
FOREWORD

In the first of the reviews reprinted in the present volume, Bernard Williams recalls and dismisses what he trusts is an outdated estimation of Plato, sharply expressing his ironic surprise that anyone should ever have offered or accepted it. Far from seeing the *Republic* as “one of the noblest monuments of Western liberalism and enlightenment,” Williams finds in it only an “extraordinary tissue of historical falsehood and philosophical misunderstanding,” and support for a “political system . . . based on oligarchic deceit and a contempt for much legitimate aspiration and human diversity.” Plato represents “as a system of consent what must actually be, on his own premises, a system of coercion.” This is fine, fiery writing and leaves us in no doubt about Williams’s own political and moral position. Or about his interest in the chances and importance of independence of mind. The same review includes a characteristic use and definition of the word “provocative.” The book under consideration, a reissue of *Plato Today*, by Richard Crossman, a Member of Parliament and distinguished Labour Party intellectual, is said to be “provocative in the best sense—provocative of thought.”

Williams had a distinguished career as an academic philosopher—he won a prize fellowship at All Souls, Oxford as soon as he had finished his first degree, and was appointed to a chair of philosophy in London at the age of thirty-four. Later he held chairs in Cambridge, Oxford, and Berkeley, and from 1979 to 1987 he was provost of King’s College, Cambridge. He chaired a government Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship; he commented frequently and lucidly on many public issues, ranging from religion and law to science and abortion and the future of universities. Much of this work is reflected in this volume, but the essays themselves suggest an intellectual scope and a variety that go beyond even these diverse activities, a life of the mind that only an adventurous mind could live.

Although he was not explicitly or exclusively addressing his professional colleagues in the pieces collected here, Williams always wrote *as a philosopher* in his own ample sense, insisting that philosophy is doing its job wherever curiosity and thinking come together in any serious or cogent way. Such a position allowed him to pay handsome tribute to the disciplines in which he was trained, both classics and philosophy. Analytical philosophy, he said, offers “certain virtues of civilized thought: because it gives reasons and sets out arguments in a way that

can be explicitly followed and considered; and because it makes questions clearer and sorts out what is muddled.” At the same time Williams was concerned that English (and to some extent American) philosophy had become far too pleased with its aloofness from French and German schools of thought, to the point of regarding them not as philosophical traditions at all but as a form of intellectual circus.

While the influence of Hegel radically changed the rest of European thought, and continues to work in it, the sceptical caution of British philosophy left it spectacularly immune to it—splendidly, but to its undoubted loss.

Spectacularly, splendidly. The note of tribute remains, but the charge of complacency could hardly be clearer. There is a point, we may think, where “sceptical caution” threatens to outlaw curiosity, and even the notion of inquiry. The point was identified long ago by Descartes, and before him by Montaigne, and Williams comments very astutely on the former’s philosophical irony, the “dry joke” that opens the *Discourse on Method*. “Good sense is of all things in the world the most equally distributed,” Descartes says, “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée.” We think of ourselves as “so abundantly provided with it, that even those most difficult to please in all other matters do not commonly desire more of it than they already possess.” This stealthy (and very funny) proposition allows for all kinds of readings, including the contradictory claims that good sense may be indistinguishable from self-congratulation and that even sensible people don’t want to be more sensible than they have to be. It certainly implies, in our context, that it is difficult for us to see the good sense of others when it doesn’t look like ours.

Williams’s style develops in all kinds of ways over the years, but its energy and clarity never fade, and his central concerns, even across a very wide range of topics, are remarkably consistent. The conjunction of history and philosophy in the remarks on Plato is significant too, and the same pairing appears all the way through these essays and reviews, from the early praise of Stuart Hampshire’s *Thought and Action* (“he regards historical understanding as essential to grasping all but the absolutely basic characteristics of the human mind”) right to the very latest entry, entitled “Why Philosophy Needs History,” an essay closely related to Williams’s work for his edition of *The Gay Science* (2001) and to his final book, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002).

Williams cites Nietzsche on the “lack of a historical sense” as the “hereditary defect of philosophers,” and goes on to say that the claim, made in 1878, may seem even truer in the first years of the twenty-first century: “a lot of philosophy is more blankly non-historical now than it has ever been.” However, the point is not that philosophers should become historians of philosophy:

What matters more is their neglect of another history—the history of the concepts which philosophy is trying to understand. The starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough. We do not understand ourselves well enough ethically (how or why we should be concerned, positively or negatively, with some human dispositions and practices rather than others); we do not fully understand our political ideals; and we do not understand how we come to have ideas and experiences . . . Philosophy’s methods of helping us to understand ourselves involve reflecting on the concepts we use, the modes in which we think about these various things; and sometimes it proposes better ways of doing this.

