

BERNARD WILLIAMS ON PHILOSOPHY'S NEED FOR HISTORY

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IN A NUMBER OF RECENT WORKS published just before and just after his death, Bernard Williams explored in great detail the very timely idea that there is an important internal connection between the practice of philosophy and the practice of history. This idea is elaborated in Williams's final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, the subtitle of which is *An Essay in Genealogy*. Prior to the publication of this book, Williams had considered the idea at length in such essays and addresses as "What Might Philosophy Become?" and "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline." After his death, the publication of three volumes of various articles and lectures by Williams provides further evidence that over the past few decades his thinking had gradually evolved to a position in which he found that philosophical thought must thoroughly integrate historical practice into its work.

Williams's attempt to take history seriously constitutes a significant departure from the traditional practice of analytic philosophy as it was passed down throughout much of the twentieth century. This departure is notable just insofar as Williams was among the most venerated practitioners of the relatively ahistorical style of analytic philosophy from which he gradually defected in his final decade or so of writing. Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness* might plausibly come to be seen as the last important work in ahistorical analytic philosophy or, and this is even more likely, as among the first important works in a new genre of historically-engaged analytic philosophy. Surely precedents for Williams's interest in a combination of philosophy and history can be found in a wide range of books from the past few decades inspired principally by impressive works by erstwhile analytic philosophers, including Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth, and History* along with other works from the late 1970s by such thinkers as Charles Taylor, Quentin Skinner, and Ian Hacking.¹ During the time that

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¹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 1984); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton:

these and other philosophers were developing a historical flavor of analytic philosophy, Hans Sluga, in an important book about the first major analytic philosopher, Gottlob Frege, sought to redress “the analytic tradition’s lack of interest in historical questions” by showing how Frege’s founding gestures cannot be understood apart from their historical context. One of Sluga’s most crucial points in his book was that “[t]he meaning of contemporary problems is . . . a function of the meaning of the historical discourse within the tradition.”² Sluga’s point was that philosophy cannot even so much as understand the problems it sets itself without an appreciation of the historical context in which these problems evolved.

Despite the enormous influence of the above named works on subsequent work in philosophy over the past three decades, it still remains the case that the discipline of philosophy today largely carries on as if concerns about the historicity of rational and moral thought do not need to be addressed. Analytic philosophy, that is, largely proceeds today with strongly ahistorical assumptions about the practice of philosophy itself. The cogent criticisms of analytic methodology voiced by MacIntyre, Rorty, Putnam, Sluga, and others have hardly received a reply from those perpetuating the vices described in these criticisms. It is for this reason that Williams’s book might come to be seen in future decades as a crucial turning point in the history of analytic philosophy. Although it is undeniable that there has in recent years been a slowly increasing acknowledgment within analytic circles of the importance of history and historicity, nobody would equate this tolerant acknowledgment with enthusiastic embrace. While increasingly few analytic philosophers would deny that rationality is historical through and through, precious few of them know what to do with such a view, how to take it seriously, how to develop it, and how to mine it for philosophical insights. This is precisely the value of Williams’s late work—he takes the historicist turn that has been urged on the analytic tradition since the

Princeton University Press, 1979); Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volumes One and Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); and Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, 2006). References throughout may contain two dates: in such cases the first date refers to the original year of publication in the original language and the second date refers to the year of publication of the edition to which the cited page number refers.

² Hans Sluga, *Gottlob Frege* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 2, 4.

seventies and generates a great number of important insights. Williams's late work, some will hope, will finally bring down the historical blinders worn over the last one hundred years of analytic thought. It is not that Williams is the first to arrive on the scene of historical analytic philosophy, for he is clearly a relative latecomer to the party, it is rather that Williams has arrived late enough to be able to clearly perceive the movements preceding him in such a way as to offer a convincing portrait of what historical analytic philosophy ought to look like. MacIntyre and Rorty still had to argue their way into the historicism that colors their outlook. Williams confidently adopts a historicist mode and exhibits clearly how much is to be gained by doing so.³

Williams's late work is even more remarkable insofar as his earlier work marks him as one of those who for many years kept the business of ahistorical conceptual analysis afloat in the face of the cogent historical appeals made by his more historically minded colleagues. In a rather brash passage uncharacteristic of Williams's usually calm style, written indeed at the very time that Rorty and MacIntyre had issued their challenges to the ahistoricism of the analytic tradition, Williams was bold enough to declare that analytic philosophy "remains the only real philosophy there is."⁴ Twenty years later, Williams had migrated to a position from within which such a claim could only be viewed as incomprehensible at best and hopelessly naïve at worst. In this migration we will perhaps come to discern the gradual migration of the practice of analytic philosophy on the whole. If so, then Williams will be among our best representatives of the general drift

³ Not that Williams does not offer arguments for this shift. The most important of the late essays I here discuss in which he develops these arguments are Bernard Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" in *Philosophy* 75 (October 2000): 477–96; reprinted in Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bernard Williams, "What Might Philosophy Become?" in Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bernard Williams, "An Essay on Collingwood" in Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴ Bernard Williams, "Political Philosophy and the Analytical Tradition" in Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 2006), 168. Even in this essay, however, Williams was already making serious concessions to the idea that philosophy of any kind must involve itself in history; see "Political Philosophy," 165.

of philosophy over the past few decades from methods of ahistorical conceptual analysis to methods of historically engaged analysis.⁵

In what follows I will describe some of the more central features of Williams's turn from ahistorical conceptual analysis to a philosophical mode that combines analytic insight with historical understanding. I will begin with a brief discussion of Williams's earlier skepticism toward the practice of philosophy as he understood it to function within the analytic tradition of which he was a representative member. Williams's recognition of the limits of philosophy when practiced as a self-sufficient ahistorical inquiry created an opportunity for him to search for forms of intellectual inquiry which could achieve, if not all of the rightful aims of philosophy, then at least more of them. Williams found his constructive answer in a mode of thought which combines philosophical analysis and historical explanation. After briefly tracing this movement from the period of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) to the period of *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), I will consider the important question of why Williams sought to combine the practice of philosophy with history rather than with something else. Why must philosophy involve itself in history? Why not anthropology or psychology, or biology? What is unique to history that has both prompted so many philosophers (such as the earlier Williams) to evade it and provoked so many other philosophers (such as the later Williams) to embrace it?

