

Challenging Political Theory: Pluralism and Method in the Work of Bernard Williams

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Abstract: This article focuses on the recent surge of reflection within political theory on methodological issues and the emergence of new approaches in that discipline. Situating itself in a discussion of New Realism and its critiques of/divergences from the ideal approach of “high liberalism”, it engages the dominant reading and use of the work of Bernard Williams in that literature. Illustrating how the framework of political realism in this reading is plagued by a narrowing of the political and exclusive focus on stability, it turns to a series of resources within Williams’s larger thought in order to draw out an alternative reading of his model of political theory. Focusing on his methodological reflections on naturalism and historicism, it illustrates a conception of political thought as a form of situated socio-political criticism which stands in stark contrast to the “conceptual analysis of the political” that he overtly offers and has been the central object of focus within recent discussions. Arguing that the former avoids the pitfalls the latter encounters, this article illustrates how Williams’s naturalistic and historicist conception of political thought is more thoroughly pluralistic, both methodologically and politically. Finally, it illustrates how this reading brings him much closer to another position within the current surge of methodological reflection within political theory that takes him away from new realism. Turning to James Tully’s “public philosophy” reveals a similar emphasis on the democratic and pluralistic conditions of political thinking.

Key words: Bernard Williams, realism, naturalism, historicism, criticism, James Tully.

Political theory is experiencing a great surge of methodological reflection. Whether in debates over the requirements of critique or the strength of “ideal” forms of normative reflection, there is a persistent turn to the broad question of the nature of the discipline and the appropriate approach to theorizing politics. Flowing from this situation, there is also the emergence of clusters of new approaches with their own priorities, methods and definitions of politics. Importantly, some of these new groups have broken traditional barriers between some of the dominant, and historically opposed, traditions of recent political thought. From the traditions of liberal normative political theory, pragmatism and Continental genealogy there is an emerging cluster of sub-trends which together constitute a *situated turn* prompted by a common set of problems and a common response to them (Chin 2016). This article examines the work of Bernard Williams, a key figure within the new realist trend emerging from within liberal theory, to address the various possible avenues of this methodological situation.

All of these recent groups confront, in some form, the *problem of justification* which has plagued political thought since the twentieth century. Various articulated as the problem of foundations or metaphysics (amongst others), this problem flows from the widely accepted premise that knowledge and validity are always linguistically, socially, and historically mediated. These debates have made it increasingly difficult to refer to context-transcending criteria in the pursuit of diagnostic and normative conclusions within political

theory. This is the problem of how to justify the explicit normative claims and implicit normative assumptions that guide both socio-political criticism and reconstruction. On the one hand, we are forced to recognize the historicity of knowledge and normative claims. On the other, we must be capable of political action in an increasingly globalized world; this requires being able to raise claims to the validity of those decisions and the critical and normative frameworks that serve them. In the post-war period within political theory this problem manifests particularly as a problem of pluralism. If absolute foundations and standards are unavailable, there seems little way to speak (specifically, to make justificatory claims) across the differences that characterize late-modern liberal democracies. Edward Said has dubbed this “the fundamental historical problem of modernism” (1989, 223). Western political thought has widely accepted the need to ‘take the Other seriously’, to speak politically to those from different systems of justification without merely prioritizing our own values and categories (Berlin 1999; Rawls 2005; Benhabib 1996).

In their critique of the ideal forms of abstract normative theorizing that characterize contemporary liberalism, the recent surge of realism focuses on the specific connection between these two issues. It criticizes the failure of ideal methods to take the problem of justification seriously. Further, it criticizes their understanding of the nature of difference and political contestation. Especially prominent in this literature is a rereading of the work of Bernard Williams that focuses on the methodological resources of his thought that can aid political thinking in coping with these lacunas. This article confronts this emerging literature by offering an alternative critical reconstruction of his work, one that exposes a different set of possibilities. Situating its discussion in a critical account of the dominant reading of Williams’s realism and its critiques of divergences from the dominant ideal approaches of “high liberalism”, it illustrates how the model of political thinking developed here constricts politics and political theorizing. The point here is not to undermine the “validity” of this reading but only to expose an alternative use of Williams’s thought that presents a more effective and significant challenge to contemporary political thought’s treatment of method and pluralism. Thus, in contrast, it reconstructs William’s late turn to political theory in light of the methodological insights of his earlier work (particularly his theorization of a *naturalistic and historicist political method*) to illustrate how his thinking can contribute to a mode of political theory as situated and pluralistic socio-political criticism, rather than realist as it is currently framed. This article bears out these positive possibilities by linking Williams’s resources to other methodological trends, specifically the work of James Tully, illustrating how the former might alternatively contribute to these ongoing debates within contemporary political thought.

