Doing History Philosophically and Philosophy Historically

Marcel van Ackeren and Matthieu Queloz

Bernard Williams's historical work has tended to be overshadowed by his work as a systematic philosopher. If the influence of that historical work is harder to discern, however, it is in good part due to its remarkable range: it covers not only Homer, the Greek Tragedians, Plato, and Aristotle, but also Enlightenment figures such as Descartes, Hume, and Kant as well as modern thinkers such as Nietzsche, Collingwood, and Wittgenstein.

Moreover, Williams's historical work demonstrates remarkable range also in relating philosophy and history in a range of different ways. We can distinguish at least four—three having to do with philosophy's relations to its own history and the fourth with its relation to history more generally. In his characteristically compressed style, Williams sometimes moved swiftly between these, or combined several of them at once; but they are worth distinguishing analytically even when Williams combines them in practice, because this enables us to

understand them as four independently illuminating connections between philosophy and history.[1]

First, Williams believes that if one is going to study philosophy, one must come to know some of its history: 'someone learning philosophy itself will need to learn something of its history', he declares already in a little-known text on the discipline of philosophy from 1969, 'and this will involve, if it is to be useful, study of the actual writings of earlier philosophers' (1969: 148). True to his convictions, Williams left behind a large body of work in which he engages in detail with the work of past philosophers. He published a book on Plato and one on Descartes, and *Shame and Necessity* dealt at length with Homer and the Greek Tragedians. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* engages with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, while *Truth and Truthfulness* offers some exegesis of Hume, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. His writings in social and political philosophy are also explicitly informed by the work of Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Weber. And the posthumously published collection *The Sense of the Past* includes no fewer than twenty-five essays, written over the course of forty-one years, running from the sixth century BC to the twentieth century AD.

---

[1] For an account of the current debate, see van Ackeren (2018).

As he clarified towards the end of his career, Williams regards 'those who think that philosophy can ignore its own history' as making 'enormous and implausible assumptions' (2006c: 192). Philosophy cannot ignore its own history in the way that science tends to ignore its history, because for philosophy to ignore its history would be for it to implausibly assume that its history was entirely vindicatory—a *history of discovery*, which represents us as having got some mind-independent fact right, or at least a *history of progress*, in which later philosophers can be seen as having got something right by the lights of earlier philosophers, so that later outlooks can definitively supersede earlier outlooks. As Williams sees it, however, much of philosophy has a history that is nothing like this. It has, in good part, what might be called a *history of change* as opposed to a history of discovery or progress.[2] The history of moral and political philosophy, and even the history of metaphysics, involves changes too radical to plausibly sustain the systematic depiction of later philosophers as having won an argument with earlier philosophers. That is to say, the history of philosophy is partly the history of the very argumentative frameworks within which victory over rival arguments first becomes intelligible.

This is not to deny that there can be progress in philosophy. The peculiarity of the relation of philosophy to its history, for Williams, 'lies in the fact that great philosophical works of the past are still philosophically (and not merely historically) interesting, while at the same time there

---

[2] For an elaboration of the distinction between the history of change, the history of progress, and the history of discovery, which is itself meant to explicate distinctions implicit in Williams's own remarks, see Queloz (2017).

is such a thing as progress in philosophy' (1969: 148). This combination of features is peculiar

in that it sets philosophy apart from both the sciences and the creative arts:

> Great works of the past have contributed to advances in philosophy, and can themselves be
> criticized by reference to modern developments; at the same time they are still to be read and
> studied in their own right, and illuminated (as with works of art) by historical understanding of
> the situation in which they were written. The pull between these two approaches is constant,
> and also valuable: one has to resist the over-simplifications which would try to dump the one
> approach or the other. (1969: 150)

The contrary pull between evaluating past philosophers' arguments by present-day lights and

historicizing them by setting them in their historical context is a productive one, Williams

thinks, and there are several ways in which philosophical and historical inquiry can be

combined to exploit it.

