

BOOK REVIEWS

In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument. BERNARD WILLIAMS. Selected, edited, and with an introduction by GEOFFREY HAWTHORN. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. xx + 174 p. Cloth \$29.95.

There is a common refrain that runs through these thirteen lapidary, elegant reflections by the late Bernard Williams. It is that some sorts of decisions, or disputes, or actions, or expressions of value, are best considered as primarily “political,” where this in most cases means not “moral” or not “based on moral principles.” The key difference concerns the nature of disagreements. For one thing, the uniqueness of moral discussions derives from the nature of the reasons adduced in such disagreements. A moral argument seeks to classify an action or practice as permissible, forbidden, or obligatory. In political contexts disagreements are meant to have special sorts of consequences: actions by governments, institutions that possess a monopoly of legitimately applicable coercive force, and these always occur in particular circumstances that resist generalization. For another, the loser in a moral argument is judged to be morally wrong or immoral; in a political dispute she has simply lost a contest; one of many that will arise and pass away.

Williams of course realizes that moral considerations play a role in politics; he just does not want them playing the leading or trumping role. That is, the fact that people are suffering is certainly a proper and moral consideration in political discussions, but the point Williams is making is that we need to understand how the bearing of that or any other moral concern changes a very great deal when it is introduced as a reason for some government to do something. This is primarily because anything such a government can do unavoidably constrains, with the backing of that monopoly on the use of force, what others would otherwise be able to do. Williams’s claim is that this latter fact changes everything. The fact that someone or some group is doing something immoral does not entail that I or anyone ought to, is entitled to, or much less must, stop them. An additional and different reason is necessary to justify that claim.

Moreover, political disputes assume a “legitimation story” common to both parties and necessarily accepted if the losers are to concede that they lost and nonetheless submit to government power. It is an important aspect of Williams’s position that this legitimation question

common to all human attempts to distinguish the mere exercise of power from genuinely political claims is not itself a moral requirement, or at least not one “prior” to politics. It is rather “inherent in there being such a things as politics” (5). It may be that in some sense coercing people to do what one wants is immoral, and that thus persons can be said to have a moral right, to be morally entitled, to be free from such domination, but Williams objects forcefully and often against what he sees as a typically American attempt to consider everything that “ought not to happen” as correlated with a person’s “politically enforceable right” not to have it happen. This, he says, distorts the true, historically inflected nature of the political and poisons political debate with a rigid moralism (64).

By contrast, moral views of the political hold either that philosophy or human reason can formulate ideals and values which then must be translated into political idiom and “enacted.” (He claims that utilitarians often think this way.) Or philosophers formulate minimum structural constraints for any political institutions: what, minimally, may never be ignored, must always be attended to, in any institution or practice, all perhaps based on some ideal of persons as free and equal rational beings. (Williams thinks Kantians and Rawlseans argue this way. They do not think of politics as a *modus vivendi*, but they attend to these structural conditions with our “highest moral powers, above all a sense of fairness” in mind (2).)

By contrast, Williams’s position on how to reason normatively in the political domain is more modest and skeptical. He works back, in effect, from the starkest political question: Under what conditions, in consideration of what ends, is coercing people—in effect, threatening them with violence—acceptable? He means acceptable really, not just in principle, to those affected (all subject to the “critical theory” worry that this cannot simply be a matter of actual, empirical acceptance); and by conditions he means historical conditions. That is, these legitimation stories change across historical time. The most important change has been that many ambitious claims to legitimacy (inherited privilege, natural titles to rule, divine right) are now simply no longer credible. So distinctly political disputes operate under strict constraints about what “is historically acceptable and so possible” at a time. Accordingly, for Williams one of the greatest weaknesses in liberalism is that it has “no account of the cognitive status of its own history,” even though its basic superiority consists in its unique compatibility with current historical conditions. (One *could* imagine “Kant at the Court of King Arthur,” wagging his finger at their injustices and oppression—and Williams hints that he thinks Kantians do like to imagine such things and make such points—but such exercises are for him pointless and self-indulgent (66).)

The massive historical constraint on our own political disputes is, in a word (his word), “modernity.” So his “modest” formula is: the basic legitimation demand + modernity = liberalism, where that roughly means: constraints on liberty only to secure a like liberty for all, and a basic solution, compatible with that constraint, to the problems of security and the conditions of trust and cooperation. Acknowledging all of this amounts to acknowledging what Williams calls “political realism.”

