and Sincerity, in such a way that they are represented as 'natural' in precisely Hume's 'special sense'.

Let us take this cue, then, to move to the details of Williams' hybrid method of State of Nature Genealogy. In doing so, we shall see what happens to the Nietzschean *question* concerning the challenge of truthfulness when applied reflexively to the origins of the value of truthfulness itself, and when handled with vindicatory rather than debunking purpose in the even-tempered, naturalistic manner reminiscent of Hume. Such an origins-based, naturalistically governed genealogical approach is decidedly not one that Nietzsche would have for one moment entertained as a sibling phenomenon. On the contrary, it is the sort of approach that he, and Foucault after him, consider misguided, ludicrous even, and (in Nietzsche's scheme of things) typical of the *English*.[13] One aspect is the very idea of any *origins* thought experiment, whose ahistorical claim to any kind of necessity is anathema to a fully historicizing genealogical commitment. The other is the constructive guiding hope to explain, and perhaps to vindicate, rather than to expose and discredit. Such vindication, if indeed any is forthcoming, would be no positivistic or foundational idea, but would rather consist in an adequate degree of stability under truthful reflection[14]:

> Another way of putting it is that in a genealogy the value [in question] can be represented as arising from more primitive needs and desires, and that when we reflect on that story, we can find the value intelligible without at the same time losing our hold on it (Williams 2002; p. 92).

Williams' Humean State of Nature (--some artifices are only natural)

In his State of Nature genealogy, Williams borrows, in the first instance, substantially and explicitly from Edward Craig's State of Nature story concerning the necessary emergence of the concept of knowledge (Craig 1990). However, Williams' focus is exclusively on the traits required to sustain the practice of trustful information exchange that Craig argues inevitably produces the concept of a proto-knower. Williams asserts, with Craig, that human beings in the

[13] See the various forms of lampoon in the Preface and First Essay of the Genealogy. For instance: 'the back-to-front and perverse kind of genealogical hypotheses, actually the *English* kind…' (Nietzsche 2006; Preface, p. 5).
[14] For this reason, I would not agree with Colin Koopman's interesting assessment that Williams, like Nietzsche but not Foucault, is vulnerable to the charge of committing a genetic fallacy (Koopman 2009).

State of Nature need plenty of true beliefs (and not too many false ones) in order to survive and flourish in their practical projects, and so they need to cultivate a practice of information sharing. Williams' next move is to infer the need for interlocutors who are both Accurate and Sincere. The two proto-virtues of Accuracy and Sincerity are given capital letters to flag that they are not yet anything psychologically real—not yet an item in any realistically conceived moral culture, fictional or historical. They are strictly an abstraction within the State of Nature thought experiment.[15]

The fact that the virtue of truthfulness is constructed from only the most basic social-epistemic needs qualifies it as a complex disposition that would arise in some form in any human society. And so, we might observe that truthfulness is represented as being exactly what Williams characterized as Hume's distinctive sense of 'natural': something that 'human nature, by its very constitution, must embrace'. More broadly, Williams' view remains markedly different from Hume's. The most obvious difference is that Williams relies nowhere on the semi-technical idea of 'natural' virtues as opposed to the 'artificial' ones that are constructed in culture. The idea of a large set of dispositions universally and wholly spontaneously admired by human beings regardless of culture would fly in the face of Williams' historicism of value and of the contingency of the thick ethical concepts that discriminate them.[16] As Paul Russell has commented, 'Whereas Hume seeks to emphasize the uniformity of human nature…, it is Williams' concern to emphasize the "diversity" and variation of our ethical concepts and practices (Russell 2019; p. 41). This is why Williams has no use for Hume's idea of a 'natural' virtue, and instead makes use of Hume's intriguingly deep-level social construction of the *artificial* virtue of justice as the template for his own naturalistic genealogy of truthfulness.

Williams is fully explicit about the direct relevance of Hume's genealogy of justice. He offers a summary interpretation of the Humean construction as follows:

[15] I thank Catherine Elgin for emphasizing to me the ambiguity in the notion of an *abstraction*, given an abstraction might yet be a *historical* abstraction, which Williams' State of Nature scenario need not be (and probably isn't).
[16] Perhaps this is what Williams had in mind when, in an interview (Williams 1999, p. 256), as remarked by Russell, he says that he had come to think that Hume 'suffered from a somewhat terminal degree of optimism' (Russell 2019; pp. 37 and 40 and passim).

> We can get some help with the question of what is involved in imaginary genealogies if we look at another famous example, Hume's derivation of the 'artificial virtue' of justice. The state of affairs from which the story starts is one in which people are self-interested and have a capacity for limited sympathy, but have no motives of justice and, correspondingly, no concept of property. Given this condition, and given some further (quite strong) conditions of common knowledge, the story tells how people converge on adopting institutions of property and develop the dispositions of justice. The state of affairs from which this process starts, and hence the process itself, Hume recognizes to have been impossible (Williams 2002; p. 33).