One of these productive combinations—and this is the second interconnection between

philosophy and history—is that someone who is going to engage with the history of philosophy

will in turn need philosophy to make proper sense of that history. The history of philosophy

without philosophy is 'self-defeating' (1969: 146, 8), Williams affirms. It cannot succeed even

as history. This is because 'it is impossible to have any living interest in the philosophers being

expounded, indeed impossible even to understand what they are at, without a genuine feeling

for the problems they were concerned with' (1969: 150). The present-day interest of past

philosophers lies not merely in the conclusions they reached, but in the arguments and considerations that moved them. Merely reporting their conclusions without doing the philosophical work of trying to understand their problems and arguments is bound to prove even *historically* unilluminating, let alone philosophically:

> The historical understanding of a philosopher is, after all, supposed to be *understanding*: it is supposed to make comprehensible what he was at, what his problems and arguments were. That is not going to be done by merely repeating what he said. It involves both a philosophical sense of what a philosophical problem is, and some use of philosophical concepts and distinctions to explain (in some cases, even to translate) the philosopher's words. This already puts one in a position where one is involved in a critique and an evaluation. (1969: 150–1)

Even when work in the history of philosophy primarily aims to produce history rather than philosophy—in other words, when it aims to produce what Williams referred to as 'the history of ideas'—it will require some philosophy, and will have to be informed to some degree by our sense of what makes sense as a philosophical problem or argument, if it is to understand what it is the history of. As Williams wrote in 1965, there cannot 'be a history of ideas without identification of ideas; and to identify *what* ideas are embodied in a text, particularly a philosopher's text, is no less a matter of philosophical comprehension than of anything else' (2014a: 54).

At the same time, Williams is known for emphasizing that the history of philosophy can also be *done philosophically*, in a way that yields philosophy before it yields history (2005a: xiii). This third connection between philosophy and history involves practising the history of philosophy *as opposed to* the history of ideas. The key question then becomes what the historical texts mean *to us* rather than what they meant back then. To this end, one must reconstruct the problems and arguments of past philosophers as clearly and forcefully as one can. This requires one to be mindful of the present state of the discipline—not just because a forceful rational reconstruction of past philosophers' arguments is apt to profit from drawing on the most illuminating concepts and distinctions philosophy now has to offer, but also because what makes sense to us now as a pressing problem or a strong argument is, to a considerable degree, a function of current debates and concerns.[3]

At first glance, Williams's aspiration to produce history of philosophy as opposed to history of ideas seems simply to echo Grice's maxim that 'we should treat those who are great but dead as if they were great and living, as persons who have something to say to us *now*' (Grice 1989: 66). This maxim, Williams recalls, was approvingly cited by Peter Strawson as something that 'all Oxford philosophers would agree with' (2006b: 344). And indeed, Williams himself does not

---

[3] Arguably, Williams's problem-oriented elaboration of the genealogical method can be deployed to this end in the history of philosophy: it can make past thinkers speak to us by revealing how their concepts relate to our concerns in the sense of forming specific solutions to more generic problems we still face in some form; see Queloz (2023).

disagree with it. But he has a rather more ambiguous relationship to it than some of his Oxford mentors and colleagues.

Responding to Bryan Magee's characterization of Oxford philosophers in the 1950s as arguing with the ideas of Locke, Descartes, or any other dead philosopher as if they were a colleague in the Common Room, Williams grants that 'the approach to a lot of the philosophy of the past had what might be called a sturdily anachronistic character' (1982: 121). He describes his principal mentor, Gilbert Ryle, as urging his students to treat a text written by Plato 'as though it had come out in *Mind* last month' (Williams 2006c: 181). But Williams observes that this 'rather odd way of doing' the history of philosophy 'is rather productive and stimulating, and has in fact had a more robust legacy than some kinds of the history of philosophy which are just passively guided by an excessive concern for not being anachronistic' (1982: 121).

As comes out in this remark, Williams, self-consciously following Nietzsche, is critical of antiquarian approaches to the history of philosophy that entirely neglect to relate the past to present concerns. Gathering 'any old facts, merely for their own sake', he writes in *Truth and Truthfulness*, 'can sustain an individual life, but in a larger scheme of things historical research will not make sense unless it is driven by some question' (2002: 146). It is a 'Platonic misunderstanding' (2002: 142) of the ideal of disinterested inquiry to demand that historical inquiry should remain pure of any connection to present concerns. Just as 'a desire for fame

does not corrupt or undermine the search for truth, if what one will be famous for (if all goes well) is having found the truth' (2002: 142), so a connection to some present concern does not corrupt or undermine the disinterestedness of historical inquiry, if what will satisfy the concern (if all goes well) is knowledge of what actually happened, irrespective of what we would like to have happened. Which aspects of the past 'strike us and strike our historical curiosity' (Williams 2005a: xiv) can be a function our present situation even when what we are curious *about* is, in Ranke's famous phrase, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*—how things actually were. At the same time, the voices of yore will only mean much to us if they are imbued with meaning by our present concerns. Williams approvingly quotes Nietzsche's remark that it is 'only if we give them our soul, that [the works of earlier times] can go on living: it is *our* blood that makes them speak to *us*. A really "historical" presentation [*Vortrag*] would speak as a ghost to ghosts' (Williams 1993: 174n36).