II

Williams's skeptical attitude toward the achievements and possibilities of modern philosophical thought is probably the best known feature of his thinking. As one of Williams's commentators observes,

⁵ I discuss the importance of historicism in other philosophical traditions elsewhere. I discuss pragmatist historiography in Colin Koopman, "Historicism in Pragmatism: Lessons in Historiography and Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 4 (forthcoming October 2010). I contextualize (and argue for) the pragmatist emphasis on historicity in Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). I discuss genealogy in the work of both Williams and Michel Foucault in Colin Koopman, "Two Uses of Genealogy: Michel Foucault and Bernard Williams" in *Foucault's Legacy*, ed. Carlos Prado (London: Continuum, 2009): 90–108. Lastly, I discuss Foucault's genealogy in contrast to phenomenological attempts at history in Colin Koopman, "Historical Critique or Transcendental Critique in Foucault: Two Kantian Lineages," *Foucault Studies* 8 (February 2010): 100–21.

one of his best known contentions concerns how little moral philosophy can achieve: moral philosophy cannot deliver the very thing which might have been expected of it, an *ethical theory* to guide moral reasoning.⁶

Williams's fullest statement of this skeptical thrust against modern philosophy, above all modern moral philosophy, can be found in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. The concluding chapter of this book begins with the provocative claim that "[t]he resources of most modern moral philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world."⁷ The argument of the book itself which leads up to this strong conclusion is that the subject matter of moral philosophy, the ethical life, is far more complex than modern moral philosophies have allowed. Williams summarizes this argument in the book's first chapter:

If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics—the truth, we might say, about the ethical—why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.⁸

Williams is skeptical about modern moral philosophy just insofar as it, at least in its most typical forms, has aimed to give a simplified account of the ethical life rather than what we might call an enriching or even a complicating account.

This skeptical line of reasoning was most fully developed in *Ethics and the Limits*, but perhaps the most well-known of Williams's expression of this skepticism is his justly famous essay "Moral Luck." Here Williams offered a powerful thrust against the claims of the modern moral philosophies of Kantianism and Utilitarianism to isolate their subject matter from the vicissitudes of luck. The essay concludes on this note:

Scepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was. . . . These forms of scepticism will

⁶ A. W. Moore, "Williams on Ethics, Knowledge, and Reflection," *Philosophy* 78 (October 2003): 337.

⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 197.

⁸ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 17.

leave us with *a* concept of morality, but one less important, certainly, than ours is usually taken to be.⁹

Williams, of course, was not skeptical about our moral practices themselves, but rather about the ways in which moral philosophers have viewed these practices and attempted to underwrite them. If understanding the importance of moral practice requires isolating such practice from luck, it was Williams's argument, then it may just turn out that we might fail to understand the particular importance that morality holds for us.

Although much of Williams's early work was hotly critical of modern moral philosophy in this way, it is important to be clear about just what he was critical of and why. It is fair to assume that Williams's critiques were aimed at modern moral theory as exemplified by thinkers such as Kant and Bentham, but the real targets of his critiques were the twentieth-century professional devotees of these philosophical geniuses. The common thread which runs from Kant and Bentham down to contemporary moral theory, which is also the golden thread which gives Williams's critique the enormous breadth that it has, consists in the refusal to fully grasp the complexity and contingency of the moral life. Modern moral philosophy, Williams argued, has attempted to explain moral practice as if it were relatively pure and simple. This resulted in a lack of philosophical understanding. Williams's critique of these traditions, then, was that they do not achieve their own stated goal of a philosophical explanation of moral practice.

It is important to clearly distinguish Williams's critical thrust here from the different but related critique (which one heard from others such as Rorty and MacIntyre at that time) that modern moral philosophy has been too ahistorical. The early Williams was not complaining about a lack of historicity, but about a lack of philosophical explanation. The later Williams would turn to a historicized practice of moral philosophy in order that philosophy might achieve its own explanatory goals. His critique was never focused on the point that philosophy is ahistorical. It was rather that philosophy had failed itself. By going historical, he would later conclude, philosophy might live up to its best hopes. History, for Williams, thus comes into philosophy on philosophy's own terms.

⁹ Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, 1981), 39.

This enables a final point of clarification about the status of philosophy itself in Williams's work. Williams's skepticism was never directed at philosophy itself but rather only at certain conceptions of philosophy, such that his skepticism can be seen as offered in the service of a rather robust conception of philosophy. In this he was closer to MacIntyre than Rorty, but in actual fact closer to the traditional aspirations of philosophy than either of these historicists ever was. This can be recognized in *Ethics and the Limits* in that the book ends with a brief, but surprisingly little-discussed, consideration of the work that philosophy might do on the concept and valuation of truth: "How truthfulness to an existing self or society is to be combined with reflection, self-understanding, and criticism is a question that philosophy, itself, cannot answer." Williams's skepticism, it must be carefully noted, was not directed against the philosophical project of explicating the role that truth plays in our lives. "Philosophy can play a part in the process . . . but it cannot be a substitute for it," he urged.¹⁰ Williams's skepticism was carefully pointed against the idea that philosophy, all on its own, can successfully achieve its own self-assumed goal of an explanatory account of truth, its meaning, and its value. Williams thus should not be understood as sounding the death knell for philosophy or demanding that it must be replaced by something else like historical inquiry or culture chat. In a much later essay entitled "What Might Philosophy Become?" Williams argued that

we should retain the category of philosophy and situate ourselves within it, rather than pretend that an enquiry which addresses these issues with a richer and more imaginative range of resources represents "the end of philosophy."¹¹

The view Williams held throughout his career is that philosophy should play a key role in any serious explanation of truth without by itself attempting to constitute the whole of that project. Rather than ending on a dour note, as some critics have thought, *Ethics and the Limits* thus actually concluded in a much more confident tone by claiming that in order to accomplish its own stated business philosophy must undergo some kind of expansion or revision. This constructive expansion was precisely the subject of Williams's next major work, *Truth and Truthfulness*, where the crucial innovation is captured

¹⁰ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits*, 200.

¹¹ Bernard Williams, "What Might Philosophy Become?" 211.

in the concise conclusion that “philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history.”¹²

III

Why, on Williams’s view, does philosophy have to involve itself in history and not in, say, anthropology or psychology, or biology? In determining an answer to this question the first thing to note is that Williams has a very broad conception of history. In the essay “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline” he is clear that he is willing to describe “historical understanding” under the much wider rubric of “social understanding.”¹³ As such, probably the best interpretation of Williams’s turn to history is to understand it as a turn to humanistic inquiry broadly conceived. Nevertheless, Williams does employ the term “history” rather than “humanism” and he is clear on a number of occasions that what he has in mind is an inquiry into the past development of our present practices. So while his conception of history is much broader than that of most contemporary professional historians, it is nonetheless clear that for Williams it is a conception primarily of history and not primarily of anthropology or sociology, or biology.

