Williams's Debt to Wittgenstein

MATTHIEU QUELOZ AND NIKHIL KRISHNAN

This chapter argues that several aspects of Bernard Williams's style, methodology, and metaphilosophy can be read as evolving dialectically out of Wittgenstein's own. After considering Wittgenstein as a stylistic influence on Williams, especially as regards ideals of clarity, precision, and depth, Williams's methodological debt to Wittgenstein is examined, in particular his anthropological interest in thick concepts and their point. The chapter then turns to Williams's explicit association, in the 1990s, with a certain form of Wittgensteinianism, which he called 'Left Wittgensteinianism'. It is shown how this is not a sudden conversion, but the direct product of Williams's longstanding critical engagement with Wittgenstein's methodology and metaphilosophy: Williams arrives at this position by envisaging a Wittgensteinianism that thinks in concrete sociohistorical terms, embraces genuine explanation, and relinquishes its insistence on the purity of philosophy. When properly understood, moreover, this critique turns out to be continuous with Williams's advocacy of a conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. Finally, it is shown that Williams inherits from Wittgenstein a certain understanding of how philosophy can help us to live, in particular the therapeutic ambition to liberate us from distortions in our self-understanding by assembling reminders.

1. Williams and Wittgenstein: The Myth of Unwavering Hostility

The main philosophical event in Bernard Williams's formative period was what Elizabeth Anscombe described as 'Wittgenstein's second cut': the appearance of Wittgenstein's later work. 'A philosopher makes a cut', she wrote, 'if he makes a difference to the way philosophy is done: philosophy after the cut cannot be the same as before' (2011: 181).[1] Yet it is apparent that Williams was not in any *obvious* sense a 'Wittgensteinian'. In his personal manner, he was famously un-Wittgensteinian: sociable where Wittgenstein was solitary, egalitarian where Wittgenstein sought hierarchies, transparent where Wittgenstein was esoteric, active in politics where Wittgenstein was conspicuously apolitical. Williams also harboured less hostility to academic philosophy and its conventions, insisting that an interest in philosophy could 'be driven by straightforward curiosity' (2001a: xvi) rather than

---

[1] Anscombe adopted this image from the Polish Wittgenstein scholar Bogusław Wolniewicz.

by a quest for salvation. He had, moreover, a great respect for historical scholarship and published extensively in the history of philosophy—a striking contrast with Wittgenstein's proud description of himself as 'a one-time professor of philosophy who has never read a word of Aristotle!' (Drury 2017: 65). And while Williams's prose could tend towards the overly compressed and epigrammatic, it never radically departed from the conventions of the academic essay: conclusions were generally supported by identifiable arguments, and positions distinguished from others in the previous academic literature.[2] In none of these senses was Williams any kind of Wittgensteinian. If there is a debt here, it must consist in something more subtle.

Williams's most detailed exegetical discussion of Wittgenstein's work is his 'Wittgenstein and Idealism' (1973c), delivered as part of a 1972–73 lecture series of the Royal Institute of Philosophy entitled *Understanding Wittgenstein*.[3] But it was widely perceived as a polemical attack on Wittgenstein and provoked a flurry of critical responses. In a recent response of his own, Stephen Mulhall remarks:

> A number of those well-acquainted with Williams and his writings have suggested to me that his essay was never intended to have such polemical significance. I find it hard to accept that suggestion, in part because of Williams's pretty much unwavering hostility to the work of Wittgenstein and his followers in his other writings. (Mulhall 2015: 324n4)

Is it true that Williams displays 'unwavering hostility' to the work of Wittgenstein in his other writings? Or did Williams have more sympathy for Wittgenstein than Mulhall allows? What, in other words, is the extent of Williams's debt to Wittgenstein?

We shall be arguing that once Williams's oeuvre is perused for more sympathetic remarks on Wittgenstein's philosophy, it turns out that hostility is outweighed by sympathy, and the debt deeper than the differences. As the case of Nietzsche reminds us, some philosophers acknowledge their debts by reserving their most unwavering hostility for those to whom they are most indebted. But we are claiming not that Williams treated Wittgenstein as a source of provocation or a handy target, but that many aspects of his philosophy—his style, his

---

[2] On the compressed quality of Williams's style, see Nussbaum (2003) and Babbiotti (2020, 2023).

[3] For a nuanced assessment of Williams's argument in this lecture, see Moore (2012: 268–71; 2019).

method, and his metaphilosophical views—can be read as evolving dialectically out of Wittgenstein's own.[4]

There are several biographical reasons for expecting Williams to have engaged Wittgenstein sympathetically throughout his career. Two such reasons pertain to his early academic associations. Williams's teacher at Oxford, Gilbert Ryle, imbibed Wittgensteinian ideas through various channels—first through his close friendship with Margaret MacDonald, who studied under Wittgenstein before coming to Oxford in 1937,[5] and later through his own acquaintance with Wittgenstein.[6] Asked about his formative influences in a 1983 interview, Williams identifies Ryle as his principal mentor, whom he credits with instilling in him a liberating wariness of philosophical 'isms'. But Williams also names David Pears as one of his most important influences, a major figure in Wittgenstein scholarship who was a model for the Wittgensteinian character in Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*.[7]

The third influence Williams names is none other than Wittgenstein himself. Williams admits to sharing the general excitement surrounding Wittgenstein's work in the 1950s:

> Like everyone else then … I was interested in the philosophy of that time. It was just when Wittgenstein's posthumous work was being published. In fact, his *Philosophical Investigations* came out in 1950, I think. And a lot of this sort of Wittgensteinian literature had been circulated before that—things that had not been published, but copies of which were in circulation informally, including the 'Blue Book' and the 'Brown Book', as they were called. Well, like everybody else, I was interested in that philosophy; I was turned on, excited about it. (1983: 41)

By Williams's own account, then, Wittgenstein was an important early influence on his philosophical formation. The fact that he misdates the publication of the *Philosophical*

---

[4] Wittgensteinian strands in Williams's thought are also emphasized in Queloz and Cueni (2021), Macedo Jr (forthcoming), and Fricker (2023); Owen (2001) shows how Williams-style genealogy can be understood in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of perspicuous representation; Glock (2006) compares and contrasts Williams's genealogical method with Wittgenstein's remarks on historical modes of philosophizing; Misak (2021) emphasizes how Williams spent time among the Wittgensteinians and picked up various pragmatist ideas from them.

[5] See Kremer (2022).

[6] See Tanney (2021: §1).

[7] Pears, though only slightly older than Williams, had already begun teaching courses on Wittgensteinian themes that Williams appears to have attended: 'In the early 1950s David Pears gave a seminar in Oxford together with Geoffrey Warnock on the subject of synthetic necessary truth. … This undertaking … expressed an attitude to philosophy and its problems which continued to shape his work, in particular his writing on Wittgenstein' (Williams 2001a: xiii). On Pears's influence on Williams, see Krishnan (2023: 265–66).

Investigations (which appeared in 1953) suggests that he was hardly immersed in Wittgenstein scholarship in the 1980s. But in a discussion of Wittgenstein's work with A. J. Ayer in the early 1970s, Williams speaks of Wittgenstein with admiration, and recognizes Wittgenstein's influence on himself in no uncertain terms: 'it would be preposterous and wrong to deny that one had been *influenced* very much by this work' (Chanan 1972).

Stanley Cavell is another, slightly later Wittgensteinian influence on Williams. The two became friends when Williams spent a few months in Princeton in the spring of 1963. Williams sent Cavell a copy of 'Morality and the Emotions', his inaugural lecture at Bedford College, in 1965, and dedicated his 1978 book on Descartes to Cavell and his wife.[8]

Admittedly, Cavell, especially in 1963, was more in thrall to J. L. Austin's work than to Wittgenstein's. This highlights a challenge in characterizing Williams's debt to Wittgenstein. Given the parallels between Wittgenstein and Austin, is there not a risk of mistaking debts to the latter for debts to the former? After all, Austin, who had, like Williams, been trained as a classicist, and was Williams's older contemporary at Oxford, was better positioned than Wittgenstein to shape the thinking of the young Williams. Moreover, Austin had proven an effective school builder, counting not only Oxford philosophers such as J. O. Urmson and Geoffrey Warnock among his followers, but also a number of Americans, including Cavell.[9] And in conversations with Cavell in 1955 and 1958, Austin had 'singled [Williams] out for praise among the young Oxford philosophers' (Cavell 2010: 149).

However, Austin was himself far more deeply influenced by Wittgenstein than he cared to admit (Rowe 2023: 3, 142–50); and, by the end of his life, Austin was in any case 'pained to find that the brightest young thinkers in Oxford were becoming disenchanted with his methods and outlook, and that, in particular, he could not attract the interest of Bernard Williams' (Rowe 2023: 587). Williams himself repeatedly denied that he had been much influenced by Austin (1995d: 220n1; 1999: 3; 2007: 145–46). 'I was always rather careful of Austin', he declared in an interview. 'I kept at a certain distance from him ... those who got close to him got involved in his style, which I did not find sympathetic' (Williams 1983).[10] At a more substantive level, they disagreed about the direction of British philosophy. 'I never believed that the problem with British philosophy was that it was liable to metaphysical

---

[8] Cavell records his recollections of that friendship in Cavell (2010: 149–50, 405–6, 16, 99–501). See Babbiotti (2023) for a detailed discussion of the Cavell–Williams connection that is also informed by their respective *Nachlass*.

[9] See Rowe (2023: 587).

[10] See Krishnan (2023: 264) for a discussion of what Williams saw as the numbing effect that Austin could have on younger philosophers.

excess and needed to be cut back', Williams explained, whereas Austin seemed to him 'like a Treasury official who thought that the British economy needed deflating, when there were already three million unemployed' (1999: 143).[11]

In keeping with his wariness of Austin, Williams consistently associates Cavell with Wittgenstein in his writings, and in particular with the demand that philosophy should listen to what it says (2006j: 207). Williams remarked of Austin that 'his considerable, though unfinished, contribution is something that one can to some extent take or leave' (2014a: 46). But he was unequivocal about Wittgenstein's importance to philosophy: 'His impact, both on the spirit of philosophy and on some particular issues, was enormous, and cannot be ignored' (2014a: 46).