Precisely as in Hume's State of Nature construction of justice, Williams' construction of *truthfulness* starts with people having an individual interest in acquiring sufficient truths for their own practical purposes, and this generates an enlarged interest in everyone's coming to have the dispositions to sustain a generalized reliable practice of information sharing. This enlarged interest brings the inhabitants of Williams' State of Nature to converge on a simple institution of truth-telling with its requisite dispositions of Accuracy and Sincerity, which combine to form the complex disposition of truthfulness.

We might wonder what to make of some of this terminology. Williams' project advertises itself as a form of 'naturalism', while using a Humean template for specifically 'artificial' virtue as *opposed* to 'natural'. But this is a merely terminological difference that should not confuse things. As we may remember, Hume himself allows that the artificial virtue of justice can be thought of as pre-eminently 'natural', for it is something humankind will necessarily invent given half a chance:

> …I must here observe, that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word, *natural*, only as oppos'd to *artificial*. In another sense of the word; as no principle of the human mind is more natural than a sense of virtue; so no virtue is more natural than justice. Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as any thing that proceeds

> immediately from original principle, without the intervention of thought or reflection (Hume 1969; p. 536).

We are thus reminded that on Hume's view, those virtue concepts constructed in the State of Nature as a matter of practical necessity, albeit drawing on a certain inventiveness, are in an entirely literal sense *natural*. Given the opportunity, we naturally form certain social institutions that we recognize as beneficial to us, both individually and collectively. This much art is human nature, and in this sense human beings are seen as naturally creatures of culture—which is, in Williams's view, another way of saying it is in our nature to cultivate an ethical life. Williams is in this matter entirely on the same page as Hume. They have deeply similar conceptions of human nature. What Hume calls the 'inventive species', Williams describes as a species whose 'ethology' 'includes culture' (Williams 2002 p. 22).

In both Williams' and Hume's State of Nature constructions, there is a notional transition from valuing something instrumentally to valuing it for its own sake (or in Williams' terminology, to valuing it 'intrinsically'). The question of exactly what is involved in this 'progress of sentiments' (Hume 1969; p. 551) is interpreted by Williams as follows:

> The distinctive idea of Hume's account is that when it becomes common knowledge that everyone would benefit from certain practices, those practices arise, and they involve a new kind of reason for action, one that essentially refers to other people's having similar reasons for action. In a very restricted sense, what has emerged is a collective reason for action: this is still a reason for individual action, though it is possessed collectively, and essentially so (Williams 2002; p. 33).

This idea that Hume is effectively talking about the emergence of a 'collective reason for action' is supported by some of Hume's formulations where he casts the transition from instrumental to moral in terms of our 'sympathetic' concern with others' sentiments regarding our conduct. He says, for instance, of the moral norm of justice:

> The *general rule* reaches beyond those instances, from which it arose; while at the same time we naturally *sympathize* with others in the sentiments they entertain of us. *Thus self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice: but a* sympathy *with public interest is the source of the* moral approbation*, which attends that virtue* (Hume 1969; p. 551).

At any rate, in Williams' interpretation of Hume, the initially plain instrumental reason to respect other people's property acquires a new moral authority deriving from the 'public interest' in its being generally *treated* as possessing that sort of authority. And it is precisely this move that Williams makes in his own construction regarding truthfulness's transition from instrumental value to something we also value for its own sake.

The collective nature of the normative situation, however, also naturally creates the possibility of free-riding. It creates the possibility of an individual with a motive to lie or conceal exploiting the trust generated by the general practice of truthfulness. This, bad in itself, also poses a threat of instability to the practice as a whole, jeopardizing its functionality; and so the need arises for some further element in the practice that would stave off this possibility, so far as possible. On Williams' account this further element is a matter of bringing added 'social pressures' to bear, through the construction of truthfulness as an *intrinsic* value. This process of adding weight to the value of truthfulness is conceived as involving nothing more than two things: collectively *needing* to construct the value as intrinsic; and actually being able to do so, as a matter of moral social psychology.[17]

The process of socially constructing a value as intrinsic is a social psychological one—a matter of ethical culture:

> One important way of securing [the dispositions of trustworthiness] is that the parties come to think that trustworthy behaviour, such as keeping one's word, has an *intrinsic*

[17] See Williams 2002, p. 92. For an excellent discussion of this self-effacing aspect of the instrumental base of the value of truthfulness, see Queloz 2021 ch. 7 esp. 167-9.

> *value*… Moreover, since it has to be common knowledge that the parties think in this way, the idea of this intrinsic value has to be shared, and it has to be understood as part of the culture that it is shared (Williams 2002; p. 90).