I. LEGITIMACY AND JUSTIFICATION: NEW REALISM READING BERNARD WILLIAMS

In recent years, the identification of a rising tide of critical literature within liberal political theory has thrown that tradition into a period of sustained methodological discussion. Where previously the analytical ideal approach of normative political theory,

or “high liberalism” as William Galston has dubbed it, reigned relatively unchallenged in liberal political thought, presently there is significant contestation of its basic method for political theorizing. While there has always been external criticism of this tradition, “new realism” is a (partially) internal challenge that stems from the problem of justification and pluralism, discussed above, which bridges the different traditions of contemporary political theory. Initially, it is important to emphasize that new realism is very much an emerging movement that has yet to fully flesh out its perspective.¹ The work of Bernard Williams, whose realism is a starting point for many recent commentators and thus, along with Raymond Geuss, is one of the central points of orientation of the literature. Williams provides both one of the most fully fleshed out critiques of the ideal method and, at least implicitly, alternative sets of questions and concepts, a “realist political theory”. However, while his critique is an incisive application of the problem of justification to liberal normative thought, Williams’s alternative model fails to break with many of the elements for which he himself criticizes ideal theory. Further, many commentators within new realism have taken up his problematic projects around legitimacy and consensus. This section clarifies this reading and its dominance within this literature while the next shifts the attention to a set of methodological resources within Williams’s larger thought that push his political theory towards other responses to the problem of justification.

Williams’s model of political realism is prompted by a critique of analytical ideal theory. While he did make forays into politics at several points in his career, he only turned overtly to questions of political theory and its method in a final set of essays, posthumously published as *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Williams 2005c). Here he argues that the dominant approaches of liberalism all participate in the error of an “ethics-first” model of political thought. Both utilitarians and modern social contract theorists, in slightly different ways, give particular moral theories priority to politics resulting in a model of political theory that turns that discipline into ‘applied morality’. The charge here is that they both use moral frameworks as explanatory and normative schemas for understanding and assessing actual political situations, making “the moral prior to the political” (Williams 2005e, 1-3). This means that political acts, institutions, and ideas are understood only by the demands of morality and that the normative prescriptions that flow from these analyses are ultimately based on moral stipulations that are outside and prior to politics. For Williams this ignores the distinctive nature and conditions of politics and, as a result, turns political thought into a form of moral theory that attempts to evade or displace the human activity of politics. This argument, articulated by Williams well before the recent self-conscious identification of new realism, has been particularly influential in that literature and has been reiterated and developed by most of the major voices there (Galston 2010, 386).

1] Rather than a unified method or perspective, it is composed of a series of common themes and critiques that have been defined in recent years in the secondary literature (Galston 2010; Philp 2012; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Horton 2010).

While not generally framed as such, Williams critique of political moralism is a version of the problems of justification and pluralism, that is, of the critique of what is often called ‘foundationalism’. This wide term catches all positions that assume that society and politics are somehow grounded by principles that are 1) undeniable and immune to revision (i.e. universal) and 2) exterior to the realms of society and politics (i.e. transcendent, in some sense). These foundations assure stability in the social and political structures built on their principles. The issue Williams identifies, the critique of making the moral prior to the political, is the charge that the ideal analytic method assumes that moral categories are both universal and transcendent with respect to political activity; that they ground our politics. While it is not commonly articulated as an issue of foundationalism, Mark Philp has argued that the critique of moralism and turn to realism is a critique of philosophical foundationalism, of the idea of an Archimedean moral foundation to ground politics (Philp 2012, 7-8, 11-12). What is key here is a hostility to external standards (non-political ones) as measures for political analysis and normative reconstruction. Williams’s argument rejects ideal theory’s subordination of politics to foundational moral theories and asserts the autonomy of politics as a sphere and activity. Further, for Williams and realists, it is a sphere defined by the absence of rational moral consensus. Rather, the political is characterized by value pluralism, persistent disagreement, historical contingency and only pragmatic (temporary) stability (Williams 2005a, 77-78). While it is only implicit and emerging in these essays, there is a method within Williams’s reflections on political theory. Briefly, his focus was on providing a mode of political theorizing which gave autonomy to the political, while attending to the conditions of politics mentioned above. This, he hoped, would leave his approach untainted by the external normative standards liberalism relied on. It is important to emphasise that Williams’s reputation as a philosophical sceptic belies the fact that he was only sceptical of the manner in which the task of moral and political thought was pursued, not the task itself. Thus, he was committed to a true explanation of moral and political practice through conceptual analysis. As we will see in the next section, he only wanted to supplement this with other philosophical resources. His project remained a theorization of the political without external normative standards. As Matt Sleat has observed, “Williams sought to address this by engaging in what was in effect a conceptual analysis of the political, the conditions and claims inherent in there being such a thing as politics” (Sleat 2010, 494).² This is an important claim. Despite Williams’s noted emphases on naturalism and historicism (examined in detail subsequently), his method here is focused on making universal claims about politics. This is not to say that an attention to historical change is not present in these analyses, but that it is not the main architecture of this project. Instead, Williams tries to draw out a structure to the sphere of politics, one

²] Hence, the structure of Williams’s political essays in (Williams 2005a) is to move through various core concepts within Western Political Thought, attempting to rid them of their idealized notions and, through his historical conceptual analysis, ascertain their aporias and conditions.

attentive to historical development, and from that, to understand how normative claims about particular forms of politics can be made.