The “historical falsehood” named in the Plato review arises from a refusal to consult the available record, and the “philosophical misunderstanding” stems from shabby or sentimental logic. Ignoring realities and misconstruing them, not attending or attending badly: these are our favorite, hallowed methods for error, into which we all fall some of the time.

In such modes we fail variously to “get it right,” to borrow a phrase Williams uses repeatedly in these pieces. It’s worth saying that there is nothing narrowly positivist or hairsplitting about this demand for a capacious set of accuracies. Williams does not dismiss perspectivism along with relativism, and the suggestion that Alasdair MacIntyre for example, should be more “realistic” does not imply that the philosopher should lower his expectations of anyone’s paying heed to his brilliant but nostalgic reconstructions of moral history. It implies that he should think more about the way things are and not as they are colored by anyone’s desire and dream. Of one book under review here Williams remarks that it is “sometimes inattentive to everyday truths, and it cannot afford to be: no inquiry that is going to help us understand ourselves can do without that kind of truthfulness, an acute and wary sense of the ordinary.” “The ordinary,” we note, and not the so-often mystified “ordinary language.” When we see the way things are, as Wittgenstein remarked in another context, there is a good deal that we shall not say.

Williams believes then, as many philosophers do not, at least when they are doing philosophy, in concrete historical context, what words and actions mean in their place and time—according to “some actual authority in some actual social circumstances,” as he says at one point in this book. “All our ways of thinking about the world are conditioned by a given historical context of conventions, manners, and interests.” For this reason (among others) he recommends the practice of what he calls “partial scepticism.”

The overall sceptical argument that we know nothing at all about other people’s minds, for instance, is painless, because it is totally

theoretical; it is more disturbing to consider that perhaps we know something about other people, but a lot less than we suppose.

This is to say that a great deal of our knowledge and ignorance is not “totally theoretical,” or indeed theoretical at all, and the idea of “painless” skepticism recalls Williams’s remark elsewhere about Bertrand Russell’s “costless heroics.” We might assert, as Henry James did of what he called the real, that the way things are is what we cannot *not* know. We might, but then we would need also to remember that not knowing what we know is one of our favorite forms of evasion and self-protection.

Williams is also unusual among analytic philosophers in (at least) two other ways: he believes in style, and he thinks it is sometimes worth trying to say what can’t be said. He describes Descartes, whom we have already seen in action, as “a philosophical stylist of genius.” But then “Moore’s famous care and precision,” Williams says, are virtues to which “he raised an ugly monument in his grinding style,” developing “a kind of emphatic vagueness which curiously co-exists with the marks of solicitor-like caution.” Heidegger’s style is marked by “its lack of light and its dire assertiveness,” and his thought cannot escape this marking. Style indeed for Williams is an aspect of thought, a convergence literary historians are as likely to miss or refuse as philosophers are. To their serious disadvantage:

for how is one to chart the misunderstandings [of a philosopher], without philosophical understanding of what the philosopher really meant? . . . philosophical insight is not something separate from the *literary* understanding of philosophical writing, because it is not separate from understanding philosophical writing at all.

Williams also uses the word “style” more broadly to signify a way of doing philosophy. Thus he can suggest that Nietzsche, in his inflammatory way, was aiming for his own version of accuracy and truthfulness, and that indeed Nietzsche’s writing offers a valuable general lesson in this respect: “that there is no one style in philosophy that displays the need to get it right.”

Williams has no time for murky or casual thought. “Contradictions in themselves do not make life more abundant. They do not even, much of the time, make it more interesting.” Chomsky, we learn, “moves with dangerous speed and simplicity between his theoretical preoccupations and the political ideals for which he has so conspicuously stood up.” There is real regret in Williams’s noting of a distinguished senior colleague that “there is probably a truth lurking in what Ryle says, but his considerations do not bring it to light.”