However, Williams also acknowledges that if one seeks to tie past philosophical ideas as closely as possible to present concerns, one ends up doing so at the expense of one's ability to recover the distinctive significance they carried in their original context. There is a trade-off between the pursuit of present-day relevance and the pursuit of authenticity. The two cannot be pressed all the way in concert without eventually coming into conflict—rather as 'Impressionism, by exploring as intensely as possible the surface effects of light, was thereby debarred from giving as much information about structure as was accessible to some other styles of painting' (2006a:

257). There comes a point, for instance, at which our willingness to count the sheer boringness of a reconstructed philosophical view as a criticism shows that we are more interested in producing philosophy than history (2006d: 166). Similarly, we must realize that pursuing the maximally consistent interpretation of a philosophical text is not necessarily going to lead to the most authentic representation of it. As Williams himself writes of his attempts to make sense of Plato, for example:

> people spend enormous time (I have spent some myself) on trying to find interpretations of Plato's *Sophist* which make Plato's theories consistent. But if Plato's *Sophist* is about what we think it is about (and granted his theories about these very difficult subjects came when they did) it is wildly improbable that his theories on those subjects would succeed in being consistent. (2006d: 166)

This is why, alongside the history of philosophy that yields philosophy before it yields history, an important role remains for the history of ideas, according to Williams—as long as it is sufficiently informed by philosophy to achieve a proper grip on the ideas it traces the history of.

Moreover, Williams has strong reservations about ways of doing history philosophically that presuppose the transhistorical identity of the questions being asked. If we treat the great and dead as having something to say to us now because they were fundamentally asking the same questions that we are now asking, we ignore everything that is historical about the history of

philosophy. But by flattening the differences between our situation and the past, we deprive ourselves of the main rationale for turning to the past to begin with. This is why Williams came to dismiss Ryle's injunction to treat a text written by Plato as though it had come out in *Mind* last month as 'an idea which, if it means anything at all, means something that destroys the main philosophical point of reading Plato at all' (2006c: 181). Why bother learning Greek and reading Plato if all we find is what we were familiar with already, because we remain resolutely insensitive to anything that could set ancient philosophical thought apart from the latest journal articles?

'To justify its existence', Williams believes, the history of philosophy must not only be done philosophically, to 'sustain its identity as philosophy', but must also 'maintain a historical distance from the present' (2006a: 259). Just insofar as what the great and dead have to say to us now *differs* from what the living have to say to us can the past help us understand our ideas better by revealing unquestioned presuppositions and unasked questions in our current ways of going on. Again following Nietzsche, Williams sees the value of the history of philosophy as lying notably in its capacity to be *untimely*, to act against the age for the benefit of future ages (1993: 4; 2006a: 259). For it is in virtue of 'the possibility of the past philosophy's being untimely' that it can help 'to make strange what is familiar in our own assumptions' (2006a: 263). This 'alienation effect' allows us to use the respects in which the past is a foreign country

to our advantage.[4] If we are to succeed in this, however, we must not only draw on as much of

our own philosophical understanding as necessary to recover from the past something that

counts as philosophy; we must also draw on as much historical understanding as possible to

ensure that what comes out is not simply *our* philosophy:

> What we must do is to use the philosophical materials that we now have to hand, together with
> historical understanding, in order to find in, or make from, the philosophy of the past a
> philosophical structure that will be strange enough to help us to question our present situation
> and the received picture of the tradition, including those materials themselves. (2006a: 264)

By becoming familiar with the strangeness of past philosophy, and recovering the strangeness

of what is most familiar in our current ways of philosophizing, we put ourselves in a position

to challenge the presuppositions, questions, and answers characteristic of contemporary

debates instead of blindly perpetuating them.

A fourth way in which Williams connects philosophical and historical inquiry, finally, is by

insisting on the need for philosophy to involve itself not just in its own history, but in history

more generally. In an interview conducted in December 2002, Williams speaks of a 'historicist

turn' (2009: 198) having become increasingly prominent in his work over the previous ten to

fifteen years. In the same year, he published a piece in the *London Review of Books* entitled 'Why

---

[4] On the alienation effect and the uses Williams himself makes of it, see van Ackeren (2019).

Philosophy Needs History', which was much discussed at the time.[5] And in *Truth and Truthfulness*, he insists that 'philosophy cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do'—it 'must involve more than abstract argument, and ... must engage itself in history' (2002: 39). When dealing with concepts that have a significant history, such as the values of liberty, truthfulness, justice, or equality, that history 'stands in the way of their simply having a definition' (2001: 91), Williams argues, paraphrasing Nietzsche. That is why Williams felt the need to turn—as his close friend Isaiah Berlin had done in his own way—'from a form of philosophy which ignored history to a form of philosophy which did not ignore history' (2001: 92).