Principally, Williams pursues this through setting out a structure of politics within which historical and cultural variation occurs. Thus, for him, the ‘first’ question of the political is that of “the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” (Williams 2005e, 3). This question has priority for Williams in the sense that it is a precondition of every other political issue. In fact, Williams builds from this to a reconstruction of the liberal theory of legitimacy that, rather than flowing from a moral conception of the individual, he claims flows from the conditions of the political itself. For him, if stability is the first question of politics, it is also a necessary condition for the legitimacy (LEG) of a state. As a result, Williams formulates what he calls the “Basic Legitimation Demand” (BLD), a test which determines legitimacy by whether the given state a) solves the first political question to a sufficient degree, and b) does so in a way that is acceptable to the given polity. The latter is an important contextualism that Williams inserts to acknowledge that the political question, as clearly seen in history, can be solved in a variety of ways. It is his acknowledgement that there is no special sense in which liberalism is more justified than any other mode of government, irrespective of context. This being the case, he does still argue for the particular legitimacy of liberalism in the present. Due to a series of social and historical conditions, including the manner in which modernity has undermined previous legitimations, for Williams LEG + Modernity = Liberalism. This sensitivity to historical context is something we will return to in the subsequent section. Presently, what is important are the problems these claims result in.

Two linked lines of critique have emerged from this framework in the brief time since its publication. First, several commentators have charged that while Williams clearly makes an insightful critique of liberal legitimacy, offering a realist reconstruction of that concept, his model seems to share many of the normative assumptions for which he criticizes political moralism. For example, it assumes a consensual view of politics. For Williams, the nature of politics demands that meeting the BLD “implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power to each subject” (2005e, 4). Such a requirement, like Williams critique of ideal theory, narrows the ground of politics to that which broadly would fit within the tradition of modern liberalism. In contrast, part of realism’s insight is to argue that a basic reading of political history and current political practice illustrates how quite a bit of political life does not assume this requirement and its absence, in many contexts, has engendered no claims to a lack of legitimacy (Sleat 2010, 496-97, 499-500; Freedon 2012, 5-7). Building on this, Williams assumes the presence of political consensus in modernity, despite his repeated and notable championing of pluralism. The only way LEG + Modernity = Liberalism, would be if modernity was a relatively uncontested period. However, a brief look at the diversity within which political theory has conceived the modern period (let alone the diversity of actual cultural, social and political practices) illustrates the myopia of this view.

Second, implicitly extending this, Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears have argued that Williams's positing of stability and order as the first political question constricts politics and his method for political theorizing. This represents a serious criticism of new realism which generally prioritizes the question of stability. For Honig and Stears, as in Williams figuring of modernity, his priority of stability contradicts his overt pluralism in a narrowing of political action. These two elements, pluralism and stability, for them constitute the main internal tension within Williams's work. Again and again in Williams's realism, then, the potential chaos of radical pluralism is anchored in an architecture of time and space that stabilises things and enables the priority of order prized by Williams (Honig and Stears 2011, 193). The result of this is a limitation of pluralism and a failure to attend to the manner in which it conditions our politics, and importantly our attempts for stability, in our contested modernity. What Williams essentially does, for Honig and Stears, is generalize one important feature of politics into its essence, ignoring how pluralism, change and disruption constitute the pole against which stability is always pursued. In this manner, this second criticism builds on the narrower first, revealing how Williams's realism fails to address the problem of justification and pluralism which he himself deploys against political moralism.

It is important to clarify that the above elements of his political realism have, by far, been the dominant objects of discussion within his reception in new realism. In fact many commentators there have taken up his project around conceptually outlining a realist understanding of the political, and focusing on issues around stability, legitimacy and consensus (Sleat 2013; Rossi 2010; Bavister-Gould 2011; Forrester 2012). While this is by no means a problem as such, as the next section reveals, this literature ignores important methodological resources that address these two lines of criticism around Williams's relation to pluralism in his realism, some of which have come from within their own ranks. Thus, presently, new realism suffers from a disproportionate focus on (and positive use of) what I would argue are the most problematic elements of his work. Instead, this analysis will now turn to these implicit resources and how they illustrate the possibility of an alternative path away from the problem of justification and pluralism.

II. WILLIAMS'S SUBTERRANEAN METHOD: NATURALISM, HISTORICISM AND POLITICAL THEORY

Running alongside the dominant concerns around stability, legitimacy and consensus within Williams's political realism, is an alternative possibility for political thought after moral foundationalism. This section argues that when you read his wider methodological arguments around naturalism and historicism and his later turn to the question of political theory in conjunction with the critique of foundationalism and problems of justification and pluralism, a conception of political theory as an embedded activity of socio-political criticism emerges. This model stands in stark contrast to the quasi-foundational activity of a conceptual analysis of the political we saw above and,

as the next section illustrates, brings Williams much closer to alternative responses to the contemporary surge of methodological debates in political theory.