Whether Kant or that Kantians are subject to these charges will be a matter of some contention. Kant after all had his own theory of history and of the Enlightenment (though it is not quite the “error theory” Williams demands—why complex human civilizations have only come to realize the superordinate value of liberty after a few thousand years¹), and his *Metaphysics of Morals* strictly differentiates between the concerns of morality and those of political thought along lines informed by concerns similar to Williams (the justifiable use of coercion). And there are certainly Kantians who are willing to consider who we have historically come to be as indispensable to moral reflection.² There is also the question of how one would want to distinguish between some dreadful and degraded historical conditions which leave only certain political options open, and on the other hand those constraints on possible legitimation strategies which one wants to affirm besides merely accept. Thinking of the matter in this way could give one pause about just how “modest” such a formula is. Some progressivist claim seems necessary to make this distinction. It may be appropriate to regard “the discovery of what rights people have as a political and historical one, not a philosophical one,” (61) but the claim that this *is* a “discovery” is surely a philosophical one.

Williams’s is a recognizable position in the history of political thought, widely construed. He is aware of the resonances of his position in figures such as Thucydides, Machiavelli and one of the most important for his later work, Nietzsche, and his worries about fanaticism, rigidity, and the substitution of moralism for “sound political judgment” are common to writers like Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott. (Williams prefers to distinguish the “liberalism of natural rights” (the Lockean liberalism of “energetic litigants”) from the “liberalism of personal development” (Mill), from his preferred “liberalism of fear” and skepticism as formulated by Judith Shklar and visible in Montaigne and Constant.) The distinctiveness of Williams’s

¹ Kant’s unusual answer is not an explanation but a vague indictment. What accounts for this fact is a kind of cowardice, a “self-incurred” immaturity.

² Cf. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (New York: Cambridge, 1996), p. 117.

own position consists in (a) the fine-grained accounts of what such a realist position would have to say about such issues as toleration, humanitarian intervention, and censorship and (b) his ambitious treatment, in the realist mode, of the primary modern political value, liberty. These then are the three dimensions of the book: the underlying opposition between realism and a moralized view of politics, the discussion of liberty "as a political value" and its putative contest with the value of equality, and the application of his realism to contemporary political debates.

It is useful to consider these latter essays first, especially since Williams is himself often a proponent of a "bottom up" rather than "top down" methodology. That is, one can see what is at stake for him in framing disputes as political. Consider the question of "the right (or even the duty) to intervene" for "humanitarian purposes." Much of our reasoning here, Williams argues, is based on an analogy with the morality (rights and duties) of rescue. But politically what is often at issue is that *X is in peril at the hands of Z* and this means, contrary to most rescue cases, that someone will object to our intervention. And so a host of other factors must be relevant to such a decision and, Williams argues, must not be self-righteously ignored in favor only of "what is the simply right thing to do." For a *state* will be doing whatever some group thinks ought to be done, and that means (a) that the intervention will have many repercussions for other states and it would be irresponsible not to consider those consequences *ex ante*; (b) there is, sadly, suffering of this general sort going on in more than one place at any given time and one has to have a plausible account of why this intervention and not some other (or all others) demands our attention and action; (c) in the greatest contrast to the private morality of rescue, a state decision means that some individuals are deciding that other individuals should be put at great risk, and surely the considerations relevant to that disanalogy alter what should count as reasons to intervene; and (d) modern liberal governments are subject to democratic will. If its leaders are responsive to some moral consideration, they must also, as Williams puts it in his "realistic" way, "be able to get away with it." It must "play in Peoria" (151). And this is altogether proper, not the self-serving or temporizing dodge the moral point of view sometimes suggests.

The most important issues in the book are raised in the middle chapters and concern the questions of what it means to consider freedom an essentially "political value," why we should view it that way, and how thinking of it that way changes our view of its possible competition with equality. Williams disagrees with those like Ronald Dworkin who argue that no one has a "claim in liberty" when he is

simply being denied the capacity to do what he wants. He has such a claim only when he is denied what he is entitled to do. On Dworkin's view, this means that when people complain that the state is restricting their liberty by constraining them in nonentitled domains, the proper response is to explain to them that, appearances to the contrary, this is not so, that they are "really" as free as before the restriction. Williams finds this all very implausible and dangerously close to the controversial "force to be free" arguments of Rousseau. (He has similar objections to Quentin Skinner on republican liberty. Compelling participation in public offices might be a good thing, but it should count as a loss in liberty.) Political life often *does* demand a real loss of liberty for the sake of other competing goods, and we should acknowledge this and try to justify it, not try to reeducate the complainants.

Williams follows the same strategy in understanding the claims of equality as "political claims." For Williams, not treating persons differentially based on skin color is not a matter of recognizing their common status as free and rational beings, or as their having moral capacities, as if these capacities are a special sort, always independent of contingent differences. Not treating persons unequally (in the relevant respects, especially with regard to equality of opportunity and equality of respect) is simply not to exercise one's will arbitrarily, "like that of some Caligulan rules who decided to execute everyone whose name contained three R's" (100). We do not need to pay the "high price" (102) of appealing to "transcendental" properties in order to rule out such arbitrariness.