Why, then, is Williams so interested in history? Is it because history provides us with a way to recognize the enormous complexity of our practices? Surely history does this, but it is not at all clear that it does this uniquely. Anthropology gives just as much insight into this enormous complexity as does history. Is it, then, that history allows us to recognize the contingency of our beliefs? This is, to be sure, a point which Williams himself emphasizes. However, it is not clear that history is uniquely positioned to give us insight into our own contingency and fallibility. Psychology, especially in such forms as psychoanalysis or social psychology, is equally in a position to help us recognize the contingency of even our most cherished conceptions.

One useful thought is that history, unlike anthropology or psychology, or biology, is a form of inquiry concerned with temporal development. While these other disciplines can surely take up themes concerning

¹² Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 173.

¹³ Williams, “Humanistic Discipline,” 493.

temporality and historicity into their work (yielding such useful matrices of inquiry as historical anthropology, evolutionary psychology, and evolutionary biology), there is something about history such that it seems that it must take up these themes. This is to say that temporal development counts for nearly everything in history. The historian cannot avoid temporality, but the anthropologist, psychologist, and biologist can by contrast get along fine if they choose not to dabble in certain time-conscious subfields in their disciplines. This suggests that if history is uniquely positioned to provide us with anything, it is an understanding of the specific way in which certain of our practices and concepts have developed over time. This thought fits well with much of Williams's work, but that it does so will take some showing. The interpretation which I wish to defend holds that Williams's view is that history provides unique access to the developmental rationality of what seem to us to be some of our most unshakeable convictions, like our preference for truthfulness and our commitment to tolerance. This interpretation has the benefit of both offering the best way of understanding Williams's turn to genealogy in his later work and of fitting well with a number of Williams's claims in writings that seem to explicitly suggest such a view.

To see why Williams thinks that history's unique affordance of a perspective on development is vital to philosophy, recall his concern with the limits of philosophy: philosophy too often simplifies rather than enriches our understanding of our most important practices. It is precisely at these limits—where philosophical explanation breaks down in the face of deeply contingent complexities—that historical inquiry can kick in as useful for both explanation and understanding. An example drawn from Williams's writings on liberalism elucidates the point. Discussing certain prevalent ways of defending liberalism, Williams observes:

It is not a reproach to these liberals that they cannot see beyond the outer limits of what they find acceptable: no-one can do that. But it is more of a reproach that they are not interested enough in why this is so, in why their most basic convictions should seem to be, as I put it, simply there.¹⁴

Williams's view is that the historian is uniquely positioned to give an account of certain of our beliefs which we, as both philosophers and ordinary

¹⁴ Williams, "Humanistic Discipline," 494; see also Bernard Williams, "The Liberalism of Fear" in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

everyday inquirers, are customarily inclined to treat simply as given, as necessary, or as the conversational bedrock which turns back the spade of both philosophical and empirical inquiry.

Still, there are different ways in which history can be used to explicate our practices at the points where philosophy meets its limits. In some of his earliest writings on the uses of genealogical history, that is, in his first serious writings on Nietzsche, Williams develops a conception of history as comparative:

We need to understand what parts of our conceptual scheme are, in what degree, culturally local. We understand this best when we understand an actual human scheme that differs from ours in certain respects. One, very important, way of locating such a scheme is finding it in history, in particular in the history of our own scheme.¹⁵

This conception seems somewhat unsatisfactory both in its reliance on the notion of varying conceptual schemes and in its use of history as mining the past for practices which can be contrasted to our own. In his later writings Williams developed a more sophisticated use of history, much more in line with certain other prominent conceptions of genealogy, according to which his inquiries would not be histories of a past that is different from our own but histories of our present which reveal the conditions under which we accept (whether wisely or not) who we have come to be.¹⁶ Here is how Williams makes the point in a later essay:

Above all, historical understanding—perhaps I may now say, more broadly, social understanding—can help with the business, which is quite certainly a philosophical business, of distinguishing between different ways in which various of our ideas and procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond them, that there is no conceivable alternative.¹⁷

Note the difference in the two uses of history. Both uses of history are offered as responses to a condition in which philosophical inquiry stops at the supposed bedrock of our ways of living. The earlier view was that

¹⁵ Bernard Williams, “Nietzsche’s Minimalist Moral Psychology” in Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, 2006), 308.

¹⁶ On this point I disagree with Mark Jenkins who bases his explication of Williams’s conception of genealogical method almost entirely on Williams’s earlier view such that he seems to discern no important philosophical differences between Williams’s earlier and later descriptions of genealogy; see Mark Jenkins, *Bernard Williams* (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 161.

¹⁷ Williams, “Humanistic Discipline,” 492–3.

history might enable us to retrieve from the past certain alternative forms of life that could enable us to see past the limits of the present. The later view was that history might enable us to explicate the complex and contingent ways in which we developed the limits that condition our present forms of life. Both conceptions of history have their uses, but it is clear that Williams himself accepted his more considered view as the right way of bringing together historical and philosophical inquiry. On this later and more considered view, historical understanding enables us to give an account of the way in which our most cherished beliefs have come to be cherished in the way that they are. History helps philosophy uncover the role of our deepest concepts in such a way as to help us understand why we find these concepts necessary for living in the social worlds we inhabit. But what does it mean to give an account of what would otherwise be taken as necessary?

Although Williams is nowhere entirely perspicuous on this matter, history in his sense of understanding concepts we cannot seem to go beyond seems to fulfill two related but distinct functions. History first helps us to understand internally the specific content of our particular social arrangements. History second helps us to critically engage these arrangements as part of a more general project of vindicating or revising them as we find necessary. In one of his late essays Williams distinguishes between the activity of “understanding where [our ideas] came from” and that of “reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them.” Williams’s view is that history engages thought in both of these functions. His claim is thus that these two activities “are in various ways continuous with one another.”¹⁸ There is no deep conflict between explicating our beliefs and criticizing them, no important contradiction between what P. F. Strawson called in another context “descriptive” and “revisionary” inquiry.¹⁹ Indeed it seems to be Williams’s point that there are in fact important connections between these forms of inquiry such that we should avoid the traditional practice of prioritizing either one over the other. Giving an account of ourselves in historical terms helps to fulfill both of these functions together.

¹⁸ Williams, “Humanistic Discipline,” 194.