Initially, it should be noted that this account builds significantly on the work of Colin Koopman, who has been offering thorough re-readings of Williams's historical method and its political virtues in recent years. In a series of publications, Koopman has illustrated Williams's genealogical and historical method, and its significance for an anti-foundational approach to political normativity (Koopman 2010; 2011; 2013, chap. 2). However, he has consistently ignored the naturalistic framework for this method, and the importance of that for making those normative claims within the context of political and social pluralism.³ As I argue below, this is necessary to identifying how Williams's thought addresses the problems of justification and pluralism. Nonetheless, the account below is indebted to his preceding work.

The hostility to external standards which stands behind Williams's critique of political moralism and its ethical foundationalism leads to the possibility of a very different understanding of politics and method for political thought within Williams's late work. What emerges here is a series of conditions or attributes of political life that Williams thinks pertinent to understanding the limits of political theorizing and the role it can have in both academic reflection on politics and within politics itself. There is no definite list here, however, a series of conditions are present. Thus, for him, our politics seem to be a product of our historical development; our beliefs, passions, and interests; our limited agency and judgement; persistent disagreement and contestation, especially in relation to claims to legitimacy, resulting from value pluralism; and the practices of normativity which are always embedded within our political practices. As several commentators have argued, what we are left with after this is a fairly inchoate potential methodology with several possible avenues of exploration. However, by looking back through two key themes of his larger work, and how they participate in this final political phase, an alternative methodology and project for political thought can be discerned within his final set of political essays.⁴ Specifically, the method for political thought Williams was offering was defined by strong commitments to *naturalistic* and *historicist* conditions on theoretical enquiry, and it is from within these that his conditions of the political must be understood.

Williams's method emerges from a balancing of naturalism and historicism. Together, these two themes set conditions and imperatives on the nature and capacities of a theoretical form of enquiry into the human social practice of politics. Williams's focus on history has often been noted in the philosophical literature on him. However,

3] Further, mainly embedded within debates within philosophy, he has also not sufficiently engaged his reading with recent debates in political theory. This is not so much a flaw but a limitation.

4] This method of fleshing out his method for political theory by reading this text in conjunction with his earlier contributions to moral philosophy is not unproblematic but it is necessitated by this reticence to overtly lay out a method. He preferred throughout his works to give examples of applying his approach rather than stipulating its key tenets.

while it is often acknowledged it is rarely engaged in any detail, especially in terms of its consequences for the methodology of political theory within recent realist reflections on him. The situation is only compounded with his naturalism which is entirely ignored within that literature. I will examine each of these themes in turn and their effects on his model of political theory.

For Williams, historical reflection has a distinct value for the explanatory and critical task necessary to political thinking.⁵ However, he did not always hold this position. Early in his career, Williams rejected history as irrelevant to the task of philosophy. Further, his later turn toward a historical method must be understood with one very important qualification. History does not replace philosophy. Rather, historical resources are necessary for the traditional philosophical project to prove fruitful. As briefly mentioned above, Williams's general notoriety as a philosophical sceptic often belies the fact that he was only sceptical of the manner in which the task of moral and political thought was pursued, not the task itself. Thus, he was just as committed to a true explanation of moral and political practice.⁶ His turn to history was not a rejection of philosophical conceptual analysis but a supplement to it in broad favour of its explanatory goals. His noted commitment to an understanding of truth and practices of truthfulness testifies to this. For him, "philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history" (Williams 2002, 173; see also Koopman 2011, 15).

Yet, the question remains of what history offers philosophy. Why is a historical method special in relation to other humanistic or social scientific disciplines? The answer is found in its focus on temporal development. History, in its singular concentration on this development, gives us unique insight into the advance of our practices and concepts. It reveals to us their "developmental rationality", not from an ahistorical foundation but from the internal set of reasons that have moved our various shifts in practices. It is in this way that history helps us "make sense" of ourselves, a technical phrase Williams used to illustrate the internal, complex and contingent nature of our practices and their movement through time (Williams 2002, chap. 10). In this manner, historical enquiry in fact aids the project of conceptual analysis by revealing the development of our ideas up to and including their present place in the existing moment and its complexity (Koopman 2010, 10-11).

Already in the focus on the level of practice and its development, there is an implicit naturalism. Naturalism here is understood, not as a law-like model of the natural sciences, but as a situated account of the social practices of normativity and critique which understands them only as dependent on communal practices of justification

5] Williams follows Nietzsche in enquiring not into the truth of history but its value. The best example of this emphasis is in his genealogy of truth, which itself is concerned with the value of truthfulness not the nature of something called truth (Williams 2002).

6] A key point for distinguishing him from other noted "sceptics" like Richard Rorty, who had far more revisionary intentions in terms of the task and role of philosophical thought (Sleat 2007). However, against Williams own protestations, there are many points of accord between Rorty and his own thinking.

and conversation. Williams approaches morality and politics as sets of practices to be examined and bettered; and he does so from within a perspective that emphasizes their historicity. Further, throughout his career he consistently argued for the importance of culture in explaining the human condition.⁷ Culture is the source of human variation and complexity; it is also the origin of our unique ability to engage in reflexive development. For Williams, this centrality has important methodological consequences for theoretical disciplines. “We cannot be in a position to give a biological explanation of any phenomenon that has a cultural dimension, however widespread the phenomenon is, unless we are also in a position to interpret it culturally” (1995a, 81). “Making sense of humanity” in Williams’s terms, and its political practices, requires a turn to the social.