It is in terms of this fourth connection between philosophy and history that we can make sense of Williams's embrace, in his late work, of a form of the genealogical method. This involves not so much doing history philosophically as doing philosophy historically.

Distinguishing these two aspirations allows us to reconcile Williams's emphasis, in his remarks on the history of philosophy, on how *different* past philosophical thought is with his seemingly contrary emphasis, in his genealogical philosophizing, on unsuspected *commonalities* across history. For what the state-of-nature story opening his genealogical narrative in *Truth and*

---

[5] Reprinted in Williams (2014b).

Truthfulness reveals, after all, is that truthfulness possesses 'a common core ... developed or expressed ... in different ways' across history; in other words, Williams proposes to understand truthfulness in terms of 'historical variation' around a 'central core' (2014b: 407). Similarly, his historical reflections on the notions of responsibility and voluntary action in the ancient Greek world lead him to conclude that these notions are practically indispensable to any human society anywhere, because their indispensability follows already 'from some universal banalities' (1993: 55). And his genealogical sketch of the development of varying conceptions of liberty over the course of history turns on the idea that 'there must be a core, or a primitive conception, perhaps some universal or widely spread human experience, to which these various conceptions relate' (2005b: 76).

To some of his critics, this emphasis on transhistorical constants has seemed to be deeply at odds with his championing of historical difference. Jonathan Barnes, for example, concludes that 'Williams doesn't practice the HP [history of philosophy] he preaches' (2011: 21). If 'the point of reading philosophers of the past is to find in them something different from the present' (Williams 2006b: 344), why does Williams spend so much time arguing that people in very different historical circumstances fundamentally conceive of truthfulness, voluntariness, responsibility, and liberty in much the same way as we do?

The answer is that doing philosophy historically is a very different enterprise from doing history philosophically. While the latter aims to reconstruct the philosophy of the past without turning it into an echo chamber of contemporary debates, the former aims to use the history behind our ideas—as opposed to the history of their discussion in philosophical texts—in order better to understand how and why we came to live by these ideas, and why they have the contours they do. How we peculiarly conceive of truthfulness, voluntariness, responsibility, and liberty now and around here is one thing. But in order to place other conceptions of these things 'in a philosophical and historical space', as Williams puts it, we also need 'a more generic construction or plan' (2005b: 76). That is what we can gain from reflection on 'universal banalities' and from their representation using the narrative device of the 'State of Nature'. Grasping in more abstract terms what the central concerns are that most basically animate preoccupation with anything like these ideas allows us to reidentify them across different historical contexts (how would we know what counted as a different expressions of the same underlying ideas otherwise?). Moreover, this can help us to understand what kind of facts—whether general or parochial—an idea derives its importance from, and what might have led other societies to conceive of an idea differently from the way we conceive of it now. The concerns of the philosophical genealogist are therefore not at all the same as those of the historian of philosophy.

Williams thus connects philosophy and history in numerous ways between his work *in* the history of philosophy, *on* the history of philosophy, and on history's importance *to* philosophy. Better understanding these aspects of his oeuvre and how they relate is not only central to understanding his own thought, but also has valuable insights to offer to several currently raging debates—on the methodology of philosophy, on how and why to do history of philosophy, and on the relevance of the historical perspective to systematic philosophy. Given that Williams himself insisted that historical and philosophical inquiry were significantly intertwined, there is also reason to think that his historical work informed and might elucidate his more systematic work.

The present volume assembles interpreters of Williams's work and well-known experts in the various fields of scholarship it touches on to address the following four sets of questions:

(1) *Critical appraisal of his historical work*: How does Williams interpret past philosophers? In what way are these interpretations influenced by his own systematic views? What is the influence of his historical work on current exegetical debates?

(2) *Systematic significance of his historical work*: How does Williams's engagement with historical texts shape his own systematic views? What are his intellectual debts to thinkers of

the past, and which insights, including negative insights, did he carry over into his systematic work?

(3) *Methodology of the history of philosophy*: How can the history of philosophy be done philosophically (as judged by Williams's own example)? What should work in the history of philosophy aim to do for us, and how can these aims guide the way we do it? What mistakes should we avoid?

(4) *Metaphilosophy*: How should we do systematic philosophy in a way that is informed by history? What methods did Williams develop to this end? Why does philosophy need history?