¹⁹ See P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 1959, 1990). I return to Strawson’s distinction below in comparing Williams to two other philosophers of history, namely Stuart Hampshire and R. G. Collingwood.

Williams's view seems to be that it is precisely where we have tended to talk past one another, where pure philosophy (just like pure empirical inquiry) meets its limits, that we should move into history in order to better understand and better justify our present concepts and practices. In order that we might be able to give an account of ourselves to one another, and to ourselves, and especially to those most skeptical parts of ourselves, it is important that we engage in practices of descriptive interpretation when we engage in practices of normative justification. We might thus ask of Williams's view how that view conceptualizes the relationship between interpretation (or understanding) and justification (or legislation).

The view that philosophy needs to involve itself in history can be understood in terms of the familiar hermeneutic and genealogical idea that philosophical justification requires historical understanding in order to have any definite bearing on our actual practices. This idea, which Williams could have found articulated in MacIntyre or Rorty, or Gadamer but which he seems to have taken over mostly from Berlin and Collingwood, and also undoubtedly from Nietzsche,²⁰ is that in order to properly evaluate any concept or practice we first need to have a rich understanding of that concept or practice and that history alone is in a position to provide us with this richness in all its complexities. It is in this sense that Williams claims that "the reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding."²¹ History, because it locates our concepts in the rich contexts in which they contingently evolved, enables us to grasp the greater complexity of these concepts necessary for their philosophical consideration. The idea is not simply that historical understanding provides us with conceptual resources that philosophical explication cannot mount. If that were the case, then the philosopher could simply reply that philosophy does not stand in need of the additional conceptual resources developed by the historian. Williams's claim, rather, is the more ambitious and, I think, more convincing one that without involving itself in history, philosophy is "likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry" in

²⁰ On Berlin see Bernard Williams, "Introduction" to Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories* (London: Hogarth, 1978); on Collingwood see Bernard Williams, "An Essay on Collingwood" in Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); on Nietzsche see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*.

²¹ Williams, "Humanistic Discipline," 489.

the first place.²² The strong claim is that history is required if we are to gain a sufficient understanding of the very concepts and practices which are already a part of our traditions of philosophical inquiry. Philosophy cannot ignore history just insofar as history provides the only way of grasping the complex subject matter that is widely taken to be essential to philosophical thought.

This position has, in varying forms, been well-rehearsed by philosophers working in traditions like hermeneutics and genealogy.²³ Many of the historically minded philosophers working in these traditions also make the further claim, which Williams makes too, that historical understanding can in many instances provide us with accounts sufficient for philosophical evaluation. Indeed, without this further claim it is not at all clear that history can contribute much to philosophy. Historicist philosophies like hermeneutics and genealogy tend to get interesting precisely where they lay claim to the idea that history by itself can constitute a viable mode of evaluation. This is also precisely where Williams's own involvement of philosophy in history gets interesting.

Historicist philosophies like hermeneutics and genealogy in this stronger form have been subjected to a number of familiar criticisms. One of the most important of these criticisms has been that of the genetic fallacy. The point of recognizing this fallacy is to affirm that historical explanations of some concept or practice, say that of truth, are not yet normative justifications of that concept or practice, say the value of truth. Many hold that such reasoning is fallacious even in cases where a justification of the practice in question requires a prior historical interpretation of that practice. Most hermeneuticians and genealogists have tried to get around this criticism by writing histories of certain concepts or practices in such a way as to show them to be necessarily linked to other concepts and practices which nobody should want to question. For instance, a history of liberalism might show that many important aspects of our current way of life are essentially tied to core liberal practices and this might be used to show in turn that liberalism is more or less justified. For Williams, this common approach to avoiding the genetic fallacy will not do. For his view is that history is useful precisely at this point where philosophy begins to rely on convictions and beliefs so

²² Williams, "Humanistic Discipline," 489.

²³ For a detailed comparison to Foucault's genealogy see Koopman, "Foucault and Williams."

unshakeable that nobody should want to question them. Williams does not want to use history to establish that certain of our concepts are ineliminably tied to other concepts which nobody should want to call into question. This would amount to using history to establish the merely instrumental value of a concept. Such an evaluation would of course depend on the presumed intrinsic value of some further grounding concept which the historian does not bother to inquire into. Williams wants to use history to inquire into those seemingly intrinsically valuable concepts which nobody wants to call into question or, more precisely, those seemingly intrinsically valuable concepts which are all too often called into question but which nobody knows how to offer a really careful defense of.²⁴

The standard criticisms of historicist conceptions of understanding, often directed at hermeneutics and genealogy, raise important questions which we should ask of Williams's project, too. How can a descriptive genealogical history play a normative role in vindicating (or subverting) the present practices whose histories we have traced? How can Williams avoid the traditional failings of those robust forms of hermeneutics and genealogy which purport to use descriptive history as a means of normative justification? How, in other words, can Williams's use of genealogy not commit the genetic fallacy? Answering these questions will help us provide an answer to the already stated question of why Williams turns to history, rather than say anthropology or psychology, where philosophy meets its limits.

History, on Williams's account, is meant to provide a vantage which is together normative and interpretive, both revisionist and descriptive. That, precisely, is why a genealogy can be vindicatory or, alternatively, denunciatory. And that is why a descriptive account of the genesis of a practice can be an essential part of a normative account of the value of that same practice. To see how this might be so, it will be useful to contrast genealogy to both theoretical inquiries such as philosophy and empirical inquiries such as psychology or ethnography. Theoretical inquiries such as philosophy tend to be good on normativity, but weak on empirical reality. Empirical inquiries such as psychology tend to be good at description, but weak on normativity. Historical genealogy offers a way of meeting both demands at once. To see why this is so, or at least why Williams might have

²⁴ I am thinking primarily of the discussion of the intrinsic value of truth in *Truth and Truthfulness*.

thought that it would be so, and to see further why genealogy does not commit the genetic fallacy, we have to very carefully consider what I mentioned above as history's unique contribution: temporal development.