This results in an explicit attempt to develop a naturalistic perspective. The real insight here is Williams’s observation that while there is wide support for a naturalistic understanding of humans (at least from some philosophical corners), beyond seeing them as “being part of nature” in some sense there is very little agreement as to what this involves. Most theories tend either to rule out too much, reducing humans to biological machines (which excludes culture), or include too much, attempting to naturalize complex cultural ideas (e.g. ascribing a capacity to intuit the structure of moral reality to human nature). This *quandary of naturalism* is systematic for Williams. It tends either to include too much, and so become reductive, or so weak as to include nothing. The fault he claims is in the assumption that naturalism is a top-down approach “under which we are already supposed to know what terms are needed to describe any «natural» phenomenon” (Williams 1995b, 67). Instead, he offers a bottom-up naturalistic minimalism.

In response to this quandary, Williams turns to Nietzsche for a naturalistic attitude and set of injunctions.⁸ Considering the specific case of human moral psychology, the preconditions that allow humans to be moral creatures, he notes two aspects of this attitude. First, it must demand minimalism. The less traits ascribed to humanity to explain a human social practice, the better in this attitude. However, this seems only to repeat one pole of the above quandary; for without some sense of what materials *can* be included in these “economical interpretations” this minimalism risks meaninglessness. So, Williams turns to a second aspect of this attitude. Following Nietzsche, the strategy is to appeal to “what an experienced, honest, subtle, and unoptimistic interpreter might make of human behaviour elsewhere.” While he does not cast it as such, what Williams is offering here is a humble form of holism, whereby we judge our assumptions about humanity in relation to some practice by how that accords with other areas of behaviour. This results, for him, in a realistic and naturalistic perspective that is not “the application of an already defined scientific programme, but rather an informed interpretation of

7] In fact, it is an important feature of his naturalism that there is a human condition, but no human nature (Guignon 2009, 174).

8] This connection of Nietzsche and naturalism is not in fact uncommon within analytical spheres now. However, Williams, along with Rorty, pioneered both the reading of Nietzsche and such a naturalistic perspective (Rorty 1991a; Leiter 2002; Janaway and Robertson 2012).

some human experiences and activities in relation to others” (Williams 1995b, 68). These methodological injunctions, which are admittedly mostly negative in character, do constitute a “hermeneutics of suspicion”. However, he qualifies that while this method does call for suspicion, it is not suspicious of everything. Rather, implicitly following the fallibilism of such pragmatists as Richard Rorty, doubt and belief both require reasons for Williams (Rorty 2007).

It is important to emphasize here that Williams’s naturalism is explicitly opposed to scientific forms of physical reductionism.⁹ His question is not whether social and political elements are reducible to nature, but only whether they *can be explained in terms of* other aspects of our present set of experiences and practices (i.e. nature in some broad sense). The first is a transitive relation while the second is a strategic anti-foundationalism. Rather, Williams explicitly rejects such reductionism. For him, the significance of culture is how it has pervaded all aspects of our existence. As a result, we cannot divide living under culture (i.e. with an ethical system, a set of social practices, a language, etc.) from whatever capacities allow us to live under culture in general. Instead, we must engage in the type of naturalistic holism described above (Williams 2000, 150-53). Importantly, and this brings us full circle, this requires a historical form of enquiry.

For Williams there are several methodological and political virtues to this model of naturalistic and historical enquiry into the development of our concepts and social practices. Principle among these is an explicit rejection of reductionism. Rather, historical naturalism exposes the contingency of our ideas and actions. Importantly, this is not solely a matter of historical interest; it shifts our understanding of the present and its necessity. “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.” (Williams 2006, 492-93).

A historical mode of philosophical enquiry has the unique potential to help us understand the present, how we have come to it, and why it seems to be the limit to our experience and thought. Essentially, it helps us see the limits of our present sets of concepts and practices and how these participate in making our present social and political lives seem necessary. This gives us a unique, internal understanding of our present socio-political arrangements and the potential to criticize them.

It is important to be clear here. A historical and naturalistic philosophical approach is essential to Williams for both of the tasks essential to a critical socio-political theory: explanation (or understanding) and normative critique. While these elements are by no means discrete, they are both addressed by this approach. As I just argued, it helps us understand the development of our practices and ideas up to and including the present (explanation). This rich understanding of the complexity of those ideas and practices

[9] This, of course, did not stop his critics from accusing him of this anyway, e.g. (Taylor 1985, 1).

then serves as a basis for their evaluation (normative). In fact, Williams's main critique of analytical moral and political thought is that conceptual analysis is not a sufficient basis for these types of normative claims. Where moral life in history is seen to be complex, contextual and evolving, ideal theorists posit it as clear, simple, and reducible to a set of universal and transcendent principles. In contrast, a historical and naturalistic approach allows us to enquire into the concepts and practices that are such engrained parts of our lives that we simply lack the ability to question them (Koopman 2010, 12-15).¹⁰ While I would argue that this may not be a complete theorization of an approach to normative reconstruction, Williams is identifying an important necessary element here.