Nor did Williams cease to make favourable remarks about Wittgenstein's philosophy later in his career. In a late piece on modernist philosophers, Williams called Wittgenstein 'the greatest of such philosophers' (2006c: 119). And in the credo-like lecture in which he summed up his view of philosophy as a humanistic discipline, he expressed great admiration for aspects of Wittgenstein's work, declaring that 'some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy, notably in the work of Wittgenstein, remain undeveloped' (2006e: 181)—an observation that blends praise for Wittgenstein's legacy with regret at what philosophers had so far managed to make of it. Williams was usually careful to exempt Wittgenstein from the hostility he directed at some of Wittgenstein's followers.[12]

To bring out the nature and extent of Williams's debt to Wittgenstein, we begin by considering Wittgenstein as a stylistic influence on Williams, especially as regards ideals of clarity, precision, and depth (section 2). We then examine Williams's methodological debt to Wittgenstein, in particular his anthropological interest in thick concepts and their point (section 3). In section 4, we turn to the fact that, in the 1990s, Williams started explicitly associating himself with a certain form of Wittgensteinianism, which he called 'Left Wittgensteinianism'. Section 5 shows how this is not a sudden conversion, but the direct product of Williams's longstanding critical engagement with Wittgenstein's methodology and metaphilosophy: Williams arrives at this position by envisaging a Wittgensteinianism that thinks in concrete sociohistorical terms, embraces genuine explanation, and relinquishes its insistence on the purity of philosophy. When properly understood,

---

[11] For further discussion of the similarities and differences between Austin and Williams, see Krishnan (2023: 264) and Queloz (forthcoming).

[12] See, e.g., Williams (1995d: 218; 2001a: xvi; 2005e: 35, 7; 2006f: 161).

moreover, this critique turns out to be continuous with Williams's advocacy of a conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. In the final section, we show that Williams inherits from Wittgenstein a certain understanding of how philosophy can help us to live, in particular the therapeutic ambition to liberate us from distortions in our self-understanding by assembling reminders.

2. Resisting Scientistic Ideals of Clarity, Precision, and Depth

Williams's style in philosophy was, to a considerable degree, what his coeval Richard Wollheim called a 'group style': a set of dispositions manifested in thought, speech, and writing that he shared with other philosophers, just as shared dispositions united artistic movements such as the Impressionists or the Pre-Raphaelites. That group style was what Williams characterized as the 'analytical' style: 'What distinguishes analytical philosophy from other contemporary philosophy … is a certain way of going on, which involves argument, distinctions, and … moderately plain speech' (2011: xvi). He added that analytical philosophy rejects 'obscurity', but sometimes finds 'technicality' necessary to achieve its ends. He himself did not care much about the 'analytical' label. However, he did care that his prose should be 'what I call "clear"' (2011: xvi).

Yet Williams's style was never *merely* 'analytical' in this generic sense. Even a cursory examination of his prose reveals distinguishing features: an occasionally mannered elegance, a wide range of references (often to high cultural artefacts such as opera and classical texts), a wider diction than most analytic philosophers employ, and the use of the full expressive resources of the English language: idiom, metaphor, analogy, imagery, compression, allusiveness, and the deliberate mixing of seriousness with dry wit. The individuality of his style is already hinted at in the crucial qualifying phrase in his remark above. '*What I call* "clear"' suggests that he recognized something idiosyncratic in his understanding of clarity.

Williams took it for granted that 'if philosophy, or anything like it, is to have a point, the idea of "getting it right" must be in place, and so must clarity and precision' (2014b: 367). Yet he insisted that 'there is more than one kind of all these things' (2014b: 367). And he regretted analytic philosophy's tendency to narrowly model its conception of these ideals on the natural sciences. To be sure, physics could explain complex behaviour in terms of simple laws, and mathematics could offer sharp definitions and irrefutable proofs. But it did not follow that, *in philosophy*, clarity likewise had to consist in the reduction of complexity to simplicity; or that precision required the total elimination of vagueness through sharp

definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions; or that 'getting it right' simply meant arriving at a logically unassailable argument.

A good place, then, to seek a description of what Wollheim might have called Williams's 'individual' style—analogous to the artistic dispositions that might distinguish Cézanne's Impressionism from Monet's—is to ask how his conceptions of clarity, precision, and 'getting it right' differed from those that other analytic philosophers drew from the natural sciences. It is in relation to these ideals that Wittgenstein offered Williams a constructive alternative.

First, Wittgenstein offered a kind of philosophy which, as Williams described it in an interview, left it ambiguous 'how far it is harnessed to an argument' (1982: 118). It was striking, Williams said, how few of the conventional markers of argumentative structure (e.g. 'therefore', 'since', and 'because') there are in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Instead, 'the work consists of curious sorts of conversations with himself, and epigrams, reminders', suggesting that philosophy had 'nothing to do with proof or argument at all'.[13]

Williams certainly never disdained argument, and explicitly condemned philosophers such as Richard Rorty, who emulated Wittgenstein in this respect, as allies of the very professionalization they scorned: a conversation held together only by 'well then' and 'that reminds me' and 'come to think of it' would not give anyone sufficient reason to listen: 'the only people who will take part in such a conversation are those who are paid to do so' (2014b: 367).

Nevertheless, Williams saw no reason why philosophy should not combine the argumentative mode with the conversational, the explicit with the suggestive. Martha Nussbaum summarized the reaction of many readers when she described Williams's compressed prose as 'suggestive and revealing rather than systematic and finished, reaching for imaginative insight rather than hobbled by conventions of analysis' (2003). One stylistic marker of this suggestiveness is Williams's frequent use of 'of course' to remind readers of some shared human experience.[14] Another is his pervasive use of the first-person plural in inviting readers to confront the implications of some belief or conception. 'My procedure', he explains at the outset of 'Moral Luck', 'will be to invite reflection about how to think and

---

[13] For a detailed discussion of the relation between Wittgenstein's style, method, and philosophy, see Pichler (2023).

[14] Some illustrative examples: 'The combination—discovery, trust, and risk—are central to this sort of [Romantic] outlook, as of course they are to the state of being in love' (2001b: 79). 'Of course, no sane person could really believe that the goodness of the world just consisted in people keeping their obligations' (1973a: 89). 'Telemachus can be held responsible for things he did unintentionally, and so, of course, can we' (1993: 54).

feel about some rather less usual situations, in the light of an appeal to how we—many people—tend to think and feel about other more usual situations' (1981a: 22). He refined this explanation in *Shame and Necessity*: in his usage, '"we" operates not through a previously fixed designation, but through invitation. ... It is not a matter of "I" telling "you" what I and others think, but of my asking you to consider to what extent you and I think some things and perhaps need to think others' (1993: 171n7). The result was a style that 'combined brilliant clarity with some of the properties of aphorism' (2003), as Nussbaum put it.

However, we need not accept Nussbaum's implicit contrast between 'clarity' and 'the properties of aphorism'. There are respects in which these suggestive qualities of Williams's style themselves serve his aspiration to clarity, precision, and 'getting it right'—it is only that Williams has a more Wittgensteinian conception of these ideals than the mainstream of analytic philosophy. As emerges from a conversation between Williams and Bryan Magee, the philosophical approach of the *Investigations* resembles not the natural sciences, but works of art that try 'to get people to see things in a certain way'; when that approach succeeds, it is not so much that we are compelled to adopt a new belief, but that we see things 'in a way uncorrupted by the theoretical oversimplifications of philosophy', thus 'recovering the complexity of ordinary experience' (1982: 118). The suggestiveness of Williams's prose can likewise be understood as serving to help us see things aright, undistorted by philosophical theory.

One might thus say that Williams adopts a Wittgensteinian conception of clarity. As Williams described the ideal of clarity at work in the *Investigations*: 'the idea of clarity, here, is connected with substituting complexity for obscurity. Philosophy is allowed to be complex because life is complex' (1982: 118). Instead of reducing complexity to simplicity, Wittgensteinian clarity replaces obscurity with complexity.

Out of this Wittgensteinian conception of clarity then falls a Wittgensteinian conception of precision, whereby philosophy only seeks to eliminate vagueness as far as real complexity will allow. A conception of precision not merely as *consistent* with complexity and vagueness but as *requiring* it puts Wittgenstein and Williams at odds with the aspiration to arrive at strict definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. They both see a place for a suggestive vagueness that reflects real and irreducible complexity. Williams explicitly endorsed this Wittgensteinian understanding of precision when he praised David Pears for his 'particular ironical taste for formulae which offer the tone or register of rigorous analysis but actually deliver a condition which is deliberately, and realistically, vague' (2001a: xv).

Such formulae exemplifying Wittgensteinian precision also pervade Williams's own work. His well-known account of the truth-conditions for statements about reasons for action is an example: he took it to be a necessary condition on an agent A having reason to perform an action ϕ that 'A could reach the conclusion that he should ϕ ... by a sound deliberative route from the motivations that he has in his actual motivational set—that is, the set of his desires, evaluations, attitudes, projects, and so on' (1995b: 35). Responding later in that paper to the worry that this leaves us 'with a vague concept of what an agent has a reason to do', Williams responded that this consequence was 'not a disadvantage of the position. It *is* often vague what one has a reason to do' (1995b: 38).[15] An account of reasons that tried to render the notion of 'sound deliberation' more sharply precise—for instance, by rendering the link between rationality and imagination entirely determinate—would simply distort the concept of a reason. The added precision of such an account would come at the cost of *Wittgensteinian precision*—a precision that allows certain forms of vagueness to reflect not eliminable obscurity, but ineliminable complexity.

At the same time, Williams contrasted these rigorously articulated but realistically vague formulae with a superficially similar combination of characteristics he found exemplified G. E. Moore's 'grinding style', which 'assists sometimes the appearance rather than the reality of precision, and is capable of conveying a kind of emphatic vagueness which curiously co-exists with the marks of solicitor-like caution' (2014c: 76). Williams's ideal of precision is not to combine apparent precision with actual vagueness, but to be as precise as possible while remaining as vague as the recognition of real complexity requires one to be.

His Wittgensteinian conceptions of clarity and precision also led Williams to a correspondingly different understanding of what it means to 'get it right' in philosophy. He became impressed by the thought that getting it right required more than coming up with clever and logically unassailable arguments. This resistance to mere technical sophistication—as opposed to the sort of sophistication that consists in having as many thoughts and feelings as one needs to make sense of the world—seems, as a matter of biographical fact, to have come to him notably through the Wittgensteinian influence of Anscombe, who, he reported, 'conveyed a strong sense of the seriousness of the subject, and how the subject was difficult in ways that simply being clever wasn't going to get round' (2009: 197).

---

[15] He doubles down on this in a later paper: 'It is not an objection to the internalist account ... that it involves vagueness and indeterminacy. This merely mirrors the truth that statements to the effect that A has a reason to do a certain thing are themselves vague and in various ways indeterminate' (2006i: 110).