However, in cashing out what he means by "arbitrarily" and in explaining the nature of the wrongness of so exercising our will, Williams appeals to a notion of "relevant reasons" that seems to rest on the moral considerations that he is trying to avoid. The "weak" principle he begins with is that "for every difference in the way people are treated, a reason should be given," and he goes on to insist that these reasons must be relevant and they must be "socially operative" (equality before the law does not count as such if only wealthy people can make effective use of such an entitlement) (107). But this sort of prohibition on unequal treatment (in the relevant respects) appeals to the fact that persons are reason-giving and reason-demanding in a way that is normatively significant, and that they must be treated as such beings independently of how well or poorly they can be said to exercise such reason. What is done to them or what is foreclosed to them must be in principle defensible *to* them because they enjoy a status that can only be called "moral," and that in a way that does not look in any significant sense historically inflected

or contingently variable. Indeed, Williams says that with this notion of the relevant claims of equality and its grounds, we “have a genuine moral weapon” to wield against unequal treatment (107).

This though is not where the political considerations that interest Williams enter. He argues that we will not have a firm grasp of *what* being committed to achieving equality of opportunity consists in unless we consider the political dimensions of trying to realize such a goal. When we consider the realization issue, we have to concede that various dimensions of achieving equality of opportunity will be in conflict with, say, equality of respect. Some distribution schemes will be patronizing and will damage the competitive chances of others; some schemes for insuring equality of respect, if indifferent to issues like the human desire for prestige, and the economic need for certain rare skills, will be doomed to a “futile Utopianism” (114). All we can hope for is the “best way of eating and having as much cake as possible” (114). (There is a famous German word for this: “*Aufhebung*” or “sublation,” and Williams indicates at several places that he appreciates the Hegelian resonances to what he is saying (25, 31, 36, 48).)

This is another example of the implications of the phrase from Goethe’s *Faust* that Williams takes as his watchword, “In the Beginning Was the Deed.” He means by invoking it to claim that no principle can by itself determine its own application and that the issue of the “actual” content of any principle, when it is applied and asserted in the public domain, when it is opposed by others and directed towards the use of coercive restraint on others, is not a secondary or supplementary issue, does not involve a mere unfortunate compromise with an imperfect world. It is *in* such contestations and in the midst of historical change that the concept can be said to have any determinate content at all. (The implications of these sorts of claims for philosophy, as it is now practiced professionally, are obviously profound, something only occasionally hinted at here.)

In his discussion of a possibly “left Wittgensteinianism” (Wittgenstein quoted the Faust passage in *On Certainty*), Williams notes the important point that this does *not* mean that our actual practices should be said to be “grounded” in something like a “description of how we go on,” as if the latter could be given as a reason to someone who requested one. *That* too would have to count as the way we now go on; it could not justify anything “foundationally.” Nothing could. (This is the paradox of “conservative Wittgensteinians” who must invoke such a theory to rail against theory, and it is why Williams is not, say, like Burke, or like the Southern segregationists who criticized moral demands for integration by appealing to the “futile Utopianism” of integration and to the priority of “how we’ve always

gone on." No one gets to be the unchallengeable arbiter of what is now possible; that too is always up for debate.) Nor is his position that our practices are "groundless" in the sense of arbitrary, or justifiable only relativistically. That would be to accept in a question-begging way the universalistic and a priorist criterion of justification and to count everything that fell short of that as unjustifiable, assertable only ironically. (Williams thinks that Richard Rorty is guilty of this.) Political practices are justifiable (or not) to the persons they affect in a context, at a time, in the light of other competing claims and opposing norms, given a historical location in an ongoing development. In our location, we are self-conscious about all of this, and that makes for a much more complicated situation.

The point Williams is making is that the social and ethical "we" is not like Wittgenstein's linguistic-community "we." The latter refers to anyone who can speak a language, with whom we might be able to converse, and in that sense there is no human who stands outside such "we." But political communities are different because so contentious; indeed our community especially can no longer count as a "satisfactorily functioning whole" (37). Some widely accepted parts of it might even stand condemned by "perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts" (37).

This might have a MacIntyrean sound to it, can sound like a claim about the normative incoherence of "modernity." But Williams does not think that because the political community is not functioning as a whole, it is not functioning. It is not an illusion that some parts stand condemned by other parts; the condemnation is true, and we then have the complex political task of bringing some order to our normative lives. No one gets to decree that any such order is just not possible "any more." So, from this point of view, when Williams says something like, "Whether it is a matter of philosophical good sense to treat a certain practice as a violation of human rights, and whether it is politically good sense, cannot ultimately constitute two separate questions" (72), he is not encouraging us to trim our philosophical sails to accommodate prevailing political winds. He is trying to point out that it is a very bad sailor indeed who proposes to sail to his goal no matter the wind; just as bad as one who lets the prevailing winds and currents set his destination. To philosophers who profess no interest in actual sailing (just its "principles") Williams makes very clear here why he is as suspicious as Hegel of such attempts to instruct the political world from on high about how it ought to be.

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