All of this has important consequences for how we go about thinking the nature of politics. As I mentioned, Williams came to specifically apply these methodological insights to political theory in his final essays. There, it is clear that a naturalistic understanding of humans and their social practices, and a historical understanding of development and contingency should shift our focus within political theory from the ideal, transcendent and universal to "what is platinudiously politics" (Williams 2005e, 13). This somewhat opaque phrase summarizes the level at which political explanation and normative reconstruction should occur. What Williams is indicating here is that political theory should "descend" to the everyday level of actual political practice and concept-use, to the historical situations we find political actors already engaged in. This is the meaning of his repeated use of Goethe's Faustian maxim: in the beginning was the deed.

This phrase, which Williams gets via Wittgenstein, summarizes his bottom-up naturalism; it asserts the primacy of practice within moral and political thought, that it is the languages we use and the practices we engage in that should be the primary locus of critical and normative exchange in politics. Thus, rather than foundational moral standards, or universal conceptual conditions of the political, we work out from within particular socio-political situations and their specific sets of meanings and practices.

What the Wittgensteinian idea does mean for politics is that foundationalism, even constructivist foundationalism, can never achieve what it wants. Any such theory will seem to make sense, and will to some degree reorganize political thought and action, only by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented, and its relation to that historical situation cannot fully be theorized or captured in reflection. Those theories and reflections will themselves always be subject to the condition that, to someone who is intelligently and informedly in that situation (and those are not empty conditions), it does or does not seem a sensible way to go on (Williams 2005b, 36).

Political projects are conditioned not just by intellectual but by historical conditions. However, this restriction raises a danger, especially in relation to pluralism. For Williams, the dominant reaction to this insight within the history of political thought has been conservative. The shift to social practices seems to suggest that political and social change is necessarily slow and piecemeal. Speaking and acting differently is a slow process which

[10] His examination of the concept of truth and the moral will seem to be the best examples of him engaging in this type of analysis himself (Williams 2002; 1995b).

does not occur, until it occurs, to use Williams's formulation. The language of what "makes sense" within a context seems to embrace a conservative acceptance of whatever set of social practices currently exist and invalidate the entire project of a critical and normative form of philosophical thought.

Yet, for Williams there is a very significant mistake within this conclusion. Socio-political criticism is itself a practice, something we engage in, irrespective of philosophical foundations. "Practice is not just the practice of practice, so to speak, but also the practice of criticism" (Williams 2005d, 36). While Williams is somewhat opaque regarding this emerging idea, he is arguing that socio-political criticism should be understood, not as a philosophical discipline requiring grounding in universal and rational principles, but as a practice that does and has emerged from within our given set of languages and social practices. As such, it is conditioned by our contexts, by the set of resources available in its moment, and requires attention to these situations in order to be efficacious. This is why the previously mentioned holism is no conservatism and is in fact key to this model of political theory. On Williams's reading one of the principle features of our late-modern condition is a pluralistic reflexivity that offers new capacities for social critique. In contrast to other moments (and places), modern ethico-political life is confronted with the diversity of past and present alternatives to its way of being. This offers a strong sense of the situated nature of our practices and ideas which undermines the idea that they represent any kind of privileged position.

Once the resultant picture of ethical thought without foundationalism is made historically and socially realistic, in particular by registering in it the categories of modernity, it provides a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers (Williams 2005d, 37).

Critique on this understanding, is a situated practice of deploying some practices and ideas, and plausible extrapolations from them, against widely accepted, though problematic, ones. It is a localized, naturalistic, and holistic practice of employing the possibilities within our historical situation against practices and ideas which were perhaps once unproblematic but have become harmful.

It is in this vein that Williams calls in these final essays for a "Left Wittgensteinianism" to take up the project of this non-foundational situated form of socio-political criticism. Importantly, it is a method that is responsive to its historical moment and the general condition of pluralism we live under within late modernity. This reading has exposed a series of resources within Williams's model of political realism. Specifically, he offers the broad sketches of a naturalistic and historicist method for political theorizing that is fundamentally responsive to the contemporary condition of pluralism. Importantly, this implicit model pushes Williams closer to another contemporary tradition within political thinking that has also emerged as a response to the problem of justification. Further, engaging this version of Williams with this reading has the potential not only to clarify

this dynamic within his theory but to advance their shared projects for the methodology of political theory.

III. CONTEMPORARY REVERBERATIONS: PUTTING WILLIAMS TOGETHER WITH TULLY FOR A DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM

This reading of Williams's naturalistic historicism and implicit model of political theory as socio-political criticism pushes him away from New Realism and toward an alternative model of growing significance in contemporary methodological debates within political thought: James Tully's "public philosophy". Along with David Owen, Paul Patton, and Amy Allen, Tully is part of a group of theorists employing genealogical resources in the critical discussion of fundamental questions within contemporary democratic theory. Further, in a much more overt way than his compatriots, Tully has formulated a methodology for political theory that responds to the problems of pluralism and justification, seeking to identify critical and normative capacities from within these conditions. He is linked to Williams in this method by an equal emphasis on a naturalistic and historicist model of socio-political criticism. This section bears out their similarities and the positive methodological advantages of Tully's theory in order to illustrate the potential of this reading of Williams to advance methodological trends inside and outside of New Realism. Particularly, it offers insights into how realists could draw on other methodological trends in political theory, similarly situated, to pursue developing alternative models to liberal moralism (Chin 2016).