Hume too incorporates the role of social pressures, and, like Williams, the suggestion is that this can help stabilize the sentiments, even while it can of course be overdone, or done to a manipulative or controlling purpose. In his discussion of how far the virtue of justice is grounded in the 'publick interest' Hume emphasizes that while justice is indeed in the public interest, this cannot possibly be our motive to be just, for normal people do not often have such a 'remote' and 'sublime' quality of sentiment. He says:

> …experience sufficiently proves, that men, in the ordinary conduct of life, look not so far as the public interest, when they pay their creditors, perform their promises, and abstain from theft, and robbery, and injustice of every kind. That is a motive too remote and too sublime to affect the generality of mankind, and operate with any force in actions so contrary to private interest as are frequently those of justice and common honesty (Hume 1969/1739, p. 533).

This is why, even though he once again emphasizes the naturalness of acting from the virtue of justice on many occasions, we do need a certain social psychological reinforcement to cover the rest. But the exertion of social pressure can of course be over-done, as Hume remarks. He talks in particular of 'politicians' who tend to exaggerate the value in order to help keep order, though at the same time he affirms the underlying natural authority of the virtue:

> Tho' this progress of the sentiments be *natural,* and even necessary, 'tis certain, that it is here forwarded by the artifice of politicians, who, in order to govern men more easily, and preserve peace in human society, have endeavour'd to produce an esteem for justice, and an abhorrence of injustice… Any artifice of politicians may assist nature in the producing of those sentiments…; but 'tis impossible it should be the sole cause of the distinction we make betwixt vice and virtue. For if nature did not aid us in this particular,

> 'twou'd be in vain for politicians to talk of *honourable* or *dishonourable*, *praiseworthy* or *blameable*' (Hume 1969; p. 551).

Thus, in Hume, as in Williams, the social pressures that may be necessary to stabilize the relevant dispositions are shoring up something that already possesses normative force.

Earlier in this section I argued that Williams shared with Hume a substantially common conception of human nature and the social psychological ingredients of ethical naturalism. And now we see, in addition, that Williams took a similar approach to Hume as regards the social mechanisms of motivational stabilization. Distinctively in Williams, however, there is always a significant role for a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', to recall his use of Ricoeur's phrase.[18] This remained important to him as part of what he sometimes called the Critical Theory Test, which he regarded as an integral part of our ongoing immanent critique of our values.[19] Importantly, for Williams, however, our suspicion need not fall on the whole moral belief system at once, but might rather target specific cases of valuing whose particular history may give us cause for concern and alienate us from its authority. We see this in progress, for instance, in his discussion (in *Ethics and the Limits*) of the manner in which reflection can sometimes press a given disfavoured thick ethical concept out of service. The hermeneutics of suspicion that he had in mind need not, and had better not, alienate us from our entire repertoire of value all at once.

This essential role, in Williams, for some degree of suspicious critical awareness in relation to our ethical values brings us to the second phase in his genealogy. For unlike Hume's, Williams' genealogy only begins in the State of Nature, a starting position strictly conceived as containing merely proto-values, since none is yet culturally realized. The next phase—the Nietzschean phase—moves us into History, the real space of contingent ethical social construction, and power.

[18] Williams 2006 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology'; p. 302.
[19] See Williams 2002 ch. 9 section 5.

From the State of Nature to History: From Hume to Nietzsche

The core elements of truthfulness as constituted in the State of Nature leave it only half-formed. Its further constituting layers of content will be the contingent deposits of history. Here is Williams' explanation of this fact, and of its implications for philosophy's need to involve itself in history:

> *General reflection can show that something has to support the disposition of Sincerity, and that an agent should be able to make inner sense of the structure in which Sincerity is embedded*. But what particular range of values in a given cultural situation will perform this role is a matter of real history, and this history has been quite various and dense. In our own time we find it particularly natural to think that deceiving people…is an example of using or manipulating them, and that that is what is wrong with it. But there have been other ways of looking at it: *Sincerity has a history, and it is the deposit of this history that we encounter in thinking about the virtues of truth in our own life. This is why at a certain point philosophy needs to make way for history, or, as I prefer to say, to involve itself in it* (Williams 2002; p. 93; italics added).[20]

Williams himself gestures at the range of historical possibilities by concentrating on two contrastive conceptions of sincerity in eighteenth-century French culture of letters, in particular the different conceptions entertained by Rousseau, and later Diderot, and the distinctive ideas of authenticity and the self that accompanied these conceptions. He gives a substantial comparative discussion, in the course of which he characterizes Rousseau as profoundly misguided in thinking that the way to achieve authentic self-knowledge is by way of relentless introspection in a context of rural isolation. Williams considered Rousseau to be caught up in a philosophical error about the nature of the self to which sincerity and authenticity are answerable. By contrast, Williams argued, Diderot's conception of what it means to be sincere or truthful to oneself—and thus authentic—involves no such individualistic errors. Diderot's idea of the self is thoroughly