Above all, however, Williams was stylistically indebted to Wittgenstein for helping him see the importance of imaginative and expressive power to getting it right. Those in the analytic mainstream who modelled philosophy on science held that getting it right had nothing to do with style and modes of expression and imagination. And indeed, 'the question of whether scientists have got it right or not', Williams acknowledges, 'is not much affected by the expressive power of their writing' (2014b: 368). But philosophy is different. A philosopher's contribution to the subject, especially in moral and political philosophy, is not independent from the imaginative and expressive power of their work. Ethics can be, as the title of the preface to the French edition of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* has it, 'a matter of style' (2021). To convey a certain picture of human life, to integrate it with what the philosopher cares about, and to adequately express those concerns—all this can be part of what it means to get it right in philosophy. Getting it right can require one not just to say true things, but to say the right things in the right tone, which requires certain imaginative and expressive powers. As Williams was fond of saying, philosophers' observations need not just to *be* true, but to *ring* true.[16]

It is in Wittgenstein's work that the young Williams found a salutary example of philosophy that sought to ring true:

> Oxford philosophy in the fifties was very clever … But the philosophical tone had to be kept down, muted[,] English, dry, and that was a loss. That is why in a way I was drawn to the Wittgensteinian thing to some extent. Wittgenstein put much greater weight on the imaginative and the unpredictable aspects of philosophy. (1983: 41)

Williams warns that analytic philosophy's 'plain style' modelled on natural science 'can become a dead weight under the influence of the scientific model' (2014b: 368). The philosophical outlooks that show the 'most enthusiasm for natural sciences', Williams tells Ayer, suffer from a tendency to be 'brutally optimistic, unimaginative, short on … certain deeper perceptions about human life and values' (Chanan 1972). Not for Williams the austere, Eddingtonian naturalism that views the world as largely empty, with a few scattered electric charges rushing about. Williams dislikes those 'skeletal metaphysical pictures', preferring what he describes as 'emotionally and morally denser pictures of a form of life', which Williams explicitly thinks of as 'represented by somebody like Wittgenstein' (Chanan 1972). The working picture that other twentieth-century philosophers such as Carnap and

---

[16] See Williams (2001b: xv; 2006j: 206).

Russell have of human life, Williams elaborates, lacks that emotional and moral density, and consequently lacks *depth* in its perception of human life and values, in a way that Wittgenstein's picture of human life does not:

> if you turn to Carnap or, indeed, Russell, come to that, and then compare that with Wittgenstein, just in terms of the tone about what human life is like, I think, although one may well repudiate a lot of Wittgensteinian propositions, particularly his obsession with the quasi-religious issue of suicide and some other topics, it would be difficult to deny that there is some form of *depth* in Wittgenstein's philosophy—which there is also, for instance, obviously in the philosophy of Nietzsche—which is notably lacking in the philosophies of, say, Russell and Carnap. (Chanan 1972)

Williams here casts Wittgenstein as offering a model of philosophical depth, which comes in part from 'the tone about what human life is like'. It is true that Williams mentions Nietzsche in the same breath, as another model of depth. But Nietzsche was anathema in the Oxford of the 1940s and 50s, and Wittgenstein would have loomed far larger in the intellectual scene of Williams's formative years, both directly and through his influence on Ryle, Pears, Cavell, Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch.[17] It is therefore a plausible surmise that it was rather Wittgenstein who acted as a formative model of philosophical depth for Williams. Indeed, Williams avowed earlier in that conversation that Wittgenstein's work had influenced him 'partly because of the enormous imaginative power ... there is such enormous literary power' (Chanan 1972). Wittgenstein embodied the idea that getting it right could require one to deploy imaginative and expressive powers to convey the kind of depth and density that philosophy must have if it is to be truthful to human experience.

Williams thus inherited something of Wittgenstein's resistance to scientism—not, however, 'Wittgenstein's hatred of the cockiness of natural science', which Williams found hard 'to distinguish from a hatred of natural science' (1973c: 91), but rather his resistance

---

[17] Along with Hegel, Nietzsche was thought to be connected with totalitarianism and was 'ideologically suspect' (Williams 1982: 117). And even after Nietzsche was well on his way to being rehabilitated in the Anglophone world, it took Williams years to warm to the self-described 'hermit of Sils-Maria'. The Nietzsche scholar Michael Tanner remembers how, as late as the early 1960s, Williams was still capable of picking up Tanner's copy of *Beyond Good and Evil* and wondering: 'Why do you waste time over rubbish that Joad could have refuted?' (O'Grady 2003) (C. E. M. Joad was a broadcasting personality and populariser of philosophy who came to prominence with the BBC programme *The Brains Trust* in the 1940s). It was only later that Williams became seriously interested in Nietzsche, to the point of planning a book about him. See Owen (this volume) for the most detailed account to date of Williams's relationship to Nietzsche.

to stylistic ideals modelled on natural science.[18] The scientism Williams resisted was what he called the 'scientism of style' (Williams 2006j: 204).[19] The resistance to the sort of cleverness that oversimplified the phenomena so that it could meet arbitrary standards of theoretical virtue was itself an idea well expressed in *Investigations* §107, where Wittgenstein speaks of how the 'crystalline purity of logic' is too cheaply won if it is simply a requirement placed in advance of inquiry, rather than a product of an inquiry successfully conducted. Wittgenstein's famous motto in relation to logic and language, 'Back to the rough ground!', would serve equally well as an epigraph to most of Williams's ethical writings, and an encapsulation of his style.

3. Thick Concepts and their Point: A Functionalist Anthropological Method

If we turn now to Williams's methodological debt to Wittgenstein, it is striking that Williams makes a number of observations about Wittgenstein's methodology that apply equally to himself. One example is his remark that Wittgenstein 'wished to recall philosophy to the world' (Williams and Montefiore 1966: 10). That is a methodological commitment he adopted himself. This comes out most clearly in his last book, which defends the value of truth against its postmodern deniers. 'Philosophy here, on lines variously laid down by Hume, Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, needs to recall us to the everyday' (2002: 10), he writes, stressing the need to remember that there are everyday truths, and that they are important.

Williams also remarks of Wittgenstein that he 'emphasises concrete practices and shared understandings as against abstract ethical theory, and indeed has no time for that sort of theorizing' (2021: 277). Again, the same could be said—with qualifications[20]—of Williams. Like Wittgenstein, Williams takes considerations arising from the way concrete practices actually work, and from the shared understandings we bring to these practices, to carry more

---

[18] On Wittgenstein's resistance to scientism and his defence of the autonomy of humanistic understanding against encroachment by the natural sciences, see Hacker (2011), who also sketches the history of the notion of *humanism*.

[19] On Williams's resistance to the 'scientism of style', see also Fricker (2023).

[20] Although Williams was famously an opponent of *moral* theory, he was in favour of systematic theorizing in other areas of philosophy if the scientific model of theory was made appropriate by the systematic nature of the phenomena (as in the philosophy of language), or if there were strong practical demands for some degree of systematization (as in political and legal philosophy). On the practical demands for systematization that made Williams sympathetic to theory in political and legal philosophy, see Cueni and Queloz (2021).

weight than considerations of systematicity arising from the desire for a philosophical theory, which threaten to distort those understandings.[21]

Above all, however, the pursuit of 'emotionally and morally denser pictures of a form of life' drove both Wittgenstein and Williams away from physical or biological explanations towards anthropological or ethnographic descriptions.[22] This preference for anthropological or ethnographic descriptions is manifest in Williams's emphasis on the explanatory and justificatory value of what he influentially labelled 'thick' ethical concepts.[23] It also comes out in his repeated insistence on the importance to philosophy of what he called 'the ethnographic stance', whereby, like an ethnographer, one 'understands from the inside a conceptual system in which ethical concepts are integrally related to modes of explanation and description' while being 'conscious that there are alternatives to any such system' (1986: 204).[24]

Relatedly, Williams also adopts what he recognizes is 'basically a Wittgensteinian idea' (2011: 263n7), namely the idea that we would be unable to see how people 'go on' from one application of a thick ethical concept to the next 'if we did not share the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has its point' (2011: 157). Williams notes that he first encountered this idea in a graduate class convened by Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, and Basil Mitchell in the early summer of 1954.[25] It seemed to him to remedy a signal failing of ordinary language philosophy as predominantly practised in Oxford during his student days, namely its lack of interest in the background of contingent facts and human concerns from which a concept or distinction derives its point:

> what we tended to do was to pick up some distinction or opposition, and go very carefully
> into it and into the various nuances that might be attached to it, and order them, or state

---

[21] See especially chapter 6 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (2011: 126). See Diamond (2018) for a sympathetic discussion of an example of this in Williams's work.

[22] A helpful overview of Wittgenstein's views on philosophical method is given by Glock (2017b). For detailed accounts of the respects in which Wittgenstein exemplified an 'anthropological and ethnographical approach', see Hacker (2013) and Brusotti (2014). For Williams's account of 'the ethnographic stance' and its importance to philosophy, see Williams (1986: 203–4; 1995d: 207; 1995f: 239; 2002: 50–1; 2006h: 61; 2011: 157; 2021: 278). He also endorses a form of what he variously calls 'a priori anthropology', 'ideal anthropology', or 'philosophical anthropology' in Williams (1997: 27; 2002: 10; 2005c: 76; 2006h: 61).

[23] Williams would in turn have been familiar with Geertz's (1973: 6) advocacy of 'thick descriptions' in anthropology, not least since Geertz borrowed the phrase from Ryle (2009a: 489; 2009b: 497).

[24] See Williams (1986: 203–4; 1995d: 207; 1995f: 239; 2002: 50–1; 2006h: 61; 2011: 157; 2021: 278).