A developmental perspective is the one thing afforded by history which other forms of inquiry do not, at least not by themselves, have a handle on. This is why it can sometimes be helpful to contrast historical inquiry with strict or pure conceptions of empirical and theoretical inquiry. In their strictest or purest forms, empirical and theoretical inquiries adopt synchronic approaches to their subject matter. Classical empirical anthropologists or psychologists, for instance, do not need to ask how a cultural practice or mental item came into existence but can concern themselves simply with showing that such and such a practice or belief takes place or is held. To be sure, anthropologists and psychologists can (and some in fact do) consider the development of cultural practices and mental items, but to the extent that they do so they involve themselves in and borrow from history. This involvement in history, Williams would urge, is a good thing, and to the extent that social inquiry adopts such an approach it falls under the general category which he refers to as historical inquiry. In their purest forms, however, empirical inquiries do not concern themselves with development. This is also true of the purest forms of theoretical inquiry, including many traditional conceptions of philosophical inquiry. Philosophy, when practiced in this traditional way, is not at all concerned with descriptions of how things actually are, but more so with issues concerning why they have to be the way they are (metaphysics and epistemology) or how they ideally ought to be (moral and political philosophy). To the extent that philosophy strays from this pure conception and involves itself in the way things actually are, it increases the complexity of its subject matter such that it is difficult for philosophy to do its work by itself. In this case, too, Williams would applaud the expanded conception of philosophy's task. Now, it must be noted that this is an expansion of philosophy and not at all the traditional or pure conception of philosophy which Williams, like so many others, finds limited. The key point is that pure forms of empirical and philosophical inquiry are not concerned with the way things develop. Empirical inquiry is concerned exclusively with how things are and not at all with how they might come to be otherwise. Philosophical inquiry is concerned exclusively with how things ought to be and not at all with how they came to be the way that they are.

Both of these approaches to inquiry, rarefied as they might seem to be,²⁵ can be contrasted with the historical sort of inquiry which Williams urged. History takes its subject matter as diachronic. It is concerned with development. As such, history offers a perspective which empirical and philosophical approaches cannot mount without explicitly involving themselves in history. This unique perspective is one which faces in both normative and descriptive directions simultaneously. In effect, the perspective is one which enables the normative evaluation of a practice in terms of the actual historical genesis of that practice. Rather than evaluating practices according to some atemporal standard as moral philosophers have tended to do, we can instead evaluate them in relation to the historical problems or questions which precede them. This means evaluating practices according to the actual historical situation out of which they developed. We will not assess practices merely on the basis of their atemporal logical correctness. We will instead assess them in terms of the possibilities afforded by the situations in which the practices developed. The best practice is not that which, in the ideal realm of theory, would have been best. The best practice is rather that which, in the actual world of changing historical reality, developed the best opportunities afforded by the historical situation itself. To find out what the best opportunity is in a real historical situation we have to engage in both empirical description and theoretical evaluation. History, in Williams's sense, offers us just such a conception of inquiry in which genesis and justification are closely related.

These ideas can be further clarified by comparing Williams's historicist sensibility with that of two other twentieth-century British philosophers: Stuart Hampshire and R. G. Collingwood. These comparisons will help make sense of Williams's attempt to integrate, in the realm of historiography, what P. F. Strawson, in the realm of metaphysics, helpfully distinguished as "revisionary" and "descriptive" inquiry.²⁶

²⁵ It would not be difficult, however, to find such rarefied inquiries in the pages of the leading contemporary academic journals in the fields of philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, biology, and so on.

²⁶ See Strawson, *Individuals*.

IV

There are numerous instructive points of contact between Williams's invocation of history and a similar revisionist conception of philosophy offered by moral philosopher Stuart Hampshire. Addressing the role played by justification in normative theories Hampshire advanced a claim not unfamiliar to Williams: "There is a very substantial part of morality, and of moral concern, which requires the recognition of complexity and not the reduction of complexity to simplicity." About this substantial portion of our moral lives Hampshire urged a move which, here again, is not unfamiliar to Williams: "An explanation of the moral claims would have to be, partly at least, historical, referring to their past and their consciousness of the past." As with explanation, so with justification, again in agreement with Williams: "The justification is to be found, not in argument towards a general principle, but in the specification of a complex array of historical realities and causal relations." Much like Williams, Hampshire argued that taking the complexity of our moral lives into account requires a shift in philosophical practice such that historical forms of explanation and justification are given their due. There is, however, a crucial point of difference which separates these two conceptions of historicist philosophy. Williams sought to move philosophy into history so that we might more fully understand our bedrock conceptions of our ways of life. Hampshire, however, urges the same move in order that we might grasp our ways of life as a kind of bedrock. Hampshire claims that any person who

justifies his practices in this historical style implicitly or explicitly presupposes . . . that every man and woman lives imbedded in some particular way of life . . . [and] that ways of life are coherent totalities of customs, attitudes, beliefs, institutions, which are interconnected and mutually dependent.

Historical justification thus serves to demonstrate why we "cannot easily abstract the activity or practice [in question] from its setting in a complete way of life."²⁷ For Hampshire, history removes us to a perspective in which we can grasp the justification of practices by reference to our way of life. For Williams, by contrast, history is invoked precisely in order to develop

²⁷ Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 167, 166, 5, 6.

more engaging accounts of those “coherent totalities” which we too often accept as unquestionable bedrocks of justification and explanation.

Williams’s use of historical genealogy can be further explicated by reference to that of another historicist philosopher who, it ought to be noted, Williams once called “the most unjustly neglected of twentieth-century British philosophers,” namely R. G. Collingwood.²⁸ Collingwood’s philosophy of history anticipates Williams’s in that he held that normative evaluation cannot be conceived as ahistorical and must rather be practiced with a close eye on historical development. A practice or belief, Collingwood urged, cannot be evaluated except as an answer to a question which preceded it. We cannot jump outside of the historical “logic of question and answer” in order to assess a practice or belief according to some eternally pure logic.²⁹ Practices and beliefs can only be evaluated as responses to the conditions out of which they developed. Collingwood wrote:

meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions . . . to a complex consisting of questions and answers.³⁰

Collingwood came to refer to this complex, or at least a more developed version of that idea, as forming the “absolute presuppositions” of our practice in contrast to the “relative presuppositions.”³¹ Absolute presuppositions are, for Collingwood, neither analytically nor empirically verifiable, but rather form the very conditions of analytical thought and empirical inquiry. Not long after Collingwood, Ludwig Wittgenstein more humbly referred to these sorts of presuppositions as “forms of life.”³² An essential contribution of historical inquiry, or what Collingwood called “metaphysics [as] an historical

²⁸ Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 237; see also Williams, “Collingwood.” I thank Hans Sluga for first suggesting to me the great importance of Collingwood for a proper grasp of Williams’s philosophy of history.

²⁹ Collingwood contrasted his own “logic of question and answer” to the “propositional logic” which was in his day, and remains in our own, dominant in professional philosophy, in R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, 1970), 33. Williams found this distinction rather dubious; see “Collingwood”, 352.