[20] For discussion of the 'impure' conception of philosophy that this entails, see Moran (2016); also Fricker (2024). For a discussion of Williams' idea that philosophy needs history, including some instructive comparison with R. G. Collingwood and Stuart Hampshire, see Koopman (2010).

relational, implying a conception of mind such that the very constitution of one's beliefs and desires are determined through conversational engagements. Williams put it like this:

> On Diderot's view…it is a universal truth, not just a special feature of modernity, that human beings have an inconstant mental constitution that needs to be steadied by society and interaction with other people. …This picture of the mind implies that it has relations to other people and to society that are quite different from any imagined by Rousseau, and this implies different conceptions of both sincerity and authenticity (Williams 2002; p. 191).

The view he goes on to elaborate using the materials given by Diderot, and in particular his satirical work *Rameau's Nephew,* involves the idea that our very mental states are determined—or 'steadied', to use Williams' own term—through our 'trustful conversation' with one another. The extraordinary thing about the fictional Rameau's nephew is that he exhibits almost no determinacy of mind, saying roughly whatever comes into his head as pleasing for the occasion. Inasmuch as having a belief involves at least *some* temporally extended propositional commitment, Rameau's nephew does not really have any beliefs; and, on the whole, what desires he experiences are similarly fleeting in nature. Given the mercurial psychology of this imaginary character, then, we find him equipped with insufficiently determinate mental states for either sincerity or insincerity to get a grip, for there is simply too little to be true to. Consequently, the self-discipline of truthfulness doesn't get a look-in. One lesson to draw here is that the value of truthfulness is not merely the benefit of reliable information exchange, but the creation of determinate mentality. Our ongoing process of cognizing the world depends on it, so that through such everyday dialogical relations we aim to answer questions for ourselves and others about how the world is, steadying our various formerly indeterminate propositional states ('wishes' as Williams terms them) into attitudinally determinate beliefs or desires. On this picture, it is only through such trustful conversation and the self-discipline that it demands from us, that we may

come to *think* in a more or less disciplined manner, avoiding fantasy and the many positive and negative forms of 'wish' that can so easily influence our thinking.[21]

What, then, of the imprint of Nietzsche on the historical chapter of Williams' explanatory story? Given that an attention to history need not be specifically Nietzschean in its concerns, we may fruitfully ask: How *Nietzschean* is Williams' approach to historical genealogy? Brian Leiter has argued that it is not nearly as Nietzschean as is often represented, even by Williams himself, and that the often 'suggested affinity' between Williams and Nietzsche is misleading. His conclusion is that Nietzsche's influence on Williams, though 'not illusory' is only 'superficial' (Leiter 2022; p. 32). Leiter points to various manifest differences in their philosophical views, for instance, the idea that action is generally the upshot of rational deliberation, or that the Homeric conception of the structure of responsible action bears some real similarities to our own. Both of these ideas, Leiter argues, are things Williams affirms and Nietzsche denies. Agreed—there are indeed many such differences between Nietzsche's and Williams' philosophical views.[22] But this much is simply to be taken for granted, given Nietzsche's riotously polemical and provocative stance. (As Leiter duly observes at the end of his paper, the differences of view are 'just as well', given Nietzsche's excesses.) But we should not conclude from their differences of view that there is no strong philosophical affinity between the two thinkers.[23] An affinity might be generated elsewhere. It might, for instance, consist in a like-mindedness in diagnosing the main problem to be addressed, or in identifying the most important question to press, or again a harmony in overall conception of what one is trying to achieve. As we should expect, Williams is highly critically selective in what he draws on in Nietzsche, often leaving to one side this or that piece of what he may regard as philosophical extravagance or empty provocation, so the case for there being a real affinity and influence can only be made by pointing to the similarities and assessing whether or not they add up to a significantly deep imprint on Williams' thought.[24]

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[21] The dialogue might be between two or more people, but by extension it might (I take it) also take solo reflexive form. For a discussion of this idea that *thinking* is a kind of reflexive dialogue, and of the Socratic root of this idea, see Moran (2018) ch.7 esp. p. 192.

[22] For a comparative discussion of Williams' and Nietzsche's use of history in genealogy, see Prescott-Couch (2014).

[23] I have recently had the benefit of reading a manuscript of David Owen's forthcoming paper, which includes a similar line of argument regarding Leiter's methodological assumption that philosophical influence is to be measured by a checklist of shared philosophical opinions (Owen, forthcoming).

[24] For an exploration of one aspect of Williams' critical distance in relation to Nietzsche, see Queloz (2021).