[25] Williams only mentions a seminar with Foot and Murdoch in the 1950s, but Murdoch's teaching record shows that this class, entitled 'Analysis in Moral Philosophy', was the only one she co-taught with Foot in that period (Broackes 2011: 5).

them, without enough reflection on what background made this set of distinctions, rather than some other, interesting or important. (1982: 119)

For Williams, Wittgenstein did not simply emphasize that justifications come to an end, i.e. that 'at various points we run into the fact that "this is the way we go on"' (Williams 2006e: 196); significantly, he also encouraged philosophers to ask *why* we go on in this way—what the *point* of a given use of language is, if it has one at all.[26] As Wittgenstein himself put it, a 'use of language has normally what we might call a *point*. This is immensely important' (1989: 205). One way of figuring out what, if anything, the point of something is, Wittgenstein thought, is to look at its history: 'if you wish to give the point, you might tell the history of it' (1989: 204)—although, as Wittgenstein remarked at the end of the *Philosophical Investigations*, 'we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purpose' (2009: II, §365).[27]

Wittgenstein did not suffer from the Panglossian presumption that nothing is pointless. He explicitly wondered whether there was a point to everything we do (1989: 203), and emphasized that it is only in relation to certain facts about people's interests and concerns, and the world in which they pursue them, that a use of language has a point. If people or the world were sufficiently different, that use of language would become pointless. Even as things are, not every use of language necessarily has a point. As Williams observes, it is central to Wittgenstein's critique of certain forms of philosophizing that some uses of language might be 'alienated from *every* human purpose' (2006j: 210), as Williams puts it: 'They are, so to speak, timelessly out of place, because they fit no conceivable human purpose, except the misguided philosophical impulse which they are supposed to illustrate' (2006j: 210).[28]

Williams self-consciously follows Wittgenstein in approaching almost any puzzling conceptual practice by asking what its point or function is—*why* we go on in this way. To the twenty-nine-year-old Williams, this methodological strategy stood out as an underappreciated continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, as he observed in his 1958 review of a collection entitled *The Revolution in Philosophy*. Though the collection ranged over everything from Bradley, Frege, Moore and the Vienna Circle to

---

[26] See also Wittgenstein (2009: §§467–70).

[27] On Wittgenstein's scattered remarks on history and historical modes of philosophizing, see Glock (2006), who also compares and contrasts them with Williams's views on the topic.

[28] As Williams remarks in an interview with Bryan Magee, this led Wittgenstein to harbour 'great doubts about the existence of philosophy at all, except as a deep aberration that happens when our conceptions of ourselves go wrong' (1982: 120).

reflections on the state of the discipline and the role of the imagination, Williams devotes the bulk of his review to calling for further research on strands in Wittgenstein's work that he thinks come closest to constituting the 'essence' (1958: 67) of the post-war 'revolution' in British philosophy. What he singles out as 'certainly lacking' from the book is a 'unified account of the work of Wittgenstein' (1958: 67) that would help us to make sense of the relation between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> There are many similarities and connections between the two works, which need exploration. ... Sometimes it almost looks as if the afterthoughts and marginal comments of the *Tractatus* grew in Wittgenstein's thought until they edged out the central thesis: casually at 6.211 he remarks 'in philosophy the question "Why do we really use that word, that proposition?" constantly leads to valuable results', and in the *Investigations* we find the results of asking just this sort of question. (1958: 67)

Where we also find the results of asking just this sort of question is in the works that Williams himself went on to write. It is an unobtrusive but abiding feature of his method that he asks after the point or function of the concepts and practices he examines. What is achieved *by* thinking and speaking in this way? How does it help us to live? Of course, Wittgenstein was not alone in directing philosophical attention to the point of individual concepts and practices. But he was a particularly influential exponent of what has lately been termed 'Cambridge Pragmatism' (Misak 2016)—a tradition that includes F. P. Ramsey, Hugh Mellor, Edward Craig, Simon Blackburn, and Huw Price, and also influenced post-war Oxford.[29] And it is revealing that what stood out to the young Williams as a continuity in Wittgenstein's work was its pragmatist penchant for asking *why* people think and speak as they do.

It was notably for raising this functionalist question about the concept of knowledge that Williams commended Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990), which offered a template for Williams's own state-of-nature narrative in *Truth and Truthfulness*. What Craig's guiding question crucially introduces, Williams explains,

> is the notion of function, and that step itself does some of the work. If one sees the concept of knowledge as having a function—in particular, a function in relation to very

---

[29] On Oxford pragmatism, see Glock (2017c), Kremer (2022), and Misak (forthcoming).

basic needs—this in itself helps one to see why it has the features it has, and can discourage one from less fruitful approaches. (2002: 31–2)

But where did Craig get the idea of asking after the function of the concept of knowledge? At least part of the answer, as Craig acknowledged in his Wittgenstein Lectures in Bayreuth, was Ludwig Wittgenstein.[30] Craig declared himself indebted to Wittgenstein for 'loosening up the concept of a concept', giving him licence to regard the concept of knowledge as an instrument serving some function, and to contemplate the possibility that its function might even be the most important thing about it (1993: 39–40).[31]

In Williams's oeuvre, however, the interest in the function or point of conceptual practices long predates Craig's book, and is something that Williams firmly associated with Wittgenstein—in his 1972 discussion with Ayer on 'the point' of religious practices, for example, and again in his 1973 lecture on Wittgenstein and idealism, where he notes that Wittgenstein sometimes relates people's 'practice in some broadly functional way to their interests' (1973c: 91). Williams's interest in the point of conceptual practices is already evident in the way he approaches the moral/nonmoral distinction in his first book, *Morality*, which inquires into 'the *point* of selecting certain motives for *moral* approbation' (2001b: 68).

This methodological interest in the point or function of conceptual practices endures throughout Williams's later work.[32] Discussing the concept of obligation, he seeks to 'help us to understand the point and value of living a life in which obligations counted as ethical reasons' (2006g: 73). In considering the morality system as a whole, he wonders about 'the

---

[30] This is only part of the story; a full account would have to mention Craig's debts to Carnap and Hume as well as his inspiration by Williams's own work on the concept of knowledge (1973b: 146; 2005b: ch. 2), for which Williams declared himself indebted to 'the Australian philosopher Dan Taylor, who may have been influenced in this direction by John Anderson' (1995h: 211n4). See Queloz (2021a) for a detailed discussion of these connections.

[31] Oswald Hanfling's (1985) approach, which bears some resemblance to Craig's, even more explicitly affiliates itself to Wittgenstein.

[32] Examples abound: his assessment of the characteristic psychology of blame remains controlled by a sense of 'the purpose of blame' (1995a: 15)—see Queloz (2021b) for a more detailed exegesis along these lines. In thinking about ethical theory, he asks after 'the point of ethical theory: who needs such a theory? What for?' (2005d: 54)—see Cueni and Queloz (2021). His account of responsibility is guided by the conviction that 'responsibility has a function' (2006d: 125), and by the 'purposes that are served by discriminating between actions in terms of the voluntary' (1993: 67)—see Queloz (2022). Writing on tort law, he insists that philosophers must understand *why* tort law has the principles it does (1995g: 492–93)—see Queloz (forthcoming). Reflecting on 'liberty' and 'freedom', he warns against missing 'the point of why we want these terms in the first place' (2005c: 79)—see Queloz (2023).

point of this conception of morality' (1995c: 241). The paper he presented at the Fifth Kirchberg Wittgenstein Symposium in 1980 proposes to draw on 'the function of the all-in *ought* of practical deliberation' (1981b: 120) to explain why this concept has just the features it does. Even in his brief essay on censorship, he finds room to consider when 'the point of censorship is lost' (2005a). And of course, *Truth and Truthfulness* aims to show that truthfulness 'gets its point ultimately from the human interest, individual and collective, in gaining and sharing true information' (2002: 126). It even implements Wittgenstein's methodological suggestion for how to achieve this: by telling a partly fictional 'history' or 'genealogy' of truthfulness.[33]

At the same time, Williams strove to be sensitive to the fact that we do not simply value truthfulness instrumentally, as perhaps we value money, but regard truthfulness as something intrinsically valuable. The ultimate explanation of that fact may refer to its instrumental value, but the *phenomenology* of valuing truthfulness is not instrumental-minded (2002: 92–3). Here, as elsewhere, Williams makes a point of asking what the psychology of an agent who lives by the concept or practice in question looks like: what sorts of considerations actually figure in the deliberations of such an agent, and under what descriptions?

But he does not leave it at that. He *combines* a realistic description of the phenomenology of a way of thinking with a more detached account of the human concerns that this way of thinking ties in with. Fusing the one-eyed view of how something phenomenologically presents itself to us with the equally one-eyed view of what function it performs, he arrives at a stereoscopic view of it. That is part of how he achieves a sense of depth.

This combination of functionalist anthropology with 'emotionally and morally denser pictures of a form of life' is characteristic of Wittgenstein, who described his ambition to capture both the 'dignity' of rules and their usefulness without collapsing one into the other:

> What I have to do is as it were to describe the office of a king;—in doing which I must never fall into the error of explaining the kingly dignity by the king's usefulness, but I must leave neither his usefulness nor his dignity out of account. (1978: V, §3)

Williams might have said the same of his treatment of the intrinsic value of truth (2002), which aspires to leave neither its intrinsic value nor its instrumental value out of account

---

[33] For comparisons of Wittgenstein's 'remarks on the natural history of human beings' (2009: §415) with Williams's genealogical method, see also Owen (2001) and Glock (2006).

while avoiding the error of spelling out its intrinsic value in terms of its instrumental value. Like Wittgenstein, Williams insists on the need to explore functional hypotheses as to why we engage in certain decidedly non-functionalist ways of thinking without reducing one to the other. These deep methodological consonances make for clear evidence not just of coincidence, but of a genuine debt of influence.

4. Williams's Left Wittgensteinianism

In the 1990s, Williams became more open about the Wittgensteinian roots of his own thinking. He explicitly associated himself with a certain form of Wittgensteinianism, which, in an echo of the traditional distinction between Right and Left Hegelians, he called 'Left Wittgensteinianism'. Hegel had rejected—as Wittgenstein later would—the Kantian focus on thin and abstract concepts, and emphasized the importance of thick concepts in constituting shared customs and a communal way of life. But Hegelians soon split into a more conservative and a more radical camp, entrenching a distinction between the 'Right Hegelian' emphasis on the need to embrace tradition and its culmination in the Prussian state, and the 'Left Hegelian' emphasis on the need for a radical critique of the inherited order.[34] Though this contested distinction made the factions appear more unified and self-conscious than they in fact were, it had the virtue of registering that Hegelianism was not one thing, but could be elaborated in different directions.

As Williams and David Bloor both argued—apparently independently—in 1992, a parallel divergence is possible in the elaboration of Wittgensteinian ideas. Wittgensteinianism is not one thing, and the fact that many interpretations of Wittgensteinian ideas have been of the 'Right' variety, encouraging the conservative embrace of inherited concepts, does not foreclose the possibility of a 'Left' Wittgensteinianism capable of making sense of the radical critique of inherited concepts.[35] 'So far as critique is concerned', Williams remarks in an essay first published as 'Left-Wing Wittgenstein, Right-Wing Marx' (1992),[36]

---

[34] See Toews (1985) and Breckman (2019).