³⁰ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 33, 37.

³¹ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940, 1998), 32.

³² Williams offers a similar comparison between Collingwood and Wittgenstein; see “Collingwood,” 356

science,” is that it enables us to explicate our absolute presuppositions so as to “find out on what occasions and by what processes one of them has turned into another.”³³ Collingwood’s view everywhere emphasizes the tremendous importance of understanding our conceptions in terms of the conditions of their development—and history is that form of inquiry which uniquely affords a perspective on such development. As Williams put it in a posthumously published essay on Collingwood, by placing “emphasis on history” Collingwood was able to develop a form of inquiry “where continuity and change permit a developmental, diachronic understanding which is not offered by the blankly ethnographic case” or for that matter the abstractly philosophical case.³⁴ Collingwood thus used history to gain a perspective on the development of our forms of life in a way that enabled him to understand the lives so formed in ways which simply could not be grasped from a nonhistorical perspective.

Despite the obvious resonances between the views held by Hampshire and Collingwood on the one hand and by Williams on the other, there remain important differences. These differences can be brought into focus by returning to P. F. Strawson’s distinction between descriptive metaphysics and revisionist metaphysics. Here is how Strawson draws his distinction: “Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.” Strawson drew this distinction in order to emphasize the priority of descriptive over revisionary metaphysics. Without concerning ourselves with Strawson’s argument on behalf of the priority of descriptive metaphysics, we can put his distinction about conceptions of metaphysics to good use in parsing out the various conceptions of historiography I have been discussing.

I suggest that we see Hampshire and Collingwood as largely following Strawson’s conceptualization of inquiry as above all a descriptive enterprise.³⁵ Collingwood, for example, used historiography to explicate or

³³ Collingwood, *Metaphysics*, 49, 73.

³⁴ Williams, “Collingwood,” 358.

³⁵ Hacker rightly points out the differences separating Collingwood from Strawson over metaphysics in P. M. S. Hacker, “On Strawson’s Rehabilitation of Metaphysics” in Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001): 348–54. My procedure here is consistent with Hacker’s observation in that I am merely using Strawson’s distinction in an analogous way in a domain of inquiry where Strawson himself did not employ it (that is, historiography rather than metaphysics). This leaves open the possibility that in the

describe absolute presuppositions. This view is like Strawson's in that revisionary results seem to simply follow from descriptive inquiry in such a way that revisionary inquiry offers a derivative rather than a distinctive contribution to inquiry. Descriptive inquiry is meant to get the world right in such a way that revisionary inquiry consists in little more than drawing the right inferences from a set of wholly accurate and rather complete descriptions. In Strawson's memorable phrase, "Revisionary metaphysics is at the service of descriptive metaphysics."³⁶ Hampshire's view is probably a little more complex on these matters, but at bottom it seems to be similarly motivated by the idea that history enables us to understand the bedrock which forms our lives such that they are the way that they are. For both Hampshire and Collingwood, this descriptive historical project seems to accommodate a certain kind of normative project but without leaving much for particularly revisionist kinds of normative projects. Justification takes place as a second project that is merely derivative of the first project of description in such a way that nonjustificatory critique is effectively blocked.

I mentioned earlier that Williams's turn to history is motivated by a dual concern to descriptively explicate our forms of life and to normatively evaluate these forms of life. Putting this point in Strawson's terminology, Williams practiced both descriptive and revisionist historiography, and he did so because he saw the two as needing to be integrated if either one is to do its job well. Williams's move toward history is meant to help us to gain a clearer understanding of our forms of life such that we can come to a clearer perception of both the strengths and the weaknesses of these forms of life. In this, Williams's view crucially diverges from Hampshire's and Collingwood's, although it is important to observe that there is no principled opposition between the two sets of views so long as we restrict ourselves to employing Strawson's distinction without endorsing Strawson's recommendation of how to prioritize what is thereby distinguished.

In employing these distinctions, it is important to observe that Williams was of course not insensitive to many of the concerns that have led careful thinkers such as Collingwood, Hampshire, and Strawson to prioritize description over revision. Williams affirmed definite limits to his own

original domain of employment (that is, metaphysics) Strawson differs a great deal from Collingwood and Hampshire. Collingwood himself contested the distinction between metaphysics and historiography (in *Metaphysics*, 49, 61–2), but I think we can still at least provisionally tender the distinction for heuristic purposes.

³⁶ Strawson, *Individuals*, 9.

revisionist project. While historical inquiry will be necessary for normative revisionism in some cases (notably in the case of morality and politics) it will not, for Williams at least, be useful for normative inquiry in every case (notably in the case of much of science). Nevertheless, regardless of the breadth of its application the central point of Williams's attempt to involve philosophy in history was to integrate descriptive historiography with a revisionist engagement with the historical conditions which inform our lives as we know them. One misses, for better or for worse, this integrated sensibility of description and revision in many other prominent philosophers who have also notably turned to history, Hampshire and Collingwood among them.

This brings us to another potential problem for Williams's view. This unique aspect of Williams's view seems to commit him to the claim that we could never fully explain to ourselves the moral conceptions employed in such abominable practices as slavery and genocide. As Williams frankly puts it, "What makes sense of the past to us may not make sense of it to others."³⁷ This view is closely related to the view which Williams had earlier defended under the name of "the relativism of distance" and which provoked much philosophical ire.³⁸ Critics of the earlier position argued that Williams's view is indefensible insofar as it seems plausible that we might be able to explain how it is that others have held racist moral conceptions without endorsing these conceptions ourselves.³⁹ In defense, recall that Williams's interest in both philosophy and history has always been in developing explanations that are neither merely empirical nor merely philosophical. What he seemed to not want were explanations of, say, racism that are couched in terms of familiar ideological categories ("they were racist because it furthered their class interests" or "their economic system required a permanent slave caste") or in terms of some purely philosophical idiom ("they employed a different conception of persons" or "they just used the word 'human being' differently than we do now"). These sorts of explanation are external to those holding racist conceptions, which is

³⁷ Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 258. This point connects to the discussion of internal reasons and external reasons models of explanation in Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 1981).

³⁸ Williams, *Limits*, 162.

³⁹ See Samuel Scheffler, "Morality Through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*," *The Philosophical Review* 96, no. 3 (July 1987): 411–34.

to say that they would not function for racists as sufficient explanations of their own behavior. What Williams is really interested in are internal explanations that might be employed by those who actually employ the moral conceptions being explained.