Tully describes his public philosophy as a practical, critical and historical approach that focuses on the practices of governance experienced as problematic in the present. He rejects the foundational task of a normative theory of justice, equality or democracy and its imperative to identify background conditions that transcend the everyday world of politics.¹¹ Instead, his approach is a practical philosophy, a "way of living" oriented to the problematic aspects of the present. It attempts to establish the conditions of possibility of a specific practice in the present. Importantly, the purpose here is not just "thick" description, but "to characterise the conditions of possibility of the problematic form of governance in a redescription (often in a new vocabulary) that transforms the self-understanding of those subject to and struggling with it, enabling them to see its contingent conditions and the possibilities of governing themselves differently" (Tully 2008b, 16). Thus, the purpose of this method is to enable political actors. It redescribes a problematic practice, illustrating its contingency to expose the nature of the present set of limits and open up alternative manners of collectively organizing that form of cooperation. It does this through three elements. First, it asserts the primacy of social practices. This approach is a form of philosophical reflection that both begins by reflecting on practices of governance experienced as problematic in the present, and localizes its

[11] Implicitly rejecting the dominant reading of Williams in new realism too.

discussion (contestation and negotiation) in the past and present forms of this regime of practices. This leads to its second and third elements that comprise a two-step process of intervention. Second, this approach enacts a critical survey of the existing languages and practices in which the struggles arise and the various ways of addressing conflict and problems already existing there. The point here is to understand which forms of thought and action are already taken for granted in this realm and so function as the constitutive limits of present thought and action. Third, this initial enquiry is broadened into a history (genealogy) of the formation of these languages and practices. Together, these two surveys give us a manner to understand the nature and limits of a current language and/or set of practices, treating them as a kind of provisional bounded whole, allowing us to call them into question and raise claims to alternative modes of organization (Tully 2008b, 19-37). The point of this is to enable political actors to “think and act differently” and, importantly, within a framework that does not assume external normative or critical standards.

This admittedly brief characterisation of Tully’s approach reveals several points of contact that clarify the minority reading of Williams and, importantly, a few points of difference.¹² In the first instance, there is a clear connection between Williams’s bottom-up naturalism and Tully’s primacy of social practices. Both shift our attention to the sets of social practices and languages that communities actually employ. They work out from this base, the present socio-political world, in order to address political problems. What Williams distinctly offers is the potential of a significantly more developed understanding of that social-practice based naturalism, one that may serve to flesh out the tradition of public philosophy Tully sees as implicit within western political thought since the Enlightenment. It is in this sense that while Tully does not use the term, these approaches are linked in a common naturalism defined by, as Rorty has aptly observed, a rejection of the notion of politics as a bounded whole outside of which rest some set of absolute conditions or moral standards. Rather, politics is only “a set of indefinitely expansible social practices” (Rorty 1991b, 57). The consequences of this are both disabling (of a certain sort of approach) and, for these theorists, profoundly enabling (of an alternative). With Wittgenstein, they both take the notion that doubt and critique, once naturalized in this manner, cannot be “a suspicion of everything”. Rather, both focus on how capacities for critique and normativity reside within social practices and languages themselves. For example, for Tully, following Wittgenstein, while one cannot question all the rules of a language game at once, we can always bring particular rules and practices (spaces of freedom) into contestation (Tully 2008b, chap. 2).¹³

Both Williams and Tully also turn to history as a key resource for a political theory bounded by this naturalism. For Williams, history reveals the development of our thought and practices. This has the important consequence of revealing how the elements of our

[12] For a general look at Tully’s relation to realism, see (Honig 2014; Honig and Stears 2014).

[13] There are of course important differences too. Tully is much more suspicious of truth, as discussed below, and Williams is much more suspicious of Wittgenstein’s framework (Williams 2005d).

present that seem natural and necessary came to be, and of giving us critical distance to them. Tully too, in a slightly more nuanced and worked out fashion, employs history in order to de-naturalize a set of practices and ideas and to raise the possibility of alternatives. In both thus, it is a key resource for the critical and normative practice of socio-political critique. This has an important consequence only really identified in Tully's more overt method. Historicizing our practices in this manner democratizes them. It exposes them to contestation and agon, to a process of democratic exchange (in a variety of forms) that is explicitly obscured within ideal methods (Tully 2008a, 242). This is, perhaps, not a consequence Williams (especially the Williams of new realism) would support; prioritizing the question of stability as he did. However, the alternative, more pluralistic Williams would have endorsed this levelling of the epistemological and political fields.

This brings us to the question of the mode of political thought offered here. From this it should be clear that Williams and Tully are both offering situated modes of political theorizing, that work out from the present set of practices and languages, and reject external sources of standards. These approaches formulate strategies for drawing on the existing set of social practices and languages in order to deploy some part against others (in a naturalistic holism) that we seek to meliorate in light of their problematic natures.¹⁴ As we have just seen, this is profoundly democratic. Further, this *democratic naturalistic historicism* leads to a political theory that is also fundamentally pluralistic, both methodologically and politically. Tully bears this out. The historical method is intended to raise the possibility of "perspectival seeing" where alternative possibilities for some set of practices arise out of the enquiries into the present and past of this set of practices. Such perspectivism is the product of a naturalism that cannot rely on some set of absolute standards. This changes the nature of political theories, as well as other languages and practice regimes within our situated political contexts. All of these "are approached, not as rival comprehensive and exclusive theories of the contested concepts, but as limited and often complementary accounts of the complex uses (senses) of the concepts in question and the corresponding aspects of the problematic practice to which these senses refer" (Tully 2008a, 29; see also Tully 2014, 223). In this sense, both political theories and embedded political languages are sets of practices of reasoning that offer partial clarification of a range of concepts and practices, but never are able to exhaust that process or its possibilities. They are thus "conditional perspectives" situated within some set of claims and concerns. Such a position stands in stark contrast not only to the ideal method, but to the emerging approach of new realism, which as we have seen, despite its historicism, continues to universalize about politics from within a realistic account of the conditions of that sphere.

14] Tully's use of the Common-Law tradition to critique the more dominant tradition of Western Constitutionalism for its understanding of and relation to diverse groups is perhaps the strongest example of the potential of this method. It significantly affected the understanding of contemporary Multiculturalism after its publication (Tully 1995).

The product of these methodological shifts is a deep levelling and democratizing of the field of languages and actions. In this manner, Tully specifically, and Williams potentially, respond to the problem of justification not with the attempt to overcome its paradox but to work within its conditions. They provide for the possibility of a deep methodological pluralism in contemporary political thought, where previously rival approaches can be framed within this non-hierarchical discursive field and paired in strategic combinations as needed for particular situated issues, and a deep political pluralism in contemporary democratic politics, where the process of political deliberation is not implicitly based on one group's practices or languages. In both spheres the principle question becomes, "how do we attend to the strange multiplicity of political voices and activities without distorting or disqualifying them in the very way we approach them?" (Tully 2008b, 89). While much of this is only implicit in Williams and his brief turn to political theory, his naturalistic and historicist methods, and his commitment to addressing the problem of foundationalism and the political problem of pluralism, make this a plausible extension of his thought. In this manner, his overt combination of these methods can advance current debates through Tully and the wider turn to situated forms of political theorizing.

IV. CONCLUSION

The history of contemporary political theory has struggled with the fact and idea of pluralism. From Berlin raising the question of value pluralism, Rawls re-framing it in a procedural distinction between the right and the good within liberal politics, and the fall of the Berlin Wall dramatically shifting our understanding of political divisions, political thought has repeatedly returned to the project of understanding the fractured nature of late-modern polities (Rawls 2005; Berlin 1999; Benhabib 1996).¹⁵ Just as these returns each resulted in intense methodological reflection, as political theorists attempted to equip their discipline with the tools to explain diversity and the conditions it sets for democracy, in recent years this pattern has repeated. Currently, new realism and the wider situated turn it is a part of are offering new ways of thinking pluralism in light of continued concerns around the universalist assumptions of the existing models. In this manner, pluralism (epistemic, ontological, political, etc.) continues to be the singular question of contemporary politics.

The reading of Bernard Williams presented above intervenes in this debate by offering a different potential within his work to the dominant reception it has received within recent literatures. These commentators have emphasized Williams's conceptual method, conception of politics as grounded in stability, and framework for questioning legitimacy, leading to a series of problems with the model of political thought this entails. New realism, amongst others, has criticized traditional ideal theory for relying on a moral foundationalism to ground its normative claims. However, as some critics have identified,

¹⁵] For an analysis of these transitions, see Moon 2004.

William's conceptual approach to the political produces a model of politics focusing too much on stability to the exclusion of other elements. The result is a narrowing of political theorizing and action. These represent serious concerns that have not, as yet, been adequately addressed.

In contrast, there remains a pregnant, and yet unacknowledged, alternative set of potentials in Williams's work. Reading his later political theory in conjunction with his explicit work on naturalism and historicism, reveals a set of resources to reframe political thought as a mode of socio-political criticism of our present practices and ideas. Confronting Williams with Tully bears out these positive methods and illustrates the type of direction a more thorough version of Williams naturalistic and historicist realism could take. This offers the important lesson to contemporary realism that a realist philosophy need not run roughshod over the problems of justification and pluralism that have structured recent political thought. Rather, the resources exist to frame a mode of political theorizing that attends to the real, to our actual situated languages and practices, without assuming external standards and returning to universalistic claims. Further, this potential method has the benefit of providing for a more thorough methodological and political democratic pluralism. In this way, political theory could once again become a discipline that speaks actively to the actual political world.

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