Yet Williams is allowing for a probability of truth even in this case, and he repeatedly shows what must be seen as a form of wisdom or kindness of thought in relation to human need. We might say of many things, as Williams says of religion, that “it will be hard to give it up even if it is an illusion.” He also reminds us that “it is only if religion is true that the most interesting question about it is its truth. If it is false, the most interesting question about it is . . . the content of what it actually tells us about humanity.” Williams finds even much of the most original and thoughtful work in modern philosophy—that of John Rawls and Derek Parfit, for example—just a little airless, not quite attentive enough to the “violent and enthusiastic unreasonableness” out there in the historical world.

There is one form of alluring falsehood that tests Williams’s kindness to its limits. This is the fancy skepticism found in some deconstructive writing, especially in literary criticism and theory, and sometimes in the arguments of Richard Rorty, which holds that words are all there is or all we can talk about. The rest is silence, or ought to be—a dizzy, literary exacerbation of the last sentence of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. As Williams says more than once in this book, citing a colleague at Berkeley, “Tell that to the Veterans of Foreign Texts.” The glance—I’ve heard this saying too from members of the Berkeley community—is toward a notorious sentence in Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*: “the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars and revolutions.” If this sentence means, as de Man may well have thought it did, that wars are nothing but texts, then it is heartless as well as untrue. But is this what it means?

Williams’s own generosity of mind helps us to see what is happening. We can ask what needs such claims are supposed to meet, what they tell us about ourselves and others. Manifestly there are many critics and others who have loved the idea of the world as text, to the exclusion of all fleshly pain and sorrow. Equally clearly there are others, and perhaps this set contains even more than the first, who wish to see all talk of text and interpretation as mere obfuscation of the facts we all know. But then we wonder why we or anyone would cherish these simplified, totalizing visions, and our curiosity must wait perhaps on another question, a version of the one Williams takes from Nietzsche and uses to close his eloquent introduction to *The Gay Science*: “it is a question which he wanted his readers to ask themselves not just at the end of this book, but throughout it and indeed throughout all his books—‘Is that what you *want*?’”

Reviewing a book on intellectuals, Williams asked and answered in a short space the difficult question the author, Paul Johnson, had spent over three hundred easy pages avoiding. Although the author’s argument seemed to be that intellectuals are merely celebrated scoundrels, Williams

charitably supposed that Johnson really had a better doubt in mind, namely, “why should the intellectuals have any authority? Why should anyone take any notice of them”—especially if they show no evidence of greater “moral reliability or good judgment” than anyone else? Williams’s answer was that if a philosopher like Sartre was respected, it was not because he told some “luminous truth about humanity,” in Johnson’s sneering phrase, but because he understood

that politics necessarily involves ideas, and particularly so when it denies this; that political ideas need the surroundings, the criticism, and the life provided by other ideas; and that some people are able to bring those ideas imaginatively into the thoughts of those who are going to live under that politics.

The last words of this review take us back to Williams’s early thoughts on Plato’s illiberal, coercive vision: “the authority of the intellectual . . . depends on the uncommanded response of those it affects.”

A great deal of Williams’s thought comes together in these lines: the life of ideas, even when it is unrecognized, the need for imagination in relation to this life—Williams said of Margaret Thatcher and her supporters, “It is not that they have no ideas, but that they lack imagination”—and the sense that the best we can do for others in realms of the mind is think with them rather than for them. We can’t command them, and we shouldn’t try to improve them. One of Williams’s most withering remarks concerns his fear that a book under review “is trying to do a dreadful thing: to lead philosophy back to an aspiration from which the work of this century has done so much to release it, the aspiration to be edifying.”

But we can help without seeking to edify—without even seeking to help—and Williams offers a strong suggestion that is invaluable for all serious thinking about thought. Here even Plato gets a kindly nod: at least he went in for provocation.

As Plato knew, the road to something helpful is not only hard, but unpredictable, and the motives that keep people moving down it don’t necessarily have to do with the desire to help. They include that other motive of philosophy, curiosity. In fact, the two motives cannot really be taken apart; the philosophy that is concerned to be helpful cannot be separated from philosophy that aims to help us to understand.

This is a very intricate claim. Philosophy often wants to help—“the starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough,” as I have already quoted Williams as saying—but philosophers themselves may have nothing in mind but their own puzzlement. They

may be none the less helpful for that, just as those who advertise their eagerness to help us—think of all those manuals on how to improve our thinking—may do nothing but dump us deeper into our preferred confusion. This is the complex power of Williams’s suggestion. The road is hard and unpredictable, but it is a road. It is our road. We are better off for sharing it, and much worse off whenever we pretend it’s soft or smooth or give up the idea of help altogether.

Michael Wood