The volume's thorough investigation of these various ways in which philosophy and history are intertwined in Williams's thought promises to be of interest not just to Williams scholars, but also to the growing number of people interested in how history can be done philosophically and how philosophy can learn from history.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to Williams's work *in* the history of philosophy and how it informs his systematic work. Three groups of four to five chapters each examine Williams's engagement with figures from antiquity, the Enlightenment, and modernity.

In 'Psychology, Ethics, and "Ethicized Psychology": Bernard Williams on Greek Thought and Greek Philosophy', Terence Irwin addresses Williams's contention that pre-Platonic Greek thought beyond philosophy—especially Homer and the tragedians, but also Thucydides— expresses ethical views superior to those of Plato and Aristotle, notably because the pre-Platonic Greeks lack a problematically 'ethicized' psychology revolving around a certain kind of belief in a will. Irwin challenges the contrast that Williams attempts to draw, arguing that the pre-Platonic Greeks in fact did believe in a will in just this sense, and would have been worse off if they had not. Nevertheless, Irwin sees philosophical value in Williams's approach to these ancient sources, and endorses the view that literary and historical argument can be appropriately combined with philosophical argument.

Sophie-Grace Chappell continues the critical examination of Williams's use of Greek tragedy in 'Agamemnon at Aulis: A Misfiring Example in Williams', focusing on Williams's discussion, in his classic paper on ethical consistency, of the tragic dilemma that Aeschylus represents Agamemnon as facing at the Greek port town of Aulis. After situating the Agamemnon example within Williams's use of examples more generally, Chappell argues that this turns out to be an unfortunate choice of example in light of its wider textual context. She proceeds to prise apart what Williams wants to say from what actually goes on in Aeschylus's play.

In 'Bernard Williams on Truth and Plato's *Republic* on Justice: What are Genealogical Arguments Good for?', Catherine Rowett compares Williams's genealogical method in *Truth and Truthfulness* with Plato's use of a similar method in the *Republic*: Plato, she argues, uses a naturalistic genealogy to explain and defend the value of justice in both political and individual ethics. Plato uses genealogy to ask not only whether justice pays, but also what justice is. This can help to avoid a certain form of reductionism that Rowett perceives in Williams's approach. It also secures a good fit between lived practice and theoretical analysis. She ends by speculating why Williams did not include Plato's *Republic* among his exemplars of naturalistic genealogies.

In 'The Invention of the Humanistic Discipline. Williams on Plato on Philosophy', Marcel van Ackeren then examines Williams's relation to Plato more broadly. Given how critical of Plato's ethical views Williams was in *Ethics and the Limit of Philosophy* and *Shame and Necessity*, one might be forgiven for thinking that Williams took a dim view of Plato. But as van Ackeren shows, Williams expressed great admiration for Plato in other places, and he offered an interpretation of Plato's conception of philosophy that he seems to have endorsed to a remarkable extent. Van Ackeren highlights three aspects of this interpretation: those concerning the role of the dialogue form, philosophy's aim to improve our lives, and the limits of philosophy. Through these reflections, Williams not only makes a lasting contribution to our understanding of Plato, but also helps us understand his own position.

John Cottingham turns to Williams's relationship to Descartes in 'Pure Enquiry, the Absolute Conception, and Convergence: Bernard Williams in Dialogue with Descartes'. After exploring why Williams ended up writing an entire book about Descartes, of all people—a committed theist who did not do much moral philosophy, thought of reason as a God-given and unerring endowment, and was a system-builder *par excellence*—Cottingham considers Williams's account of Descartes's project of 'pure inquiry'. On this account, pure inquiry aims at a special kind of truth about how things are independently of our local ways of conceiving them; it aims at an 'absolute' conception of reality'—a conception of the world 'as it seems to God, and therefore as it really is'. After considering Williams's argument that we need something like this conception if there is to be any knowledge, Cottingham evaluates Williams's notably unCartesian attempt to defend the idea of an absolute conception without invoking God. Finally, Cottingham turns to the notion of convergence and Williams's equally unCartesian suggestion that there is a radical asymmetry between the scientific and the ethical.

In 'Getting Round the Cartesian Circle', Gerald Lang takes a critical look at Williams's insightful solution to the notorious problem of the 'Cartesian Circle' in Descartes's *Meditations*. Williams's solution is to allow the meditator's intuitions that the proofs of God's existence are true to sustain a rule of ongoing acceptance of clear and distinct perceptions, even when these are not being experienced. This allows the meditator to go from momentary certainties to more durable items of knowledge and defeat scepticism. Lang quarrels with Williams's solution and offers an

alternative interpretation, however. He argues that Descartes's principal worry lay in distinguishing between perceptions which are clear and distinct and perceptions which merely seem clear and distinct. Descartes never questioned the epistemic status of the former class of perceptions, and the clear and distinct perceptions which matter to the cosmological argument for God can earn an exemption from sceptical doubt. Consequently, the Circle can be avoided.