As will already be plain, I find Nietzsche's imprint on Williams to be deep, and highly indicative of Williams' own distinctive point of view. We cannot really see this without looking closely at the project of *Truth and Truthfulness*, and so I am tempted to explain Leiter's dismissive view of the matter as partly a consequence of the fact that his attention to *Truth and Truthfulness* is confined to a single footnote in which he observes the difference between a vindicatory and a critical genealogy, reminding us that Nietzsche (at least as regards his genealogy of morality) went in for the critical kind. Leiter's note reads as follows:

> *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*…is, despite the sub-title, quite un-Nietzschean in conception and execution by offering a "just so" story meant to *vindicate* the concepts in question. By contrast, genealogy for Nietzsche was *critical,* and it was crucial to Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* that a genealogy was true and supported by evidence, not simply feel-good make-believe (Leiter 2022; fn 3, p. 17).

I would not dispute that while the purport of Williams' genealogy of truthfulness is broadly vindicatory, that of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality is critical. This obvious difference is part of the fabric of Williams' discussion, as we have seen. But to dwell on this difference risks missing where the Nietzschean connection is to be found in Williams' book. The debt to Nietzsche is not—clearly not—going to be found in the necessity-establishing State of Nature construction.[25] That vindicatory construction is basically Humean, as we have seen—and, incidentally, mischaracterized as 'simply feel-good make-believe', not least since it has its own internal discipline of parsimony. That discipline demands minimalism about the human needs and motivations posited in the State of Nature from which the necessity for constructing a virtue of truthfulness is argued to arise. But be that as it may, as I have argued, the first place we find Nietzsche is in the philosophical motivation for the project. Williams announces, near the start of *Truth and Truthfulness*, not only that 'the problems that concern this book were discovered,

[25] However, see Queloz for an argument that there are significant points of parallel with Nietzsche's own, somewhat vindicatory, genealogy of truthfulness (Queloz 2021 ch. 7 esp. p. 188). I am also grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for emphasizing the wider point that Williams' vindicatory strategy is consonant with other more naturalistic and less critical forms of genealogy found in Nietzsche's earlier work, notably, in his genealogy of justice offered in *Human All Too Human*, which posits its 'forgotten' origin of enlightened self-interest (Nietzsche 1996 p. 49).

effectively, by Nietzsche' (p. 12); but also that while the book is certainly not *about* Nietzsche, it nonetheless 'uses a method for which I have borrowed a name from him, *genealogy*, and I intend the association to be taken seriously' (Williams 2002; p. 13).

We should indeed take it seriously, because the book embodies a commitment to truthfulness about morality as conceived in definitively Nietzschean terms. These incorporate the idea that morality, and moral philosophy, are full of historical residues that are philosophical errors or unnecessary constructions produced by interests, notably interests in forms of control. Williams, however, is not against all forms of control, because (as we have seen) he believed that living under ethical culture required some social pressures and social constructions geared towards a certain stability that is collectively desirable. For him, it was historically minded critical reflection that would guide our ongoing grasp of whether or not the aetiology of our values, and the 'thick' ethical concepts that shape them, were ethically 'all right' or not. In other words, it was that sort of critical reflection that would determine whether we could continue to find our values and concepts authoritative, even in the knowledge of what other roles they played, and had played historically, in the social order. The mature critical spirit of this sort of reflection is represented in the historical treatments of eighteenth-century sincerity and authenticity that he offers, and they function as instructive indications of the broader kind of critical historical reflection his approach would encourage. That same critical spirit is also represented in Williams' idea that the Critical Theory Test plays an essential role in how we should think about how to live. In a given case, it may press a concept out of service; or again it may stabilize our thinking so that we achieve ethical confidence in it. Things can go either way. And this is as it should be, if the very idea of critical reflection in relation to our ethical life is to have any substantive point.[26] The net result is an array of philosophical commitments many of which are most certainly different from anything Nietzsche argued; but the diagnostic conception of the problem, the nature of the task it generates, and indeed the commitment to facing up to the

[26] Leiter considers Williams to misinterpret Nietzsche on some points—in particular regarding the nature of the will and regarding naturalism more generally (Leiter 2022; p. 31 fn20). While this is clearly relevant to one sense of a philosopher's debt to another, it is not relevant to the project of this paper, which is to explore Williams' thought by way of inspecting the impressions left on it by *his* readings of Nietzsche.

truth of where our values come from, however challenging that may be, are most surely Nietzschean.

In a 1981 review of three books on Nietzsche in *The London Review of* Books, Williams made an unusually superlative claim, which I believe reveals his overriding attitude to Nietzsche and the key reasons for it.[27] He said:

> It is certain, even if not everyone has yet come to see it, that Nietzsche was the greatest moral philosopher of the past century. This was, above all, because he saw how totally problematical morality, as understood over many centuries, has become, and how complex a reaction that fact, when fully understood, requires (Williams, 2014; p. 183).