This feature of Williams's historiography is best seen as borrowing its legitimacy from Williams's distinction in moral psychology between internal and external reasons and his own internalist position that, "the only real claims about reasons for action will be internal claims" or as he later stated this position in more simplified language, "the only reasons for action are internal reasons."⁴⁰ To the extent that Williams's internalism in moral psychology implicates a relativism of distance in historiography it is only a mild form of relativism according to which we cannot in actual fact rationally explain practices whose reasons for acting *we* cannot accept as reasons. I find the name "relativism" an unfortunate title for this view in that it is really better referred to as an entirely sensible form of "localism" that is implied by the internalism that Williams has elsewhere defended in detail. My suggestion is that, consistent with his internalism in moral psychology, Williams was in his historiography concerned to understand the way in which historical inquiry enables us to achieve perspectives that are internal to the practices with whose histories we are concerned.

To return now to the seemingly troubling implication of Williams's historiography, the concern is that the view suggests an inability to explain abominable moral conceptions to ourselves. But in what sense can we really explain abominable moral conceptions? By understanding the reasons that motivate these conceptions? That seems wrong insofar as it would suggest that we would be able to offer reasons for why a person should act in an abominable way. At most we want not internal reasons that vindicate abominable moral practices but external explanations that make them broadly comprehensible without quite suddenly rendering them moral. One of the points of Williams's distinction between internal reasons and external motivations is to hold on to the distinction between rational moral discussion and coercive moral persuasion:

The failings of an externalist account come out all the more clearly when we reflect on the kind of discussion that might be needed to convince an

⁴⁰ Williams, "Internal and External," 111 and "Values, Reasons, and the Theory of Persuasion" in Bernard Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 2006), 109.

agent that such a reason applied to him, and how that discussion could hardly fail to be coercive.⁴¹

Williams's idea is that a historical explanation of our own complex moral conceptions is best suited to helping us make sense of those conceptions to which we wholeheartedly subscribe but without fully understanding why. As Williams was careful to note, "The real question concerns our philosophical attitude towards *our own* views."⁴² History helps us explicate our internal reasons for acting in the ways that we do—this is an important task insofar as our internal reasons often remain obscure. This use of history needs to be kept distinct from the quite different practice of offering external rationalizations for forms of life that we should never rationally defend—external reasons might help us account for why something has happened but at best they offer rationalizations of practices in the pejorative senses and not reasons for practices in the moral sense. If we fail to hold on to Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons, then we may just lose sight of the important differences between rational discussion and coercive persuasion. If we fail to hold on to those important differences, then there is little hope that we shall be able to rationally engage not only the moral practices of others but our own moral practices as well.

V

Before concluding, I want to offer a pair of examples in order to describe how Williams's envisioned form of historical inquiry is meant to actually work. I turn now to two instances of genealogical history featured in two of his last works. Genealogy is crucial in both Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness* and in some of his late political writings which were to be later put into book form, but which could only be published in a relatively unarranged fashion in the posthumous collection *In the Beginning Was the Deed*.

The book on politics which Williams was planning, and the posthumous collection which offers some view into what that book might have been, was primarily to have been a historical vindication of liberalism. Crucial to this vindication was Williams's view that the normative critique of any political

⁴¹ Williams, "Values, Reasons," 118.

⁴² Williams, "Humanistic Discipline," 191.

theory can only take place if we also engage in empirical descriptions of the actual situations to which the theory is a response. Thus, Williams wrote that “[liberalism] will have a chance of being [better off] only if it accepts that like any other outlook it cannot escape starting from what is at hand, from the kinds of life among which it finds itself.”⁴³ One consequence of this view is Williams’s “relativism of distance” conception according to which we should try to avoid criticizing conceptions from the distant past from our own point of view and for our own purposes:

Political moralism, particularly in its Kantian forms, has a universalistic tendency which encourages it to inform past societies about their failings. It is not that these judgments are, exactly, meaningless—one can imagine oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur if one wants—but they are useless and do not help one to understand anything.⁴⁴

Williams thus argued that premodern nonliberal cultures need to be seen as answers to the problems presented in their own historical circumstances. It is not very helpful to inform ourselves of the obvious failings of these cultures when judged by our standards, because these cultures are bound to fail by our standards since our standards are responses to our problems and not their problems. Normatively criticizing our standards, on the other hand, is both useful and important insofar as it is the only way to inform ourselves about how well we are responding to the problems posed by our historical situation. In doing so, we should, as with past cultures, critique our own culture not so much by reference to some utopian ideal as by reference to the possibilities inherent in our own historical situation. Political critique in Williams’s historicist sense thus focuses not on perfect ideals but on the

possibility of deploying some parts of [our culture] against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers.⁴⁵

⁴³ Bernard Williams, “In the Beginning Was the Deed” in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 2005), 24.

⁴⁴ Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory” in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.

⁴⁵ Bernard Williams, “Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism” in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 2005), 37.

It seems that Williams is led to this conception of critique above all by his view that “political projects are essentially conditioned, not just in their background intellectual conditions but as a matter of empirical realism, by their historical circumstances.”⁴⁶ Instead of entering a pure mode of idealistic philosophical evaluation, Williams urges that we evaluate practices in terms of the actual historical situations out of which they arose. Instead of entering the pure mode of empirical description, he further urges that we describe the actual empirical development of practices in terms which enable us to evaluate them.

This conception of history as in some cases integrating normative and descriptive inquiry is also the best way to make sense of the genealogies Williams offers in *Truth and Truthfulness*. Those genealogies situate various forms of truthfulness (that is, various kinds of truth-telling) in relation to the actual empirical realities out of which they developed in order to show that a positive valuation of both these concepts and the practices associated with them were in fact the best opportunities afforded by the historical situations people actually faced. The intended result is a genealogy of truthfulness that vindicates the concept of truth itself.⁴⁷ Leaving aside an assessment of whether or not Williams's genealogies actually succeed in vindicating what they set out to, the point which I wish to emphasize in the present context

⁴⁶ Williams, “In the Beginning,” 25.