[35] A variety of scholars have focused on the structurally conservative aspect of Wittgenstein's thought: Pitkin (1972: 7–8); Bloor (1983, 1997, 2000); Norris (2009); Nyíri (1976, 1982); Plotica (2015); Rorty (1983; 1989: 58-60); Temelini (2015). Approaches that put a broadly Wittgensteinian picture of our conceptual apparatus to radically critical use include Pleasants (1999, 2002), Celikates (2015), and Jaeggi (2016).

[36] It was then republished under the title 'Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism' (2005e) in the posthumous *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, from which we cite above. The essay was recently republished in *Common Knowledge* under yet another title, 'Left-Wing Wittgenstein' (2019).

there seems no reason why non-foundationalist political thought, characterized in the way that Wittgenstein's philosophy suggests, should not take a radical turn. There could be, one might say, a Left Wittgensteinianism ... we can follow Wittgenstein to the extent of not looking for a new foundationalism, but still leave room for a critique of what some of 'us' do in terms of our understanding of a wider 'we'. (2005e: 37)

On the issue of how Williams conceives of the grounds of radical critique, this essay on Left Wittgensteinianism is among the most illuminating in Williams's oeuvre. Complementing his rejection of foundationalism and Rortyan ironism in 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', it stresses the possibility of non-foundationalist radical critique in political philosophy.[37]

Yet Williams does not appear to take Left Wittgensteinianism to be limited to political philosophy. In the preface he writes for the French translation of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, which has only recently appeared in the original English (2021), Williams talks about Wittgenstein at some length, referring to him nine times and reiterating his case for the possibility of a 'Left Wittgensteinianism' in the context of moral philosophy. Philosophy, Williams insists in that preface, 'has to tell us how we can come to embrace new ethical concepts' (2021: 278). But an account that 'considers only the concepts that we pick up from our local community', as most Wittgenstein-inspired work in moral and political philosophy has tended to do, 'will find it hard to explain the criticism and alteration of ethical practices' (2021: 278). This 'Right Wittgensteinianism', as Williams calls it, encourages an 'enthusiasm for the folk-ways' which amounts to 'the continuation of Hegelian conservatism by other means' (2021: 278).[38]

This time, however, Williams not only points out that there *could* be a Wittgensteinian analogue to Left Hegelianism, but that there *should* be (2021: 278):

---

[37] For an interpretation of Williams's Left Wittgensteinianism in the context of political philosophy that brings out how it contrasts with Rortyian ironism and foundationalism, see Queloz and Cueni (2021).

[38] As Bloor sketches the contrast, 'Left Wittgensteinians' offer interpretations that are 'more historical, social, and materialist-scientific', treating 'Wittgenstein's ideas as embryonic social-scientific theories' (1992: 281), while 'Right Wittgensteinians' offer interpretations of Wittgenstein that draw on internal relations as ammunition *against* sociological approaches. For Bloor, the Right Wittgensteinians paradigmatically include G. P. Baker, P. M. S. Hacker, S. G. Shanker, Michael Lynch, Marie McGinn, and 'other antisociological commentators' (1992: 273; see also 281). The only Right Wittgensteinian Williams identifies by name is Peter Winch, whom Bloor does not mention, but who is hardly best described as 'antisociological'. This suggests that Bloor's and Williams's contrasts do not exactly coincide, though Williams's critique of Winch's emphasis on internal relations at the expense of genuine social-scientific explanation echoes Bloor's critique, and suggests that Winch is not sociological enough for Williams.

there should also be a Wittgensteinian analogue to Left Hegelianism: this will be a view that accepts the insights about the thickness of our primary ethical understanding and its relation to social practices, but leaves room for a radical critique in the name of interests not adequately expressed in the folkways. (2021: 278–9)

This would be a peculiar way of introducing a French audience to his magnum opus in ethics unless Williams meant to invite his readers to draw three conclusions: that the book is more deeply immersed in Wittgensteinian ideas than he cared to make explicit to an Anglophone audience when it was first published; that there is an overlooked form of Wittgensteinianism that Williams considers viable not just in political, but also in moral philosophy; and that *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* can itself be read as advocating some form of Left Wittgensteinianism as an attractive alternative to ultimately unsuccessful foundationalist attempts to 'justify the ethical life from the ground up' (2011: 32).

5. Williams's Methodological and Metaphilosophical Critique of Wittgenstein

Williams's late and seemingly sudden endorsement of Left Wittgensteinianism becomes completely unsurprising once one reconstructs how it falls out of his earlier critical engagement with Wittgenstein's methodology and metaphilosophy. Left Wittgensteinianism, we argue, is what Williams ended up with after correcting the shortcomings he perceived in extant forms of Wittgensteinianism. And when properly understood, his critique of these shortcomings turns out to be continuous with his advocacy of a conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline.

We saw that Williams follows Wittgenstein in two important respects: in concentrating on thick concepts, and in asking after the point of our conceptual practices. But Wittgenstein remains noncommittal about what the exact boundaries of '*our*' conceptual practices are. Is he talking about a particular subset of human beings? All human beings? All rational creatures? Where he contrasts 'our' conceptual practices with those of others, he is not interested in offering genuine explanations of why different forms of life differ;[39] rather, the different forms of life are primarily meant to aid self-understanding. This means that they can also be imaginary: by considering, even purely notionally, why people might think

---

[39] Particularly in his middle period (1929–1936), Wittgenstein was intent on contrasting the giving of reasons with the citing of causes, and on that basis developed a stark dichotomy between rational justification and causal explanation. For a synthetic exposition of the passages in Wittgenstein to this effect, see Queloz (2016, 2017).

differently if they had different interests, or if certain general facts of nature were different, we can come to see the contingent dependence of the way we actually think on certain extraconceptual presuppositions: our own way of thinking will be revealed to derive its point from certain facts about us and our environment, and to be pointless without them. As Williams puts it, Wittgenstein's imagined alternatives to our form of life are not so much 'alternatives *to* us' as 'alternatives *for* us', in that 'the business of considering them is part of finding our way inside our own view' (1973c: 91). They are precisely not offered up as real alternatives calling for empirically informed explanation, but as imaginative crutches designed to elucidate our own form of life.

Combined with Wittgenstein's substantive focus on the 'universalistic preconditions on interpretation and intelligibility' (Williams 2006a: 358), which is to say the general conditions of the possibility of understanding and linguistic meaning, these ideas pulled Wittgenstein's functionalist anthropological method towards a conception of philosophy as an exclusively *a priori* enterprise that remains indifferent to empirical information from the human sciences: it takes no interest in what exactly marks off a clearly delimited local 'us' from other expressions of human life, and it does not really seek to explain these differences in terms of contingent sociohistorical developments. Wittgenstein's anthropology is a *philosophical* anthropology to the end.

Williams, by contrast, resists this methodological confinement to *a priori* anthropology. He diverges from Wittgenstein in two significant respects.

First, he takes issue with Wittgenstein's tendency to understand the notion of a 'form of life' in an *inclusive* sense encompassing anyone with whom we could intelligibly communicate.[40] That inclusive interpretation of 'form of life' may, Williams grants, be appropriate when thinking about the conditions of the possibility of understanding and linguistic meaning.[41] But it should not be carried over into philosophical reflection on ethics and politics. Williams is interested in contrasting *actual groups of human beings* by identifying some clearly delimited divide between 'us' and 'them'. Once we think *in concrete sociohistorical terms* about groups of human beings and their distinctive ethical and political concepts, we will use the notion of a form of life in a *contrastive* sense: the 'we' in question will not be the inclusive 'we', but rather the contrastive 'we' denoting some actual 'us', here and now, as distinct from concrete others (2005e: 36; 2006a: 358). In appropriating the Wittgensteinian

---

[40] See Williams (1986: 204).
[41] See Williams (2005e: 36).

emphasis on concrete practices and shared understandings, Williams thus recasts it in more politicized and sociohistorically embodied terms (2002: 10). In this respect, his reinterpretation of Wittgensteinian ideas self-consciously parallels Cavell's: like Wittgenstein, they both recall philosophy away from high theory and philosophical scepticism and back to the rough ground of concrete practices; but, unlike Wittgenstein, they seek to understand these concrete practices in a way that 'engage[s] with history or our present cultural situation' (Williams 2006j: 210).[42]

Secondly, Williams also diverges from Wittgenstein in insisting on the need for real sociohistorical *explanation*. Williams does not rest content with self-understanding achieved by contemplating 'purely imaginary and schematic ethnographic case[s]' (2006a: 357). He does not deny that there is a place for *a priori* anthropology in philosophy: Williams himself repeatedly advocates forms of *a priori* anthropology (1995e: 140; 1997: 27; 2002: 10; 2005c: 76; 2006h: 61), and often begins his own philosophical reflections by considering what any human beings anywhere would need, or what they would be bound to develop in some form. Examples include Williams's derivation, in *Shame and Necessity*, of the four elements of any conception of responsibility from 'universal banalities' (1993: 55) about human beings, or his use, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, of a 'State of Nature'-fiction to reveal the most generic needs to which the virtues of truth answer.

But *a priori* anthropology can be, for Williams, no more than a starting point on the path towards an *a posteriori* understanding of how the generically human was *in fact* extended, inflected, and elaborated into more specific forms by historical and cultural forces. Williams's approach thus early on finds a role for *a posteriori* anthropology, which is to say anthropology as a social science, characterized not principally by a philosopher's armchair reflections on human nature, but by fieldworkers applying methods of participant observation to some particular community. He also finds a role for historical, sociological, and psychological explanation. In discussing sociobiological accounts of morality, for instance, Williams warns that we cannot fully understand how a functional account of some piece of moral thought, such as a prohibition, relates to the markedly non-functionalist spirit and content of this prohibition, unless we draw on the explanatory resources of the human rather than the natural sciences:

---

[42] On the unhistorical nature of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and how it contrasts with that of R. G. Collingwood, whom Williams admired, see Blackburn (2000).

This is an area in which it is certain that sociobiological theorists go too quickly. They find a functional explanation with a certain content; they find a prohibition with a certain content; they say 'Ah! There you are.' But what we need is an explanation of how the one got into the other. (1980a: 278)

Any functionalist anthropological approach that Williams can endorse will have to display greater openness to empirical findings and to genuine sociohistorical explanation.

This twofold methodological divergence has its roots, fundamentally, in the different ways in which Wittgenstein and Williams conceive of philosophy itself. Williams repeatedly opposes what he sees as Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as a discipline that must necessarily remain *pure* of empirical material and leave everything as it is (2006e: 196).[43] It is a conception of philosophy that Williams dismisses as typical of early analytic philosophy, which aspired to use the 'distinction of fact and value', or of 'theory and value', to 'segregate the philosophical from the normative, while the companion distinction of analytic and synthetic served to segregate the philosophical from the historical or social-scientific' (1980b: 58).