A key aspect of what he considered the problematical nature of what morality had become was what he called a 'purified' idea of the will. This receives an explicitly Nietzschean treatment in Williams' paper 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology' (2006). Here Williams focuses on a number of passages from *Beyond Good and Evil*, and to a lesser extent *The Gay Science*. While allowing room for the more extravagant claims and assertions he finds implausible, Williams extracts key points which he builds on, as ever, drawing on Nietzsche as a 'resource'.[28] Famously commenting that Nietzsche (unlike Wittgenstein, in his view) produced a kind of philosophical text that was successfully 'mined' 'against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory', he also emphasized that 'it is important that it does not follow, that when we are trying to put him to serious use our philosophy should contain no theory' (Williams 2006; p. 300).[29] This is essentially what Williams does in 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology', as he did later in *Truth and Truthfulness*. He draws selectively on Nietzsche, focusing on what he takes to be truthful and helpful, integrating the Nietzschean ideas and provocations into a more theoretical construction of his own making: 'you get most out of [Nietzsche] when you've got part of the way there on some path of your own. I think it's arriving at some thoughts of my own

[27] The three books were: *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, by M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern; *Nietzsche: A Critical Life*, by Ronald Hayman; and *Nietzsche, vol. 1, The Will to Power as Art*, by Martin Heidegger.
[28] 'I don't see Nietzsche as the sort of philosopher whose views you just adopt: there are all sorts of problems with his positive views about the future, about politics, and so on. I seem him in the same way that Foucault saw him, as a sort of resource' (Williams 1994).
[29] I discuss Williams' combination of admiration and critical distance regarding Wittgenstein in Fricker (2024).

which turned out to be not dissimilar to things that Nietzsche had developed in greater depth that has greatly increased my interest in him' (Williams 1994; p. 9).

What, then, *does* he take from Nietzsche in this paper on his minimalist moral psychology? First, the idea that in moral philosophy the naturalistic effort of showing how moral psychological elements are related to pre-existing psychological forms requires that we add as little as possible that is distinctively in the service of morality. Minimalism, then, as regards our moral psychology. This Williams equally calls 'realism' about the elements of moral psychology, since the minimalism is in the service of a picture that introduces nothing that we don't find in everyday life. This double minimalist commitment enables us to see what philosophy includes in our moral psychology that does not need to be there. And when we identify such an element, we should ask what role it is performing in relation to other possibly dubious commitments. Williams writes: 'My aim is to illustrate, through a schematic treatment of this central example, the way in which a method of suspicion—the search, one might almost say, for a culprit—can help us to achieve a reduced and more realistic moral psychology' (Williams 2006; p. 303). What he proceeds to do is analyse certain of Nietzsche's claims about the bogus nature of philosophical ideas of the will, and of a supposed 'I' that can 'seem to bring about its outcome *ex nihilo*' (Williams 2006; p. 305). Here's an indicative sentence quoted from *Beyond Good an Evil* to set the relevant Nietzschean agenda:

> In short, he who wills believes with a fair amount of certainty that will and action are somehow one; he ascribes the success, the carrying out of the willing, to the will itself, and thereby enjoys an increase of the sensation of power that accompanies all success (quoted in Williams; p. 305).

Williams first homes in on the idea that human action can seem to incorporate what we might call *acts of will*—a mini act performed by the self or 'I' within the larger action done by the person, so that there is a kind of double-counting going on. And, then: 'The second helpful thought to be recovered from Nietzsche is that such a peculiar account must have a purpose, and that the purpose is a moral one' (Williams 2006; p. 306).

What, then, is this moral purpose? Williams argues that it relates to a particular conception of *blame* that is needed within the 'morality system', one which he consistently worked to expose and criticize as an integral part of a misguided historical formation of the ethical. He argues the fiction of the 'I' that causes the action provides the idea of a subject of an action that is in complete control and so can be held blameworthy for bad action in a purified manner. We can see in what respects it is 'purified', he argues, if we consider that our more everyday practices of responsibility and ideas of compensation for bad action need involve no such ideas of control. If, for example, one person wrongs another causing them loss of some kind, they can be held responsible for it and indeed required to offer appropriate compensation even if they had not intended to cause the harm and there was luck involved in doing so. But the purified form of these ideas demands full control—perhaps under the idea of fairness, he speculates—and this is what prompts the need to invent the 'I' that causes the action off its own bat, in separation from the rest of the causal nexus that is infected by luck. He sums it up by saying that 'The needs, demands, and invitations of the morality system are enough to explain the peculiar psychology of the will' (Williams 2006; p. 307), and also the distinctive conception of blame to which the system gives rise.

Here Williams gives a mini-genealogy of purified blame, describing it as bearing a 'close enough relation to Nietzsche's genealogy', perhaps, to be a version of it' (Williams 2006; p. 308). It goes like this: One person acts in a manner that brings about a loss to another person; and they cannot be brought by the victim to acknowledge or recognize the loss, so that the victim is confronted with 'a peculiarly vivid demonstration' of their 'powerlessness' (Williams 2006; p. 308). He continues:

> These circumstances can give rise, in the victim or in someone else on behalf of the victim, to a very special fantasy of retrospective prevention. As victim, I have a fantasy of inserting into the agent an acknowledgment of me, to take the place of exactly the act that harmed me. I want to think that he might have acknowledged me, that he might have been prevented from harming me. … The idea has to be, rather, *that I, now, might change the agent from one who did not acknowledge me to one who did. This fantasied, magical, change does not involve actually changing anything,* and it therefore has nothing to do

with what, if anything, might actually have changed things' (Williams 2006; p. 308; italics added).

So, the element of the morality system's characteristic response—blame—is not quite a normal everyday blame (such as a Strawsonian resentful reactive attitude), but rather a fantasy of blame purified of luck and of any real causal connectivity in moral relations. It floats free in the same dimension as the 'I' that wills within the larger action. This Williams finds to be a fiction worth exposing so that we might endeavour to free ourselves from its grip on our moral imagination, thereby releasing us from an artificially constrained conception of responsibility for our actions.

Most relevant to my disagreement with Leiter's finding that Williams is only superficially influenced by Nietzsche is that in making these theoretical moves to advance a greater realism in moral psychology Williams takes himself, explicitly, to be borrowing from Nietzsche. He ends the paper by saying: '…in laying such explanations against one another, and in diagnosing the psychology of willing as a demand of the morality system itself, we shall be following *a distinctively Nietzschean route towards the naturalization of moral psychology'* (Williams 2006; p. 310; italics added). Williams' Nietzschean inspiration is manifest, and it is not only to be found in the two thinkers' shared sceptical diagnosis concerning certain key moral ideas, together with their shared sense of the importance of exposing them. These two critics of what they each take to be prevalent moral falsehoods of their time are moreover in substantial agreement about what questions to press, and why. That is why Williams says that to ignore Nietzsche in moral philosophy is not to prefer one style over another, but rather 'to duck a problem' (Williams 2006; p. 300). Williams' debt to Nietzsche is highly selective, but deep.

Starting from Nietzsche

The year after Williams' death, his rumination 'Unbearable Suffering' was published in German (and two years later in English, in 2006). The paper, which is a contemplation of the relationship of suffering to meaning, begins with two prominent quotations from Nietzsche's *Genealogy*. One reads as follows: 'The meaningless of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse which has so far

blanketed mankind.' Noting that this theme itself has a long philosophical history, Williams introduces his own discussion of it by saying:

> I shall not try to sketch any of that history, or to place the idea in the context of Nietzsche's thought, but, *as with many other questions, I do want to start from Nietzsche*. *I find the leading edge of these problems in his understanding of what they were,* and also in his foresight of what they would come to be—and, to some extent, of what they would cease to be (Williams 2006; p. 331; italics added).

Williams' train of thought takes us through a rejection of the idea that suffering might be alleviated in the manner of mere analgesic, and instead adopts the stance that resources for making sense of the suffering may not be able to *lessen* the pain exactly, and yet they may nonetheless make it more bearable. Life projects—the sometimes adventurous, sometimes quotidian, meaningful activities and projects that give an individual reason to get out of bed in the morning—are considered as perhaps able to play this role. In this connection, and poignantly so in this stage of his life, Williams returned to early (yet ever-present) themes in his thought, to explore the idea of suffering in relation to the life projects of the fictional Gauguin and Anna Karenina of his 1976 paper, 'Moral Luck' (Williams 1981). Each character does something ethically grievous in order to pursue something they find borderline existentially necessary—painting for Gauguin; a life with Vronsky for Anna. It is essential to Williams' discussion that they are neither excepted nor excused from the moral obligations they relegate from practical priority in favour of their respective projects. Rather the thought is that (from a third-personal and historical perspective) we may nonetheless find them to be retrospectively justified in some degree, depending on how things turn out.[30] If so, then Williams suggested this would show two things that are seriously disruptive to what he would almost a decade later call the 'morality system': namely, that practical justification could be retrospective; and that it could depend upon luck.

[30] I take a different view from Catherine Wilson in this connection, whose discussion of Williams' Gauguin represents him as flirting dangerously with a moral exceptionalism (Wilson, 2019; p. 244 and passim.).

I wonder if we might regard each character as exemplifying a dictum from D. H. Lawrence that Williams quotes in his first book, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics,* and which he described, in an interview with *The Guardian* newspaper fifty years later (Jeffries, 2002), as making a huge impression on him as a young man: 'Find your deepest impulse and follow that' (Williams 1972 p. 79).[31] The dictum seems to me to express a romantic spirit that not only finds expression in the specific discussions of Gauguin and Anna, but also quite generally in Williams' ethical philosophy, in its various emphases on an individual's determination of their own practical reasons, or the 'ground projects' that shape our individual lives and give them meaning. As we have already observed, for Williams, 'The only serious enterprise is living' (Williams 1985; p. 117). Gauguin has some significant luck—he does become a very great painter, and (for many of us) this retrospectively affects the degree to which we may regard him as justified in prioritising existential and artistic self-assertion over fundamental duties of care to his family. Anna, by contrast, has bad luck. Moreover, she does not simply have the bad luck of, say, developing a serious pollen allergy so that she cannot after all stick the rural life that she and Vronsky had dreamed of. Such an incidental hitch would be 'external' to her project and, though it would, alas, 'negate' it, still it would not 'refute' it. The more essential bad luck that Anna incurs is rather of a kind that exposes her project as intrinsically flawed, so that its unlucky unravelling amounts to refutation.

In this paper, written very late in his life, Williams revisits these two characters from so much earlier in his work, drawing on them again but now in relation to the matter of suffering and the question whether and how it might be alleviated by the meaningfulness afforded by one's projects. In particular, he asks what difference it makes that a person might find that the project that helps them make sense of their suffering should wind up negated, or alternatively, refuted. Along the way he also asks what sorts of suffering negation and refutation themselves cause. He considers that at first glance one might imagine that the more meaningful one's project the worse it is that it should be short-circuited in some mundane way by luck. But then he reflects that this is not really so, and that the resources for meaningfulness that are possessed by non-flawed

[31] I thank Matthieu Queloz for the tip, however, that he and Nihil Krishnan searched in vain to find this exact formulation anywhere in Lawrence's writings. And I note that David Owen thanks them for the same, adding that it seems to be a composite of two separate injunctions found in the essay by Lawrence to which Williams is referring, which is on Benjamin Franklin (Owen, forthcoming; fn 17).

projects is that they might yet sustain one through suffering—including the suffering caused specifically by the negation of the project itself. He says:

> A person…whose project is merely negated, for whom it disappears through an external contingency, may sustain an image of how things might have been otherwise and with that, perhaps, the idea that his life to this point and at least some sense of it having been directed to this purpose (Williams 2006; p. 337).

Williams conceives this suggestion by way of engagement with Nietzsche. In this case he comes to it in inverted fashion, specifically, as he puts it, using 'Nietzsche's thought the other way round: imagining someone who suffers for such reasons and bears it, we can ask what new sense it is that his life is now finding for itself' (Williams 2006 p. 337).

Here, as elsewhere, then, we learn that Williams' thought is catalysed by Nietzsche's. Not through sharing the same opinions, but rather because he found Nietzsche's perspective to be the most compelling, and because of the distinctive ways in which Williams' own perennial concern with the possibilities of living a meaningful and truthful life itself can be seen as expressing a Nietzschean 'pessimism of strength'.[32] This is what we have repeatedly found to be the manner of the affinity between the two thinkers. A strong affinity, I think, for a philosopher's sense of which questions are the deepest and most pressing is definitive of their philosophical outlook as a whole. For this reason—and even while there is surely no physical priority between real anodes and cathodes—still, when it comes to understanding Williams' philosophical outlook, I am tempted to think that what comes first is the Nietzschean negative charge which then attracts the Humean positive energy so that something new and humanly livable may be created. The result is Williams' distinctive historicist naturalism, which balances a metaphysical pessimism with an affirming belief in the reality of human culture. I see this bipolar energy as running through his whole oeuvre in some measure, but it makes itself felt most of all in *Truth and Truthfulness*, where it is so methodologically and self-consciously explicit. The abiding and essential interconnection of Nietzschean and Humean energies in Williams' philosophy is well captured in the following prescient quotation from that book, in which we hear Williams give simultaneous

[32] On this aspect of the affinity between the two thinkers, see Queloz 2021 pp. 187-92.

expression to both—a reassuring robustness about what is bound to keep going so long as there are people living together and sharing a language, yet mixed with a sobering candour about how utterly our relationship to truth can become corrupted if we succumb to the mere analgesics or expediencies of false ideas:

> The hope can no longer be that the truth, enough truth, the whole truth, will itself set us free. But it is a lot more than the hope, merely, that the virtues of truth will keep going—in some form or other, they are bound to keep going as long as human beings communicate. The hope is that they will keep going in something like the more courageous, intransigent, and socially effective forms that they have acquired over their history; that some institutions can exist that will both support and express them; that the ways in which future people will come to make sense of things will enable them to see the truth and not be broken by it (Williams 2002; p. 269).[33]

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