⁴⁷ It is crucial to recognize that Williams offers a genealogy not of the concept of truth, but of practices of truthfulness and, in virtue of that, a genealogy of the value of truth. While truthfulness is for Williams historically variable, truth itself is not; see *Truth and Truthfulness*, 61. Employing this distinction, Williams uses genealogy for a defense of the intrinsic value of truth which would require much more than a genealogical defense of the merely instrumental value of truth. Williams's distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value is rather confusing, as pointed out by both Barry Allen, “Another New Nietzsche” (review essay of Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*), *History and Theory* 42, (October 2003): 365 and Ian Hacking, “Critical Notice” (review of Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness*), *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (Mar., 2004): 146. I dutifully note dissent in defense of Williams by Edward Craig, “Genealogies and the State of Nature” in *Bernard Williams*, ed. Alan Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 199. The lesson I draw from Allen and Hacking's discussions of this distinction is that we should try to approach Williams's argument as ethical rather than metaphysical. Williams's concern is to show that truth has intrinsic value understood ethically but not metaphysically. Thus, his claim is that history enables us to focus the intrinsic ethical importance of truth where philosophy has previously failed to understand truth in this way given its preoccupation with demonstrating either the intrinsic metaphysical value of truth or the instrumental ethical value of truth.

concerns how these genealogies of truthfulness are offered as vindicating truth. Williams does not use his genealogies to suggest that truth must be accorded positive moral worth in some ideal realm of theory. Nor does he use them to suggest that truthfulness merely is positively valued in our actual moral history. These two conclusions would be the results of the atemporal inquiries of pure philosophical and pure empirical research, respectively. Williams would be unsatisfied with both insofar as they remain content to rest at the level of conversational bedrock which he finds so troublesome, even if they rest there in two quite different ways. The philosopher rests content at the conversational bedrock of theoretical necessity while the psychologist rests content at the conversational bedrock of empirical actuality. “Here is where I stand and I can offer you nothing further,” they both straightforwardly proclaim.⁴⁸ Williams replies that we can offer something further: we can involve ourselves in history in order to explain to others and to ourselves why it is that we stand where we stand and why we can stand here with a good conscience. This helps us see why Williams engaged in the patient genealogical work offered in his chapters on Thucydides and accuracy, Diderot and sincerity, and liberalism and critique. These chapters were offered by Williams as a kind of inquiry which goes beyond the conversational bedrock where the theoretical philosopher and the empirical ethnographer meet their limits. Genealogy, in taking a developmental perspective, enables us to explicate and understand ourselves just that much more.

Of course, Williams would readily admit that we will never be in a position to understand ourselves all the way down. Genealogies of concepts as complex as truth, truthfulness, tolerance, and liberty are contestable and

⁴⁸ It is no accident that Williams’s claims here sound like a response to a certain kind of Wittgensteinian thinking. Williams was much impressed by certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy. However, Williams also recognized that there is a danger in the way in which Wittgenstein rests content at the limits of inquiry. One way of understanding Williams’s project is that he goes along with Wittgenstein insofar as the latter locates the limits of pure philosophical and empirical inquiry, but then at this very point diverges from Wittgenstein in showing how historical inquiry enables us to do further work precisely where these limits of other approaches confront us. It would be an interesting project to take up at greater length this question of the relation between Williams’s turn to history and Wittgenstein’s conception of the limitations of philosophy. For his view of the uses and disadvantages of Wittgenstein in politics see Williams, “Pluralism.”

can be written from different perspectives and with different conclusions.⁴⁹ Disagreement and skepticism, and various other forms of the absence of complete and transparent self-understanding, will remain even after the genealogists have done all of their patient and meticulous work. Williams's point is not that genealogy yields the holy grail of absolute certainty which had been the quest of most modern philosophy. His point is that genealogy yields a fuller sense of who we are, where we have come from, and where we might go than that achieved by modern philosophy in its purest forms. Genealogy cannot give us everything. But it can give us a great deal that we do not already have. And we may find that what it gives us is indispensable once we have finally got it.

VI

Williams's use of genealogy sets an intellectual agenda that is clearly worth following up on. As for Williams's specific genealogies of truthfulness and tolerance, it is not entirely clear that he has provided all the historical evidence we should want in order to draw the confident normative conclusion which he draws, namely that truth and tolerance emerge from these narratives vindicated. We can arrive at this negative assessment of Williams's project in one of two ways: either from inside or from outside that project.

From within the perspective of Williams's genealogical project, we might critically claim that we need further empirical research to demonstrate that a positive evaluation of truthfulness really was the best opportunity afforded by the historical situations in question. We might, as Williams himself admitted would be likely, contest his genealogies with our own counter-genealogies. This sort of critical engagement with Williams's work would, I think, be quite refreshing for contemporary moral philosophy. It would take seriously Williams's summary remark that involving ourselves in history is bound to change the way in which we understand ourselves to live ethical lives.

⁴⁹ Williams freely concedes that there is no such thing as "the truth" about the historical past (*Truth and Truthfulness*, 257), but he does argue that histories written in a hopeful and confident mode will more often serve our purposes better (*Truth and Truthfulness*, 266). It is notable that it is virtually impossible to distinguish him from Rorty on this point, as on so many other points.

From a quite different perspective external to Williams's agenda, many critics are bound to find his philosophical and historical work wanting. These critics will claim that the empirical evidence on offer has nothing to do with the theoretical claims which Williams makes on behalf of truth. Some will claim this because they hold that truth is merely one more empirical effect of the actual workings of history (certain postmodern historians such as Hayden White might take such an approach).⁵⁰ Others will claim this because they hold that truth (and its value) is a purely conceptual issue which has nothing to do with history as an empirical inquiry into the development of our actual evaluations for and against truth (certain analytic philosophers such as Thomas Nagel might take this approach).⁵¹

Even if most philosophers and historians were to conclude that Williams has not shown with sufficient clarity the tight connection between genesis and justification which he wishes to establish, his challenge nevertheless is clearly compelling enough to force deniers such as White and partisans of common sense such as Nagel to revisit their shared assumptions that descriptive history and normative philosophy get along well enough without one another. Most of us who find ourselves located in departments of philosophy or departments of history are busy passing each other by on the opposite sides of today's intellectual highways. In the meantime, a small handful of clear thinkers including Williams have been busy constructing interchanges through which philosophers and historians can better traffic with one another.⁵²

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⁵⁰ For his discussion of White see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, 243–5.

⁵¹ For his discussion of Nagel see Williams, "Humanistic Discipline," 492 and "The End of Explanation" in *The New York Review of Books* 45, no. 18 (19 November 1998): 40–4.

⁵² For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper I would like to thank Barry Allen, Brian Fay, Ian Hacking, Paul Roth, Joseph Rouse, Hans Sluga and George Tsai. I also gratefully acknowledge a Postdoctoral Fellowship granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided me with the time and funds to undertake the research for this paper while I was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of California, Santa Cruz.