Williams doubts that there could be a 'purely philosophical' (1986: 207) understanding of our ethical ideas and our deliberative practices, unaffected by history, psychology, and the social sciences: 'If there were such a thing, but it were somehow guaranteed not to upset our ethical ideas and our deliberative practices—presumably by its being a criterion of correctness in that subject that it left everything where it was—I do not see why we should have any reason to be interested in it' (1986: 207).

When Williams invites us to conceive of philosophy as a *humanistic* discipline, therefore, he envisages an enterprise that is deliberately and unabashedly *impure*. 'Impure' is not a pejorative term for Williams, as he clarified already in his 1969 essay on philosophy as a subject. On the contrary, he warns against 'the attempt to keep philosophy too pure, of other subjects, or of particular cases, or of taking an evaluative side in vexed issues' (1969: 153). Philosophy, on Williams's humanistic conception, can take a legitimate interest in factual issues and the empirical features of actual groups of human beings, even if those groups are agreed to be local (2006e: 196); it can draw on genuine explanations of those groups'

---

[43] Williams also remarks on the 'impurity of philosophy' in Williams (1995e: 148). For illuminating discussions of Williams's idea of a humanistic discipline and its impurity, see Moran (2016) and Cueni (forthcoming). For a conception of philosophical methodology which likewise combines Wittgensteinian commitments with a rejection of purity, see Glock (2017a).

distinctive features in terms of contingent empirical material; and it can consider whether these explanations are subversive or vindicatory, even if it has to take a normative stance on first-order moral or political issues in order to do so.

This makes philosophy impure in three respects: first, through its involvement in the factual issues and results of other subjects, such as history, sociology, and psychology; secondly, through its involvement in the contingent empirical features of sociohistorically local situations; and thirdly, through its involvement in evaluation. The later chapters of *Truth and Truthfulness* illustrate all three forms of impurity. Deeply informed by history, sociology, and psychology, they offer an expressly vindicatory appraisal of the practice of valuing the truth for a local 'us', namely the citizens of modern liberal democracies living in the shadow of Romanticism and the events of the twentieth century.[44]

Where Wittgenstein was content to show that some of our ideas and procedures were *unhintergehbar*, admitting of no justification in terms of something more basic, Williams thus goes further in wanting to distinguish between 'different ways in which various of our ideas and procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond them, that there is no conceivable alternative' (2006e: 196). To achieve this, philosophy needs to take seriously the questions, first, of who *'we'* are, and second, of what *explains* the seeming *Unhintergehbarkeit* of a given idea or procedure. If this means that philosophy needs to abandon its commitment to purity by pursuing its task in consultation with the human sciences, taking an interest in the peculiarities of local situations, and adopting an evaluative stance, then so be it: 'philosophy cannot be too pure if it really wants to do what it sets out to do' (2002: 39), Williams concludes in *Truth and Truthfulness*.[45] 'It is significant', Williams goes on to note, 'that Wittgenstein, who took as seriously as anyone could the question of what philosophy might now be, but stuck firmly to a conception of it as quite separate from other intellectual enterprises, came to the conclusion that philosophy could not offer any explanations at all' (2002: 283n23). Williams in effect agrees with Wittgenstein that if philosophy is to be pure, it cannot offer genuine explanations; but whereas Wittgenstein was willing to embrace a

---

[44] For an account of the role that the memory of WWII plays in Williams's moral philosophy, see Krishnan and Queloz (2023). For an overview of the war's influence on Oxford philosophy more generally, see Krishnan (2023). Queloz (2018) offers a detailed reconstruction of Williams's genealogical argument in *Truth and Truthfulness*.

[45] Compare Williams (1969: 153; 1996a: 34).

vision of philosophy without explanations, Williams preferred philosophy not to be so committed to its own purity.[46]

Williams's critique of Wittgenstein's methodology and metaphilosophy is echoed in his critique of Right Wittgensteinianism, 'an early and influential example' (2006a: 357n37) of which he sees in Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (1958). Winch's great virtue in Williams's eyes is to propose a Wittgensteinianism that actually takes an interest in concrete societies; he also commends it for being attuned to the integral relation between thick concepts and the ways of describing and explaining things that make up a form of life, and for emphasizing the possibility of understanding such forms of life 'from the inside' without sharing them.[47]

But Williams still regards Winch's Wittgensteinianism as suffering from 'an over-close assimilation of social to conceptual understanding' (1980b: 64): it views social science primarily as a form of conceptual investigation, which leads it to eschew causal explanation in favour of studying the conceptual interrelations within the outlook of a certain group. As Williams sees it, the study of the conceptual interrelations is only a *part* of social scientific study: he rejects as 'unacceptable' the idea that 'social science is, more than everything else, conceptual investigation (cf. Winch)' (1980b: 75n1). Another problem with this 'purely conceptual stance' is that it results in a conservative 'immunity from social reflexion' (1980b: 63).[48] To remedy this, Williams advocates 'greater openness to the impurities of the social sciences' (1980b: 63) in order to render Wittgensteinianism responsive to critical social reflection.

Above all, however, it is in the tendency to picture a form of life as a 'fully functioning and coherent system' (2006a: 357) that Williams locates what gives Wittgensteinianism a conservative or 'Right' inflection. Wittgensteinianism yields conservative conclusions due to its holism (2005e: 34). If one regards each concept and practice as performing its part within a smoothly functioning whole, any criticism will threaten to distort that delicately calibrated harmony. The result is a static picture, which simultaneously fails to account for the dynamic impetus of radical critique and discourages it.

---

[46] Glock (2017a) echoes Williams's critique in advocating 'impure' conceptual analysis on the grounds that even the conceptual issues of philosophy sometimes interact with the factual issues of science.

[47] See Williams (1986: 204; 1990: 169n7; 2011: 145, 262n7).

[48] Another aspect of Winch's work that Williams does not address, but which he well might have, is the issue of the *authority* that Winch claims for philosophy and a priori conceptual investigation. See Pettit (2000: 76) for a critique of Winch along these lines.

Williams's critique of this holism is of a piece with his earlier critique of Wittgenstein's lack of interest in the boundaries of 'we' and in genuine explanation. If one asks after the points or functions of conceptual practices, but never seriously investigates *for whom* exactly they have a point, one is limited to discerning functionality in conceptual practices from a single, unified perspective. But it is by no means given that the 'we' for whom the practice is pointful will be identical to the 'we' that engages in the practice. One could be merely a small subset of the other. Or they could be entirely distinct. The inclusive use of 'we' thus already leads to a holistic picture, because it suppresses the very questions that might encourage a more nuanced differentiation between functional perspectives.

The Left Wittgensteinianism that Williams advocates, by contrast, asks after the points of conceptual practices without making any assumption that they will all be harmoniously functional for everyone. It asks *for whom* the practice is pointful, mindful of the possibility that it might serve a point for someone other than those who engage in it, and perhaps not one they want to see served. And just because it takes this possibility seriously, it takes an interest in sociohistorical explanations of why those who engage in a practice do so *despite* the fact that the practice does not benefit them—Williams frequently alludes to Marxian analyses of false consciousness, for example.[49]

This Left Wittgensteinian picture of our practices as a tension-ridden assembly of parts, which might or might not be functional for a clearly delimited 'us', is itself the product of rendering philosophy less pure by allowing it to be informed by the social sciences. 'Once we regard the ethical life we now have as a genuinely historical and local structure', Williams writes, 'we shall have less temptation to assume that it is a satisfactorily functioning whole; and we shall be more likely to recognize that some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in the light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts' (2005e: 136–37). For example, the widely accepted practice of factory farming may stand condemned in the light of plausible extrapolations of a commitment to avoiding needless cruelty.

There is thus an underlying systematic connection between Williams's critique of Wittgenstein's methodology and purist metaphilosophy on the one hand, and Williams's own advocacy of a Left Wittgensteinianism and a humanistic metaphilosophy on the other. Williams's Left Wittgensteinianism is, in more than one sense, *impure* Wittgensteinianism. That is to say, it is a *humanistic* Wittgensteinianism.

---

[49] See Williams (2002: 225; 2005f: 6; 2006b: 140; 2011: 112).

In keeping with his longstanding aversion to 'isms', Williams does not go quite so far as to nail his flag to the mast of 'Left Wittgensteinianism'. But there is every indication that he means, at the very least, to indicate the possibility of reading his own work as an example of a Left Wittgensteinianism that promises to correct what he sees as the shortcomings of extant Wittgensteinian approaches. And once we recognize how this critique is of a piece with Williams's advocacy of a conception of philosophy as a humanistic discipline, his debt to Wittgenstein emerges as a unifying interpretative key to his work. Williams's conception of philosophy can be read as evolving dialectically out of Wittgenstein's own.

6. Philosophy as Therapy and Ethical Reminders

We have assembled plenty of evidence to debunk the myth of Williams's 'unwavering hostility' to Wittgenstein. In this final section, we show that even where Williams comes closest to being hostile to Wittgenstein, which is in connection with Wittgenstein's views on the nature of philosophy, Williams inherits from Wittgenstein a certain conception of what philosophy can do for us—of how philosophy can help us to live.

Williams identified Wittgenstein as the originator of 'an informal but very powerful style of reflection which sought insight into the origins of philosophical problems' (2014a: 46). This is usually described as a 'therapeutic' conception of philosophy, on which 'philosophy dissolves the conceptual confusions to which philosophical problems are alleged to owe their existence' (Glock 1996: 294).

Williams himself endorsed a vision of philosophy that had evident therapeutic elements. He wrote, for example, that philosophy, particularly when it sets out to destroy extant theories, aims 'to liberate a reader ... from distortions or misunderstandings involved in his or her own experience' (1995d: 218). This therapeutic element also comes out when he responds in an interview to the charge that *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is a purely negative contribution to philosophy:

> I don't see [it] as negative, I see it hopefully as liberating. It seems to me people get themselves in situations in which they feel they have no right to have certain kinds of moral thoughts because they don't fit in with some very impoverished theoretical picture of what constitutes moral thought. (1996b)

In order to realize its therapeutic aims, Wittgenstein thought, philosophy had to consist notably in the 'assembly of reminders'—typically reminders of how we used some piece of

language in a non-philosophical context—as a way of dissolving various putative philosophical problems. This is evident in his distinctive use of examples. As examples are conventionally used in philosophy, they play a role roughly analogous to that of experiments in the natural sciences, providing support for a hypothesis by eliciting pre-theoretical judgements or intuitions, or undermining a hypothesis by confronting it with a counterexample. In Wittgenstein's use, however, examples act as reminders of truths we overlooked because we were in the grip of some 'picture' that 'held us captive' (2009: §115).