With Lorenzo Greco's 'A Humean Williams and a Williamsian Hume', we come to Williams's relationship to a figure who does not loom as large in Williams's oeuvre as Plato or Descartes. Yet Greco shows that there are many elements in Williams's approach—from his early papers to his late reflection on genealogy—that can be interpreted in a Humean light, revealing more than just a superficial resemblance. And if Hume is read in light of Williams's philosophical concerns, he also appears to have been less of an optimist than Williams believed. Thus, Williams, although not a card-carrying Humean, turns out to have more in common with the Scotsman than first appears.

Paul Russell elaborates on this point in 'Recasting Responsibility: Hume and Williams'. Williams found in Hume a powerful philosophical ally who likewise resisted the impositions of what Williams called 'the morality system'. As Russell demonstrates, Hume and Williams share a commitment to providing a more 'truthful' and 'realistic' understanding of moral responsibility and our human ethical predicament, an understanding which echoes that of the

ancient Greeks. Significant differences remain, however. They include Williams's view that a naturalistic project of the kind that Hume pursues is of limited value when it comes to making sense of the morality system's illusions about responsibility and blame. It is, Williams maintains, only when we consider moral responsibility in genealogical terms, which give attention to the importance of culture and history, that we can find a way of exposing the various prejudices and illusions of the morality system.

In 'The Predicament of Temporality: Williams's Challenges to Kant's Practical Reason', Carla Bagnoli argues that Williams's criticisms of Kant's account of morality must be understood in light of their disagreement over the function of reason. The fundamental challenge they both respond to, she argues, is the tension between the temporal features of human agency and the allegedly categorical authority of some normative claims. This predicament is central to any theory of practical reason. For Kant, its roots lie in human embodiment, finitude and fragility, and the remedy is the normative standard of reason, which plays a constitutive role in unifying the agent across time. For Williams, by contrast, mortality is a condition of the possibility of valuing life, and agential unity is both unfeasible and undesirable. Bagnoli assesses the respective merits of these contrasting views.

Peter Kail, in 'Genealogy: Williams, Hume, and Nietzsche', critically examines the claims that Williams makes about the historical roots of his genealogical method in *Truth and Truthfulness.*

In particular, Williams illustrates the principal features of his method by harking back to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and David Hume. But Williams does not discuss these two thinkers in any great detail in this connection. Kail remedies this with a detailed discussion of how Williams's conception of genealogy relates to the genealogical approaches to be found in Nietzsche and Hume. This leads Kail to contest some of the key claims that Williams makes about these two thinkers.

In 'Ethics, Untimeliness and *Redlichkeit*: On the character of Williams's relationship to Nietzsche', David Owen offers the most detailed study to date of Williams's relationship to Nietzsche. He looks at the character and development of this relationship, and asks what difference Williams's encounter with Nietzsche made to Williams's philosophy. After sketching the ways in which Nietzsche appears in Williams's thinking prior to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Owen argues that this work marks Williams's recognition of his affinities with Nietzsche, which come to fruition in the transition of Williams's philosophy from a broadly Humean to a distinctively Nietzschean sensibility. The key question, however, is how we should understand the character of Williams's relationship to Nietzsche. Owen offers a nuanced answer by addressing Williams's engagement with classical Greek literature and philosophy, with naturalism and genealogy, and with truth and truthfulness.

In 'The Sense of the Past: Williams and Collingwood on Humanistic and Scientific Knowledge', Giuseppina D'Oro and James Connelly explore significant commonalities between Williams and R.G. Collingwood: in particular, their conception of what it takes to understand the past from a humanistic perspective and their commitment to the irreducibility of humanistic to scientific knowledge. D'Oro and Connelly argue that this defence of humanistic understanding against the threat of scientism aims to overcome the hegemony of scientific knowledge, but without endorsing a historicism that would be guilty of the reverse error, reducing all knowledge to humanistic knowledge. Williams and Collingwood attempt to tread a middle path between the view that all knowledge is at bottom scientific knowledge and the converse view that all knowledge is at bottom historical knowledge. As D'Oro and Connelly point out, however, this attempt was widely misunderstood: Williams was accused of identifying scientific knowledge with an "absolute" conception of reality, while Collingwood was charged with relativizing all knowledge, including scientific knowledge. Yet their philosophical contribution, D'Oro and Connelly argue, lies precisely in outlining a path between scientism and historicism.

In 'Williams's Debt to Wittgenstein', Matthieu Queloz and Nikhil Krishnan argue that several aspects of Williams's style, methodology, and metaphilosophy can be read as evolving dialectically out of Wittgenstein's own. After considering Wittgenstein's stylistic influence on Williams, especially regarding ideals of clarity, precision, and depth, they examine Williams's methodological debt to Wittgenstein—including his anthropological interest in thick concepts

and their point. Williams's explicit association, in the 1999s, with 'Left Wittgensteinianism', is then shown to be not a sudden conversion, but the product of a longstanding critical engagement with Wittgenstein's methodology and metaphilosophy: Williams reaches this position by envisaging a Wittgensteinianism that thinks in concrete sociohistorical terms, embraces genuine explanation, and relinquishes its insistence on the purity of philosophy. Moreover, this critique turns out to be continuous with Williams's advocacy of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. Finally, Queloz and Krishnan show that Williams inherits from Wittgenstein a certain understanding of how philosophy can help us to live.

The volume then continues with three chapters foregrounding Williams's methodological reflections *on* the history of philosophy.

In 'Why Bernard Williams is a Bad Example for Historians of Philosophy', John Marenbon argues that Williams shifted, in the course of his career, from recommending the 'rational reconstruction' of historical texts to advocating a subtler method, whereby philosophy from the past makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Yet Williams never abandoned his distinction between historians of philosophy and historians of ideas, Marenbon observes, and so never accepted that understanding philosophy from earlier times on its own terms is a genuinely philosophical activity. Nor did Williams question the fundamental assumption that history of philosophy is valuable only because of its value to real, first-order philosophers.

Marenbon concludes that the resulting method should not be imitated, and that it commits one to an excessively restricted view of what counts as philosophy, which leaves out most of the broad tradition of Western Philosophy.

Ralph Wedgwood, in 'The Iniquity of Oblivion', starts out from Williams's distinction between two ways of studying the philosophy of the past—the history of ideas and the history of philosophy. Wedgwood then examines the point of the history of philosophy thus conceived. He considers two possible answers to this question. The first focuses on the project of rescuing philosophical ideas from being undeservedly forgotten, while the second focuses on Williams's idea of a genealogy of our concepts. Wedgwood finds that the first answer is importantly true, and the kind of history of philosophy that it recommends is a crucial part of our discipline; by contrast, he concludes that the second answer fails to provide a sufficiently secure basis for the study of the history of philosophy.

In 'Williams, Berlin, and the Vindication Problem' Garrett Cullity invites us to read Williams as responding to the fact that the ethical questions we face, and the resources we have for answering them, are historically contingent and local. There is no "Archimedean point" from which to seek universal answers to ethical questions about the living of a human life, on Williams's view. This presents both a philosophical and practical challenge: How can a reflective awareness of the cultural contingency of ethical thought be reconciled with a commitment to

the seriousness of ethical questions, and the objectivity that this seriousness requires us to attribute to them? Cullity probes Williams's own response to that challenge, and makes the case for a different but related response, which draws on themes from one of Williams's intellectual mentors, Isaiah Berlin.

The volume ends with four chapters examining Williams's contention that philosophy should itself be done historically.

In 'Serpents in the Genealogical Garden of Eden: Why Williams's Genealogy is Excessively Historicist and Insufficiently Historical', Hans-Johann Glock seeks to put Williams's influential contribution to the movement of 'analytic genealogy' into perspective. First, Glock argues that Williams's genealogical method is not immune to the anti-genetic objection that both the content and the validity of most concepts depends on their function rather than their origin. Secondly, Glock criticizes the way in which Williams combines 'imaginary' and 'historical genealogy'. Thirdly, he urges that genealogy must be supplemented and controlled by non-genealogical philosophical analysis and non-philosophical theories about human nature and the evolutionary genesis of practices. The attractions of genealogy need to be balanced against the abiding merits of conceptual analysis, Glock cautions. Moreover, he sees reason to hope that recent advances in evolutionary theory and biological anthropology might replace state-of-nature fictions with testable scientific hypotheses.

In 'Williams's Historicist Methodology', Geraldine Ng explores in what sense Williams can be read as a historicist. She clarifies how Williams's ethical philosophy is committed to acknowledging the contingency and complexity of ethical life, and how, in the manner of R. G. Collingwood, Williams takes the task of appraising present and past agents to involve historical understanding. She then argues that Williams's strategy for defending ethical knowledge in relation to 'thick' concepts is of a piece with a historicist account of the normative force of internal reasons. Finally, she suggests that this reconsideration of reasons internalism yields a robust response to the common objection that Williams's ethical philosophy is merely negative. Williams's ethical philosophy is not merely negative, because his philosophical method is not merely analytic. Rather, in light of his earlier, implicit 'historicist turn', Williams's ethical philosophy emerges as historicist and positive.

Amanda Greene and Ilaria Cozzaglio then turn to the role of the historical perspective in Williams's political philosophy. In 'The Art of the Possible: Williams on Political Judgement and the Historical Perspective', they show that Williams places great emphasis on history when it comes to making judgements about political actors and political orders. At the same time, Williams combines this concern for historical context with universal considerations, such as drawing a distinction between order and tyranny. Greene and Cozzaglio show that this duality of contextualism and universalism is anchored in a respect for the limits of politics. They find

in Williams a challenge to the common view that judgement calls for philosophical analysis whereas action calls for political analysis. According to Williams, political judgements and political actions each require both a philosophical and a political sensibility. Only then can political critique have a point and make a difference. Finally, Greene and Cozzaglio propose that "answerability" to a historically situated audience is the distinctive trait of Williams's approach to political philosophy.

Finally, Miranda Fricker brings the volume to a close with 'A Project of "Impure" Enquiry—Williams's Historical Self-Consciousness', which considers how Williams's abiding interest in the borderlands between Philosophy and History shape his philosophy. As Fricker notes, Williams accused moral philosophy, and particularly moral theory, of overstepping the boundary marking the real 'limits' of the discipline; and in his later work, he explicitly advanced the idea of doing 'impure' philosophy, by which he meant philosophy that mixes itself with history. Through an examination of the complex impression left on Williams's historical self-consciousness by his engagements with Descartes and Wittgenstein, Fricker identifies several ways in which philosophy and history are closely intertwined for Williams. This allows her to draw out his positive vision of 'impure' philosophy—a philosophical style he took to contribute to nurturing philosophy as a humanistic discipline.

References

Barnes, Jonathan. 2011. Method and Metaphysics: Essays in Ancient Philosophy I. Edited by Maddalena Bonelli. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grice, Paul. 1989. Studies in the Way of Words. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Queloz, Matthieu. 2017. 'Does Philosophy Have a Vindicatory History? Bernard Williams on the History of Philosophy'. Studia Philosophica 76: 137–52.

—. 2023. 'Making Past Thinkers Speak to Us Through Pragmatic Genealogies'. In Historiography and the Formation of Philosophical Canons. Edited by Sandra Lapointe and Erich Reck, 171–91. New York: Routledge.

van Ackeren, Marcel. 2018. 'Philosophy and the Historical Debate: A New Debate on an Old Topic'. In Philosophy and the Historical Perspective. Edited by Marcel van Ackeren with Lee Klein, 1–17. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2019. 'Williams (on) Doing History of Philosophy: A Case Study on Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy'. In Ethics Beyond the Limits: New Essays on Bernard Williams's Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. Edited by Sophie-Grace Chappell and Marcel van Ackeren, 53–71. London: Routledge.

Williams, Bernard. 1969. 'Philosophy'. In General Education: A Symposium on the Teaching of Non-Specialists. Edited by Michael Yudkin, 138–64. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

—. 1982. 'The Spell of Linguistic Philosophy: Dialogue with Bernard Williams'. In Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy. Edited by Bryan Magee, 110–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 1993. Shame and Necessity. Berkeley: University of California Press.

—. 2001. 'Liberalism and Loss'. In The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin. Edited by Mark Lilla, Ronald Dworkin and Robert Silvers, 91–103. New York: New York Review of Books.

—. 2002. Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2005a. Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry. London: Routledge.

—. 2005b. 'From Freedom to Liberty: The Construction of a Political Value'. In In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne, 75–96. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006a. 'Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy'. In The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy. Edited by Myles Burnyeat, 257–64. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006b. 'An Essay on Collingwood'. In The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy. Edited by Myles Burnyeat, 341–60. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006c. 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline'. In Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline. Edited by Adrian W. Moore, 180–99. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006d. 'Political Philosophy and the Analytical Tradition'. In Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline. Edited by A. W. Moore, 155–68. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2009. 'A Mistrustful Animal'. In Conversations on Ethics. Edited by Alex Voorhoeve, 195–214. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2014a. 'The English Moralists, by Basil Willey'. In Essays and Reviews 1959–2002. Edited by Michael Wood, 52–5. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2014b. 'Why Philosophy Needs History'. In Essays and Reviews 1959–2002. Edited by Michael Wood, 405–12. Princeton: Princeton University Press.