Wittgenstein's influence in this respect also shows itself in Williams's own use of examples. Two of Williams's most famous examples are the mini-narratives of 'George' and 'Jim', which centre on the notion of integrity, and why an agent's displaying integrity—by refusing to take up a job he regards as immoral (George), or refusing to kill an innocent even if doing so may prevent what he acknowledges as a worse outcome (Jim)—may be inconsistent with his acting as the utilitarian recommends. Williams later clarified that the cases of George and Jim had never been intended as counterexamples. Instead, he described his aims in language strongly reminiscent of Wittgenstein:

> When I brought in integrity, it was ... as a quality that many people prize and admire. It is in such ways that people put the notion to ethical use. My claim was that if people do put it to ethical use, they cannot accept the *picture* of action and of moral motivation that direct utilitarianism requires—and here were two stories to *remind* them, perhaps in different ways, of that truth. (1995d: 212, emphases added)

Clearly, there is a Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy in the background of this remark: a conception on which philosophy can help us to live by assembling reminders that liberate us from a picture holding us captive. And just as the pictures that Wittgenstein most fervently attacked tended to be the ones he used to be in thrall to himself, the utilitarian picture that Williams invites us to break free of is one that had once held Williams himself captive: there was a time when he had 'very pious utilitarian views', he confessed in a late interview; but he came to see that 'consequentialist reasoning could just lead you on and on in the wrong direction' (Jeffries 2002).

At the same time, the cases of George and Jim illustrate how Williams goes beyond Wittgenstein when he gives examples. The reminders assembled are not, as is usually the case in Wittgenstein, linguistic or 'grammatical': they are *ethical* reminders, and their concern with the constitutive features of moral dilemmas requires literary means more

expansive than those afforded by Wittgensteinian epigrams: Williams's narrative is replete with incidental contextual detail, biographical facts, and psychological speculation. George's dilemma—whether to accept a job at a chemical and biological weapons laboratory—is not a timeless one, but one that belongs to the 1970s, the decade in which Williams was writing— the age of napalm bombings in Vietnam. The same is true of Jim, whose own impossible choice is taken against the background of the military coups across Latin America and the sustained persecution of indigenous people, facts (albeit seldom remarked ones) which provide significant historical context for that philosophical example.

The deliberate allusion to real-world political events in Williams's examples illustrates how a Wittgensteinian style might be adapted to the nature of its subject matter; the assembly of ethical reminders calls for a different style from the assembly of grammatical ones. Williams admitted that his examples were 'extremely schematic' in comparison to biography, history, or realist fiction, but they at least had the virtue of being 'nearer to psychological and social reality than the theory', and could bring out the fact that certain ethical theories were simply 'frivolous' (1995d: 217). Utilitarianism, in particular, is a clear instance of the sort of philosophy that Williams might have seen as having ingenuity without insight, or, as he himself put it, 'combining technical complexity with simple-mindedness', which he took to mean 'having too few thoughts and feelings to match the world as it really is' (1973a: 149).

Moreover, Williams's therapeutic conception of philosophy differs from therapeutic conceptions that locate the root cause of distortions and misunderstandings within philosophy itself. Williams showed considerable impatience with such views, because they underestimated the seriousness of the problem: if philosophy was itself the cause of philosophical problems, the best thing would surely be to stop doing philosophy altogether. But to make 'an academic philosophy out of denouncing academic philosophy' Williams thought, was at best 'wonderfully perverse, rather like setting up as a Kierkegaardian bishop' (1995d: 218). If there was to be an academic philosophy inspired by the Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy as therapy, it had better be a response to problems that were not merely artefacts of philosophy itself.

A more serious and less frivolous form of philosophical therapy, Williams maintained, should aim to liberate us from deception by 'forces worth worrying about, such as our own fears and resentments, our misunderstanding of social representations, and the effects of tradition' (1995d: 219). Far from being the disease to which it is itself the cure, philosophy

is at most a symptom: 'ethical theory is not itself the basic condition with which we should be concerned, but a symptom, the expression of that condition in the tissue of a certain type of philosophy' (2021: 275). If the destruction of philosophical theory can play a part in liberating us from distortions in our experience, it is because 'a powerful philosophical theory can be an effectively articulated expression of those distortions' (1995d: 218).

On this conception, one will still look for ways of thinking and speaking that are 'philosophically alienated from human purposes' (2006j: 210), as Williams puts it; but one will have to press further the question of what *explains* the tendency for people to be alienated in this way. Is it an eternal fact of the human condition? Or is it an especially prominent tendency in certain kinds of societies, or in particular historical periods, such as, say, 'modernity'? Williams mentions Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* (1979) in this connection, which concerns what Williams summarizes as 'ever-present possibilities of scepticism, implicit in the human condition' (2006j: 210). Are the possibilities literally 'ever-present'? Or are they, as Cavell sometimes also suggests, the feature of some more local 'cultural situation'? But if the latter, is it sufficient to engage with the cultural situation in purely 'metaphysical terms' rather than in those of empirical history? Does a purely metaphysical treatment not risk transforming the Wittgensteinian project into something more objectionably Heideggerian, where the modern world is seen as 'a fall from primary unity', and turns what should be a matter of evidence-based history into a 'mythical story of severance' (2006j: 210)? Therapeutic philosophy, for Williams, needs to operate not at the level of myth, but at the level of sober history, or of psychological and social explanation, if it is to understand the underlying causes of philosophical distortions and misunderstandings.

Williams's humanistic conception of philosophy thus owes a great deal to Wittgenstein: its stylistic ideals of clarity and precision, and of the depth and density required to get things right; its anthropological interest in thick concepts and their point; and its therapeutic ambition to liberate us from distortions in our self-understanding by assembling reminders.

But Williams also departs from Wittgenstein in going beyond *a priori* anthropology, insisting that philosophy engage with concrete societies' empirical determination by contingent historical forces. And for all that Williams's conception of the aims of philosophy can be set out in therapeutic terms, his Left Wittgensteinian form of therapy is precisely not guaranteed to be conciliatory or quietistic, still less to bring the philosopher 'peace'. It has more in common with what Nietzsche, Foucault, or the Frankfurt School would have called

'critique' than any activity that Wittgenstein would have recognized as properly philosophical.

As we have shown, however, even these differences are departures *from* Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, marking out Williams's own conception as descending, by dialectical evolution, from Wittgensteinian materials. 'One might say that the subject we are dealing with', Wittgenstein once remarked, 'is one of the heirs of the subject which used to be called "philosophy"' (1958: 28). In light of the philosophical family resemblances we have brought out, one might equally say that Williams's humanistic conception of philosophy is one of the heirs of the subject Wittgenstein was dealing with. Of the many inheritors of Wittgenstein's legacy, Williams's impure humanism may yet prove the more enduring. As in the Parable of the Talents, there is something to be said for not merely burying one's inheritance, but transforming it.

Bibliography

Anscombe, G. E. M. 2011. 'Wittgenstein's 'Two Cuts' in the History of Philosophy'. In *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*. Edited by Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, 181–6. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Babbiotti, Paolo. 2020. 'Compression: Nietzsche, Williams, and the Problem of Style'. *European Journal of Philosophy*.

—. 2023. *Problems of Style in Philosophy. Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams*. PhD, Università degli Studi di Torino.

Blackburn, Simon. 2000. 'Reenactment as Critique of Logical Analysis: Wittgensteinian Themes in Collingwood'. In *Empathy And Agency: The Problem Of Understanding In The Human Sciences*. Edited by Hans Herbert Kögler and Karsten R. Stueber, 270–87. Boulder: Westview Press.

Bloor, David. 1983. *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press.

—. 1992. 'Left and Right Wittgensteinians'. In *Science as Practice and Culture*. Edited by Andrew Pickering, 266–82. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

—. 1997. *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions*. London: Routledge.

—. 2000. 'Wittgenstein as a Conservative Thinker'. In *The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge*. Edited by Martin Kusch, 1–14. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Breckman, Warren. 2019. 'The Young Hegelians: Philosophy as Critical Praxis'. In *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought: Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century*. Edited by Peter E. Gordon and Warren Breckman. Vol. 1, 88–110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Broackes, Justin. 2011. 'Introduction'. In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. Edited by Justin Broackes, 1–92. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brusotti, Marco. 2014. *Wittgenstein, Frazer und die "ethnologische Betrachtungsweise"*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Cavell, Stanley. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

—. 2010. *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Celikates, Robin. 2015. 'Against Manichaeism: The Politics of Forms of Life and the Possibilities of Critique'. *Raisons politiques* 57 (1): 81–96.

Chanan, Michael. 1972. Ep. 3: Appearance and Reality. In *Logic Lane*. United Kingdom: Chanan Films.

Craig, Edward. 1990. *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

——. 1993. *Was wir wissen können: Pragmatische Untersuchungen zum Wissensbegriff. Wittgenstein-Vorlesungen der Universität Bayreuth*. Edited by Wilhelm Vossenkuhl. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Cueni, Damian. forthcoming. 'The Idea of Humanistic Middle-Range Theory'. In *Bernard Williams: From Responsibility to Law and Jurisprudence*. Edited by Veronica Rodriguez-Blanco, Daniel Peixoto Murata and Julieta Rabanos. Oxford: Hart.

Cueni, Damian, and Matthieu Queloz. 2021. 'Whence the Demand for Ethical Theory?'. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2): 135–46.

Diamond, Cora. 2018. 'Bernard Williams on the Human Prejudice'. *Philosophical Investigations* 41 (4): 379–98.

Drury, Maurice O'Connor. 2017. *The Selected Writings of Maurice O'Connor Drury: On Wittgenstein, Philosophy, Religion and Psychiatry*. London: Bloomsbury.

Fricker, Miranda. 2023. 'A Project of 'Impure' Enquiry: Williams' Historical Self-Consciousness'. *European Journal of Philosophy*.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture'. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, 3–30. New York: Basic Books.

Glock, Hans-Johann. 1996. *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell.

——. 2006. 'Wittgenstein and History'. In *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and His Works*. Edited by A. Pichler and S. Säätelä, 277–303. Frankfurt a. M.: Ontos.

——. 2017a. 'Impure Conceptual Analysis'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology*. Edited by Giuseppina D'Oro and Søren Overgaard, 77–100. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 2017b. 'Philosophy and Philosophical Method'. In *A Companion to Wittgenstein*. Edited by Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman, 231–51. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

——. 2017c. 'Wittgenstein's Rain in the 'Philosophical Desert': Pragmatist Ideas in Post-War Oxford'. In *The Practical Turn: Pragmatism in Britain in the Long Twentieth Century*. Edited by Cheryl Misak and Huw Price, 131–48. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hacker, Peter Michael Stephan. 2011. 'Wittgenstein and the Autonomy of Humanistic Understanding'. In *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*. Edited by Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, 39–74. London: Routledge.

—. 2013. 'Wittgenstein's Anthropological and Ethnological Approach'. In *Wittgenstein: Comparisons and Context*, 111–27. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hanfling, Oswald. 1985. 'A Structural Account of Knowledge'. *The Monist* 68 (1): 40–57.

Jaeggi, Rahel. 2016. *Critique of Forms of Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jeffries, Stuart. 2002. 'The Quest for Truth'. *The Guardian*, November 30.

Kremer, Michael. 2022. 'Margaret MacDonald and Gilbert Ryle: A Philosophical Friendship'. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30 (2): 288–311.

Krishnan, Nikhil. 2023. *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900–60*. London: Profile Books.

Krishnan, Nikhil, and Matthieu Queloz. 2023. 'The Shaken Realist: Bernard Williams, the War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1): 226–47.

Macedo Jr, Ronaldo Porto. forthcoming. 'An Unusual But Successful Philosophical Marriage: Nietzsche and Wittgenstein'. In *Bernard Williams: From Responsibility to Law and Jurisprudence*. Edited by Veronica Rodriguez-Blanco and Daniel Peixoto Murata.

Misak, Cheryl. 2016. *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2021. 'Williams, Pragmatism, and the Law'. *Res Publica* 27 (2): 155–70.

—. forthcoming. *Oxford Pragmatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moore, Adrian W. 2012. *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—. 2019. 'Transcendental Idealism in Wittgenstein, and Theories of Meaning'. In *Language, World, and Limits: Essays in the Philosophy of Language and Metaphysics*, 71–89. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moran, Richard. 2016. 'Williams, History, and 'the Impurity of Philosophy''. *European Journal of Philosophy* 24 (2): 315–30.

Mulhall, Stephen. 2015. ''Hopelessly Strange': Bernard Williams's Portrait of Wittgenstein as a Transcendental Idealist'. In *The Transcendental Turn*. Edited by Sebastian Gardner and Matthew Grist, 324–41. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Norris, Andrew. 2009. ''La chaîne des raisons a une fin.' Wittgenstein et Oakeshott sur le rationalisme et la pratique'. *Cités: Philosophie, Politique, Histoire* 38: 95–108.

Nussbaum, Martha C. 2003. 'Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams Remembered'. *Boston Review*, October 1. http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/martha-c-nussbaum-tragedy-and-justice.

Nyíri, J. C. 1976. 'Wittgenstein's New Traditionalism'. *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 28: 501–12.

—. 1982. 'Wittgenstein's Later Work in Relation to Conservatism'. In *Wittgenstein and his Times*. Edited by Brian McGuinness, 44–68. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

O'Grady, Jane. 2003. 'Sir Bernard Williams'. *The Guardian*.

Owen, David. 2001. 'Wittgenstein and Genealogy'. *Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 2 (2): 5–29.

Pettit, Philip. 2000. 'Winch's Double-Edged Idea of a Social Science'. *History of the Human Sciences* 13 (1): 63–77.

Pichler, Alois. 2023. *Style, Method and Philosophy in Wittgenstein*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1972. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pleasants, Nigel. 1999. *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*. London: Routledge.

—. 2002. 'Towards a Critical Use of Marx and Wittgenstein'. In *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics*. Edited by Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants, 160–81. London: Routledge.

Plotica, Luke Philip. 2015. *Michael Oakeshott and the Conversation of Modern Political Thought*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Queloz, Matthieu. 2016. 'Wittgenstein on the Chain of Reasons'. *Wittgenstein-Studien* 7 (1): 105–30.

—. 2017. 'Two Orders of Things: Wittgenstein on Reasons and Causes'. *Philosophy* 92 (3): 369–97.

—. 2018. 'Williams's Pragmatic Genealogy and Self-Effacing Functionality'. *Philosophers' Imprint* 18 (17): 1–20.

—. 2021a. *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

—. 2021b. 'The Self-Effacing Functionality of Blame'. *Philosophical Studies* 178 (4): 1361–79.

—. 2022. 'The Essential Superficiality of the Voluntary and the Moralization of Psychology'. *Philosophical Studies* 179 (5): 1591–620.

—. 2023. 'The Dworkin–Williams Debate: Liberty, Conceptual Integrity, and Tragic Conflict in Politics'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

—. forthcoming. 'Law as a Test of Conceptual Strength'. In *Bernard Williams: From Responsibility to Law and Jurisprudence*. Edited by Veronica Rodriguez-Blanco, Daniel Peixoto Murata and Julieta Rabanos.

Queloz, Matthieu, and Damian Cueni. 2021. 'Left Wittgensteinianism'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (4): 758–77.

Rorty, Richard. 1983. 'Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism'. *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (10): 583–89.

—. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rowe, M. W. 2023. *J. L. Austin: Philosopher and D-Day Intelligence Officer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryle, Gilbert. 2009a. 'Thinking and Reflecting'. In *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Collected Essays 1929–1968*, 479–93. Abingdon: Routledge.

—. 2009b. 'The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?'. In *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Collected Essays 1929–1968*, 494–510. Abingdon: Routledge.

Tanney, Julia. 2021. 'Gilbert Ryle'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Summer 2021 edition ed.

Temelini, Michael. 2015. *Wittgenstein and the Study of Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Toews, John. 1985. *Hegelianism: The Path toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805–1841*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1958. 'The Revolution in Philosophy, by A. J. Ayer et al.'. *Philosophy* 33 (124): 65–7.

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

—. 1973a. 'A Critique of Utilitarianism'. In *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, 77–155. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—. 1973b. 'Deciding to Believe'. In *Problems of the Self*, 136–51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—. 1973c. 'Wittgenstein and Idealism'. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 7: 76–95.

—. 1980a. 'Conclusion'. In *Morality as a Biological Phenomenon: The Presuppositions of Sociobiological Research*. Edited by Gunther S. Stent, 275–85. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

—. 1980b. Political Philosophy and the Analytical Tradition. In *Political Theory and Political Education*.

—. 1981a. 'Moral Luck'. In *Moral Luck*, 20–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—. 1981b. '*Ought* and Moral Obligation'. In *Moral Luck*, 114–23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 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.

——. 1983. The Uses of Philosophy: An Interview with Bernard Williams. In *The Center Magazine*, edited by Donald McDonald.

——. 1986. 'Reply to Simon Blackburn'. *Philosophical Books* 27 (4): 203–8.

——. 1990. 'Reply to the President'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 90 (1): 167–70.

——. 1992. 'Left-Wing Wittgenstein, Right-Wing Marx'. *Common Knowledge* 1 (1): 33–42.

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

——. 1995a. 'How Free Does the Will Need to Be?'. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993*, 3–21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1995b. 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame'. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993*, 35–45. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1995c. 'Moral Luck: A Postscript'. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993*, 241–7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1995d. 'Replies'. In *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*. Edited by J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison, 185–224. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1995e. 'Saint-Just's Illusion'. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993*, 135–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1995f. 'Truth in Ethics'. *Ratio* 8 (3): 227–42.

——. 1995g. 'What Has Philosophy to Learn from Tort Law?'. In *The Philosophical Foundations of Tort Law*. Edited by David G. Owen, 487–98. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 1995h. 'Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?'. In *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993*, 203–12. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1996a. 'Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look'. In *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*. Edited by Nicholas Bunnin and Eric P. Tsui-James, 23–35. Oxford: Blackwell.

——. 1996b. A Fugitive from the Pigeonhole. In *Times Higher Education Supplement*, edited by John Davies.

——. 1997. *Der Wert der Wahrheit*. Wien: Passagen.

——. 1999. 'Bernard Williams'. In *Key Philosophers in Conversation: The Cogito Interviews*. Edited by Andrew Pyle, 142–63. London: Routledge.

—. 2001a. 'Foreword: Some Philosophical Recollections'. In *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays in Honour of David Pears*. Edited by David Charles and William Child, xiii–xviii. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

—. 2001b. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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

—. 2005a. 'Censorship'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne, 139–44. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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

—. 2005c. '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.

—. 2005d. 'The Liberalism of Fear'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne, 52–61. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2005e. 'Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne, 29–39. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2005f. 'Realism and Moralism in Political Theory'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne, 1–17. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006a. '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.

—. 2006b. 'The Human Prejudice'. In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Edited by Adrian W. Moore, 135–54. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—. 2006c. 'Janáček's Modernism: Doing Less with More in Music and Philosophy'. In *On Opera*. Edited by Patricia Williams and Michael Tanner, 118–20. New Haven: Yale University Press.

—. 2006d. 'Moral Responsibility and Political Freedom'. In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Edited by A. W. Moore, 119–25. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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

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

———. 2006g. 'The Primacy of Dispositions'. In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Edited by A. W. Moore, 67–75. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2006h. 'Understanding Homer: Literature, History and Ideal Anthropology'. In *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*. Edited by Myles Burnyeat, 60–70. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2006i. 'Values, Reasons, and the Theory of Persuasion'. In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Edited by A. W. Moore, 109–18. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2006j. 'What Might Philosophy Become?'. In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*. Edited by Adrian W. Moore, 200–14. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2007. 'Truth and Truthfulness'. In *What More Philosophers Think*. Edited by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom, 130–46. London: Continuum.

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

———. 2011. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge.

———. 2014a. 'The Concept of a Person, by A. J. Ayer'. In *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002*. Edited by Michael Wood, 45–7. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2014b. 'On Hating and Despising Philosophy'. In *Essays and Reviews, 1959-2002*. Edited by Michael Wood, 363–70. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2014c. 'Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage, by A. J. Ayer'. In *Essays and Reviews, 1959-2002*. Edited by Michael Wood, 75–7. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2019. 'Left-Wing Wittgenstein'. *Common Knowledge* 25 (1–3): 321–31.

———. 2021. 'Ethics, A Matter of Style? Introduction to the French Edition'. *Philosophical Inquiries* 9 (2): 269–84.

Williams, Bernard, and Alan Montefiore. 1966. 'Introduction'. In *British Analytical Philosophy*. Edited by Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore, 1–16. London: Routledge.

Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1958. *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 1978. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Edited by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 1989. *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics, Cambridge, 1939*. Edited by Cora Diamond. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

—. 2009. *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations.* Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Edited by P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte. rev. 4th ed. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell.