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Scepticism Without Reductionism: A Reimagination of the Political Thought of Bernard Williams

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in Political Science

by

Benjamin James Hoyt

Professor Simone Chambers, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Keith Topper, Co-Chair
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Professor Kevin Olson

2023

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A doctoral dissertation is a funny document. In Williams' telling the length of a dissertation (and the intensity of the labor that goes into producing it) can lead its author to mistake it for a book, while it is really an "effort in professionalization." In other words, Williams sees it as less a work of polished scholarship and more akin to a union card. Dissertations are funny in a further way: they are, fundamentally, the byproduct of enormous individual intellectual toil but can only be written with the encouragement and support of others. I certainly would not have finished mine without innumerable shared pints, family trips, bits of academic admonition, board game nights, and walks around Aldrich Park. In the following acknowledgments, I hope to give adequate payments for all the debts I've accrued over this long campaign. While writing a dissertation is a fraught business, I've found it is still more challenging to strike the right tone in its acknowledgments. Words always strain under the weight placed upon them by sincere and boundless gratitude.

I would be remiss if I did not begin by thanking Mark Brown for introducing me to the discipline of political theory. Mark was also a peerless mentor as I started applying to graduate school—offering guidance that managed to be both reassuring and sensible. He has also been a great friend to me (even though it took me years to stop calling him "Professor Brown"). Mark encouraged me to study at the University of York, where I had the good fortune to meet Mihaela Mihai and Mónica Brito Vieira. Mihaela and Mónica both motivated me to apply to Ph.D. programs, and I feel certain that I would not have finished this dissertation without the support and the intellectual resources they provided me with during my time in York.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Scepticism Without Reductionism: A Reimagination of the Political Thought of Bernard Williams

by

Benjamin James Hoyt

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Simone Chambers, Co-Chair

Associate Professor Keith Topper, Co-Chair

This dissertation project offers the most comprehensive reexamination of philosopher Bernard Williams' political thought to date. I argue, against the grain of the scholarship on Williams in both philosophy and political theory, that Williams' work contains an identifiable philosophical approach which he dubbed "scepticism without reductionism." I reconstruct this method, drawing on a broad cross-section of his work, and find that it provides a broadly humanistic and interdisciplinary template for political theorizing in an era of democratic decline. My reconstruction is meant to both correct prevailing disciplinary misconceptions about the limited value of Williams' work in both moral philosophy and political theory, but also to bring this approach to life by utilizing it in a manner that is consistent with Williams' own larger intellectual project of defending liberal democratic values against their most determined enemies. For Williams, philosophical critique needs to begin from Wittgensteinian "forms of life," and thus needs to be motivated by problems of genuine urgency for those who sought to better understand the values and practices of a particular society. Thus, Williams offers a culturally specific, historically grounded, yet philosophically rigorous model for philosophical reflection and critique. I utilize this approach, and Williams' body of work, to show how "scepticism without reductionism," can speak to a number of problems of deep-seated

importance to citizens of liberal democracy today. These include debates over citizen competence, income inequality, climate change, the advent of widespread political misinformation, and the uses of tragedy as a means of culturally embedded political critique.

Chapter I – Reimaging Williams' Political Thought

I – Introduction

In this dissertation, I advance an interpretation of Bernard Williams' political thought, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that I propose to reimagine it. I draw on the work of Bernard Williams to identify and articulate a distinctly Williamsian approach to political theory with four key features. First, the approach I outline is consistent with the broader themes of Williams' work in moral philosophy and thus treats Williams' work more holistically and systematically than past attempts by political theorists to engage with his work. Second, it overcomes the theoretical and textual challenges inherent in any effort to interpret Williams' work comprehensively. Third, my comprehensive approach to reading Williams demonstrates how Williams' work provides a historically sensitive, robustly realist basis for social criticism. Finally, my dissertation brings Williams into conversation with a variety of other thinkers, ranging from his critics, theorists within the recent "realist turn" in political theory, contemporary critics of liberal democracy, and authors of tragic fiction such as Herman Melville who have not been traditionally connected with Williams. In doing so, I highlight the major themes of Williams' career in moral philosophy, which have attracted little attention among even Williams' more ardent admirers, and develop an account of what political thought in the style of Williams can contribute to our understanding of the crises of liberal democracy today.

Following these brief introductory remarks, this introductory chapter is divided into three separate sections. First, I outline why revisiting Williams' political thought is a valuable scholarly undertaking. I argue that such a reconsideration provides political theorists with both a better understanding of Williams' work on its own terms but also provides a style of philosophically rigorous and multidisciplinary approach to political theorizing. In other words, a better

understanding of the political themes of Williams' broader philosophical project can help reinvigorate political theory at a time of political crisis. In the second section of this introduction, I explain why such a reimagination of Williams' work is necessary in the first place. Since my aim in this dissertation is to propose a novel re-reading of Williams' political thought—one that argues that there is an enormous degree of continuity between his body of philosophy as a whole and his commitment to defending specific "Enlightenment" political values—I feel it is incumbent upon me to justify the need for a new interpretation of Williams' political thought. Here I account for why the political themes I explore in subsequent chapters have often been overlooked by past commentators and what has prevented past commentators from recognizing the interrelated nature of Williams' political purposes and how his moral philosophy supports these commitments. I do so, first, by providing a biographical sketch of Williams' career. This portrait is specifically painted to help answer why few have attempted a more holistic reinterpretation of Williams' political thought, given its varied themes and what some have described as its profoundly "destructive" or "negative" character (Davies 1996). I supplement this biographic illustration with a review of some of the well-documented challenges of reading and interpreting Williams' work, specifically emphasizing why Williams' philosophy has often been seen as a particularly arid and infertile ground to grow a body of political thought. As we will see over this discussion, Williams' philosophical output is founded, most centrally, on a withering critique of systematic moral thought, and Williams self-consciously seeks to undermine efforts to systematize his work into any "ism." However, these facts have kept interpreters from recognizing how, in Williams' words, the themes of his work "hang together (like conspirators)" (B. Williams 1995d, 186). The final introductory section outlines the themes of each subsequent dissertation chapter, detailing how I carry out this project of reimagination.

II- Why Williams, Why Now?

When spelled out every dissertation's statement of purpose engenders a corresponding question: Why? In my dissertation's case, it is more precise to say that it generates at least two questions: Why write about Williams' political thought, which is familiar enough to theorists? Why write about Williams' politics—whose realist liberalism is nearly 20 years old and perhaps well past its expiration date—*now*? The first question, why reconsider Williams' political thought at all, is especially pressing because Williams' work already enjoys a clearly defined reputation within political theory. Since the release of *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, his posthumous collection of political theory essays, Williams has been read widely as a theorist, if not *the* theorist, of political realism. [1] In this role, he is especially influential in the context of the recent "realist turn" in political theory, where his work has come to occupy a position of central importance (McQueen 2017, 2018; Baderin 2014; Rossi and Sleat 2014; Galston 2010). According to one influential summary of the movement, Williams' work provides the specific commitments that distinguish political realism as a distinctive form of inquiry within political theory (Galston 2010). Williams' posthumous collection of essays, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, has inspired a wealth of sympathetic commentaries (Flathman 2010; Sleat 2013a, 2013b; Philp 2012; Bavister-Gould 2013) and critiques (Geuss 2014; Sleat 2013b; Nussbaum 2009; Kutz 2009; Larmore 2018). Despite their differences, these critics and admirers of Williams' realist approach to political thought share a common preoccupation. Members of both camps write as if the first essay of *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, "Realism and Moralism in Political Thought," effectively represents the entirety of Bernard

[1] Throughout this dissertation I will use the term "political realism" or "realism" to refer to the tradition of realism in political theory as opposed to international relations. Though scholars have suggested there is a "case for kinship" between classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and the realist movement within political theory, the question of kinship is beyond the scope of the issues I consider here (see McQueen 2017 and McQueen 2018).

Williams' contributions to the discipline. Indeed, few commentators who classify Williams as a political realist are interested in much else beyond it.

My answer to this first question is simple enough: Political theorists need to reimagine Williams' work precisely *because* this Williams-as-realist interpretation has become so ascendant. After all, Williams was one of the preeminent British philosophers of the 20th century, and it stands to reason that his work has more to contribute to contemporary political theory than a few scattered essays written near the end of his life. According to some of those close to Williams, "Realism and Moralism" was intended to serve as the basis for a more significant book about politics (Nagel 2006; P. Williams 2005n). As a matter of doing justice to the particulars of Williams' views on politics, any effort to understand his political thought should attempt to go beyond this single interpretation of what he has to say. The second facet of my response follows from the first: In doing justice to Williams' work and reading Williams' political thought in conjunction with his work in moral philosophy, political theorists can also come to recognize that his broader philosophical project has much to offer as a template for political theorizing. At its best, Williams' philosophy makes demands on its readers that go well beyond the usual requirements of attentiveness and patience that the subject requires. Williams' work challenges his readers to see philosophy for what it might be: How it might assume a more capacious humanistic form, acting as an invaluable resource to address problems of genuine importance for those who practice it. Williams also repeatedly insists that philosophy acknowledge its own partiality and look to the social sciences and history to help answer questions it has long considered its exclusive purview. In many ways, then, a reimagining of Williams' work can also serve as a spur to reimagine how political theory might be done in a genuinely inclusive and transdisciplinary manner.

Returning to the second of my two initial questions, one might reasonably ask why reimagining Williams' political thought is a worthwhile venture *today*. This question can be posed in a variety of different ways. Still, it ultimately amounts to asking whether Williams' realist liberal democratic politics are worth reexamining at a time when realism, liberalism, and democracy each seem beset by several formidable challenges both inside the academy and out. For example, liberal democracy has been criticized in recent years by those who claim its internal political structure is self-undermining; it presupposes a characterless conception of political agency and identity, making it highly unstable as a form of social and political organization (Deneen 2018).[2] Others have argued that it relies on an unrealistic model of citizen competence and engagement and has inadvertently empowered myopic citizens who cannot be trusted to govern themselves (Achen and Bartels 2016; Brennan 2016; Rosenberg 2017). As recent events attest, and scholars have extensively documented, liberal democracy faces a set of more practical challenges with the rise of "authoritarian populism" in the United States and Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2018) and the failure of liberal democratic regimes to adequately respond to the crises including, but hardly limited to, climate change (Wagner and Weitzman 2015), the rising social consequences of stark income inequality (Blanchflower 2019; Savage 2021), and the spread of misinformation and polarization throughout the public sphere (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018; Settle 2018; Mason 2018; Chambers 2021; Chambers and Kopstein 2022). A growing critical movement insists that those of us living under liberal regimes need to look for alternatives to liberal democracy rather than defending it in some form of vain and unhelpful philosophical rear-guard action. Williams is often singled out for scorn along similar lines. His critics have held that Williams' political theory amounts to a veneration of the actual, that his realism's obsession with "lukewarm legitimacy" undercuts the radical potential latent within realism as a mode

[2] This argument has a much older pedigree. As we will see later, Williams was familiar with the so-called "communitarian" critique of liberalism in the 1980's (see Sandel 1984; MacIntyre 1988) and chafed at the suggestion that he was a member of the communitarian camp (B. Williams 1995d, 223 n. 19.).

of political theory, or that his moral philosophy constitutes a rejection of hope and effectively counsels resignation in an unforgiving universe (Finlayson 2017; Nussbaum 2009). Raymond Geuss perhaps goes the furthest in this regard, holding that Williams' reflections on politics did little more than contribute stale "liberal platitudes" to the discipline and revealed that Williams was content to splash around "in the slimy and tepid pond created by John Locke, J.S. Mill, and Isaiah Berlin" (Geuss 2014, 184). Geuss contrasts Williams with Adorno to show that the former was too comfortable in the world of Anglo-American academia to adopt the latter's more radical political posture. A rejection of liberalism—with all its attendant hypocrisies and moral blind spots would have been the only sound conclusion for someone of Williams' prodigious philosophical talents to have reached, if only had he the courage of his convictions.

As with the first "why" question, my answer here involves highlighting the two facets of my proposed reimagination: Rethinking Williams' political thought can help us better understand his work, but it can also allow us to understand our present circumstances better. What Geuss and other critics of Williams' realist liberalism overlook is that Williams' political thought was meant to contain critical potentialities that Williams himself described as radical. While he was an avowed realist, he believed that philosophy needed to play a role in challenging the politics of the actual or any philosophical approach which sought to enshrine the actual or venerated the wisdom of prejudice and "common sense," a position which, drawing on Bertrand Russell, Williams compared to espousing "the metaphysics of the Stone Age" (B. Williams 1995d, 218). By better understanding Williams' political thought, we can see how it does not have to reach the milquetoast and moderate conclusions others have ascribed to him. However, in being an avowed liberal—and by resolutely affirming the importance of theorizing in a historically and socially realistic way—it can also address some of the most pressing challenges liberal democracy faces at present. Specifically, Williams argues that in contemporary liberal democratic societies, the all-important "Enlightenment" values of "a

respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions," (B. Williams 1985a, 198) were in dire need of more truthful defenses than moral philosophy offered. Rather than justifying their value by grounding them in the structure of practical reason or consequentialism or justifying their political importance through a "moralist" teleology, Williams argues these values need to be defended by connecting their value back to the social understandings of modern liberal citizens. In subsequent chapters I will highlight how Williams attempted to provide these foundations in his realism, his work on social justice (B. Williams 1985b, 1997b), and his reflections on the value of truth within liberal democracies (B. Williams 2002a, 1996e) Williams' commitment to these values and the realist defenses he provided for them are not worth investigating simply for the sake of appreciating how Williams' philosophical and political project "hangs together," though I will argue that they do offer that benefit, they are instead worthwhile contributions to the project of defending liberal democracy today. As we will see, Williams argues that any adequate defense of values like these must ultimately take the form of compelling those inhabiting a specific "form of life" to reflect upon "what they have got, and how it might go away" (B. Williams 2005i). In this way, Williams believes that philosophical reflection and critique can serve practical political ends, and I will attempt to show how it can advance those ends even today.

At first glance, it may not seem clear why a better understanding of Williams will help facilitate a better understanding of the present challenges facing liberal democratic society today. I believe one of Williams' famous distinctions here will help clarify this facet of my dissertation's argument. In the introduction to his second book, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Williams distinguishes "the history of ideas" and "the history of philosophy." In the former, Williams argues, the central question about what a particular work means is "*what did it mean*." He continues to write, "the pursuit of that question moves horizontally in time from work, as well as backward, to establish the expectations, conventions, familiarities, in terms of which the author could have succeeding in

conveying a meaning" (B. Williams 2005d, xiii). A study in the history of ideas is meant to identify what a past author meant as a matter of historical fact; it is a kind of textual archelogy centered on a set of meanings fixed in historical time. Williams concludes that the history of philosophy is different. This latter kind of history aims at a type of "rational reconstruction. . . where the rationality of the construction is essentially and undisguisedly conceived of in a contemporary style," shaped by what the interpreter in their present situations takes "to be the most interesting philosophical concerns," of the author being interpreted (B. Williams 2005d, xiv). Williams favors this latter approach to help bring the concerns of Descartes to life in a way that demonstrated the latter's relevance to contemporary philosophers. In a later article on the tradition of political philosophy, Williams revisits and expands upon these distinctions. There Williams points out that rational reconstruction should not lead a historian of philosophy to "read Plato only as in last week's *Mind*"[3] (B. Williams 2006d, 165). However, in addition to questions of "genuine historical understanding," which amount to asking of a text "what *did* it mean," there is room for what he refers to as "'history of philosophy,' but is really a sort of philosophy. . . 'history-of-philosophy philosophy.'" (Ibid) This style of philosophy—which, as with his study of Descartes, connects an author's concerns to the modern interests and sensibilities of its readers, is "a funny kind of philosophy with archaizing elements," which can nonetheless be worthwhile (so long as it is self-conscious about the fact that it is not *genuine* history). Williams sees political philosophy as a domain that demonstrates the actual value of practicing this historically centered philosophy: It can answer a very different question than that posed by authentic history. Rather than explaining "what it meant," historically rooted political philosophy can aim at showing what an interested party can "get out" of reading a particular text, a question asked "not so much *of* a text, as asked *about* it" (Ibid). In other

[3] This proposal for reading Plato was, according to Williams, both an actual remark made by an early colleague of his and characteristic of the way that British philosophers approached the history of philosophy at the beginning of his career (B. Williams 1994a).

words, sometimes reading a particular past text can help illuminate a reader's present concerns. Williams is clear that this is not because, for example, the concerns of the author are exactly the same as the reader's. Instead, by reading a past thinker with our present concerns in mind, we can fairly straightforwardly make connections and draw analogies to our present circumstances. This is made easier when, as with Williams' use of Descartes, a past thinker's concerns lie very near to some of the concerns that animate us today.

Adopting Williams' framework, my reimagination of Williams' political thought is meant to squarely occupy the domain of the history of philosophy (philosophy). I hope to show what contemporary political theorists and interested readers can "get out" of reading Williams while also endeavoring to provide the most holistic restatement of Williams' political philosophy to date. This is partly because Williams' approach to philosophy, the political and social ends he attempted to put it towards, and some of the specific topics he spent his career analyzing are all of particular importance to citizens of modern liberal democracies today. Williams, as we will see throughout this dissertation, envisions philosophy as a form of shared social inquiry that aims to better understand problems of genuine importance to members of a particular society. His philosophical ambitions were, at least in part, concerned with protecting liberal democracy from a range of threats that he saw as particularly pressing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The threats he discussed explicitly—the rise of self-deception and misinformation in democratic political systems, the decline of liberal values, and the concomitant danger posed by what he describes as political "myths"—all present prominent and oft-discussed challenges to the stability of liberalism today. In this way, Williams' range of philosophical responses to these threats should be particularly interesting to political theorists in liberal states today. However, elucidating these political themes in Williams' philosophy will involve demonstrating a depth of previously overlooked continuity in Williams' work. Many previous commentators have argued that Williams' work lacks any consistent

structuring principle or philosophical contribution. In this light, Williams provides a range of intriguing insights on different topics, and a set of searing criticisms of particular approaches to moral philosophy, but ultimately according to the conventional view, Williams' work should not be read holistically. While this line of thinking highlights several key features of Williams' philosophical style—his disdain for philosophical systems and "isms," the wide sweep of his interests, and his withering rebuke of the trajectory of modern moral philosophy—they help to conceal how Williams' philosophy does offer a coherent approach for political theorizing today.

III - The Challenges of Interpreting Williams: Biographical, Textual, and Interpretative

In this section I highlight some of the reasons why Williams' work in moral philosophy has not been more widely embraced within political theory. The reasons why, I contend, have at least three principal sources: They stem from the particular arc of Williams' career, textual challenges peculiar to Williams's work, and criticisms of Williams' arguments from within moral and political philosophy. I review each of these in turn by offering Williams' intellectual biography. Following this, I offer an account of some of the internal challenges evident within the enterprise of interpreting Williams' work. I conclude with a discussion of the principal criticisms of Williams' work which have impeded a more comprehensive reckoning with Williams' work among philosophers, in general, and political philosophers and theorists, in particular.

By his own account, Bernard Williams came onto the philosophical scene in a remarkably different era for academic philosophy than the one that exists today. In a review of Gilbert Ryle's *On Thinking,* Williams writes that Ryle advised his students—Williams among them—to avoid "doing a Ph.D. unless they had to" because, Ryle believed, "it was better to write a short good book later than a bad long book earlier" (B. Williams 2014h, 153). Williams was admitted as an undergraduate to Balliol College at Oxford in 1946, where he read Classical Mods and Greats, a course that involved

studying classics with Eduard Fraenkel and philosophy with Ryle, Isaiah Berlin, and R.M. Hare (among others). Williams graduated with a "congratulatory first," which, within the ritualistic conventions of British academia, obliges the recipient's examining professors to "ask no questions about the candidate's written work but simply stand and applaud" (Lehmann-Haupt 2003). He was subsequently awarded a Prize Fellowship at All Souls before taking time off to complete his national military service. Indeed, Williams followed through on Ryle's advice and never completed a doctorate; in fact he never completed an MA or MPhil, and instead took up as an academic philosopher upon his return. Williams' career began first as a Tutor at Oxford before moving to University College in London and then Bedford College, partly to accommodate his first wife Shirley Williams' nascent political career.

Williams was later to describe British philosophy of the 1950s as an era of "piecemeal methods," when most philosophers "traveled frightfully light." In this "irresponsible" period, practitioners "really did have the feeling that you could make some of it up." In his early work, Williams was critical of both logical positivism and most of the mainstream strands of linguistic philosophy, which were the dominant traditions within the British academy at the time. For example, despite the personal admiration the two men shared, Williams was critical of AJ Ayer's work and described JL Austin as perhaps "the most overrated British philosopher of the 20th century."[4] In the fifties, Williams began a study of Descartes that was not to be completed until 1978. Some of this earlier work is still well-regarded today, but some reflects the era's extemporaneous character. Most notably, his first book *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* fails to offer

[4] According to Williams' first wife, Shirley Williams, Ayer regarded Bernard Williams as "a virtual son, admired him and saw him as a natural successor" (Jeffries 2002). Williams was to write elsewhere of his dislike of Austin that "I was less influenced by him [than Ryle] because I never believed the problem with British philosophy was that it was liable to metaphysical excess and needed to be cut back, which seemed to be his view. He always seemed to me like a Treasury official who thought that the British economy needed deflating, when there were already three million unemployed" (B. Williams 1994a).

anything close to what its subtitle promises in its 107 pages—though it contains many suggestive ideas and presages many themes in Williams' later writing. However, his book on Descartes, published as it was during a surge of interest in the author of the *Meditations*, distinguishes itself not only as a comprehensive attempt to explain the precise nature of Descartes' method of doubt but also attempts to place Descartes as the first true modern philosopher, whose work offered a radical challenge to the long-settled methods of scholastic philosophy. In arguing this, Williams claims that Descartes's work set out to address questions that lie at the heart of contemporary philosophy. It is from the earlier thinker's work that Williams derives a distinction that he was to return to repeatedly in his later philosophy: The idea of an "absolute conception of the world" (B. Williams 2005d).

Williams, however, was a prodigious writer. Indeed, many of the journal articles he produced during this period are more critical to understanding Williams' later thought than these two books are. Williams wrote more than a few well-received articles on personal identity, moral-decision making, and political philosophy from the 1950s until his third book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* in 1985. These papers, the most widely discussed of which are gathered in two collections of Williams' essays from 1973 and 1981, cover many topics and incorporate an astonishing range of different source materials. For example, his early work on personal identity and ethical consistency draws on Shakespeare, the opera *The Markropulos Affair,* and the work of the Greek tragedians. Williams was later to reflect on this period and conclude that during it, he intended to create a kind of moral philosophy that resisted the stultifying impulse to "simply be clever" and that he drew from Elizabeth Anscombe, another of his tutors at Oxford, a contempt for cleverness for its own sake. According to his later reflections, he found that most moral philosophy was too removed from the materials with which most ordinary people constructed their ethical lives; as a discipline, it was preoccupied with leaving people to feel "they have no right to have certain kinds of moral thoughts because they don't fit in with some very impoverished theoretical picture of what constitutes moral

thought" (Davies 1996, 12). Williams felt "an interest in, and a feeling for, the more literary aspects of philosophy, which weren't really catered for at that time," and his ambition was to create a style of moral philosophy whose relationship to ordinary ethical life resembled the style of the impressionists. As he was to say in a later interview:

> 'Impressionism was called the painting of modern life,' [Williams] explains. 'It didn't look as if it was made out of the old salon material, it looked like something people were actually doing .. I would like there to be moral philosophy that was a bit like Seurat. Something that was directly related to everyday life, but that also made it look rather strange and new because it was rather monumental and had a very strong structure.' (Ibid)

This need to defend the complexities of ordinary ethical life against the abstract artificiality of academic moral philosophy is present throughout Williams' writings in this period and beyond. It is part of what gives Williams' work its distinctively "negative" or "destructive" character, as Williams repeatedly chastises moral philosophers for misunderstanding the nature of moral decision-making or obfuscating the workings of ordinary ethical life. His 1985 review of Ronald Milo's book *Immorality* offers a characteristic glimpse into his view of the discipline's pathologies. In it, he writes, "*Immorality* is a competently argued, and hence all the more depressing, example of Anglo-American moral philosophy at its most arid. As is often the case in this subject it argues for something that no sane person ever denied except in philosophy" (B. Williams 2014m, 245).[5] For Williams, the problem with moral philosophy of this sort was that it does not adequately address a range of important ethical issues, questions of "betrayal, life, and death," which many analytic philosophers saw as the "meat and drink" of "existentialist philosophers in the European tradition" (Magee 1986, 191). Williams argues that these are among the most significant materials in the ordinary moral consciousness of normal individuals, and thus, the topics that moral philosophy ought to address.

[5] In another instance, Williams was asked by an exasperated R.M. Hare what Williams proposed to "put in the place" of the moral theory (namely, Hare's) that Williams had just finished rejecting. Williams' response was to say, "Well, in that place, I don't put anything. That isn't a place anything should be" (Voorhoeve 2009, 195).

This argument also reflects a second key feature that defines Williams' work during this early period: His concern with the "internal" or embedded perspective as a starting point for moral philosophical reflection.

It is hard to neatly recapitulate each example of "internalism" in Williams' early work, partly because it is one of the constitutive themes of everything Williams writes. However, it played a prominent role in his early and widely acclaimed papers and book chapters. For example, in "Internal and External Reasons," he argues that judgments about what an individual ought to have done must be attuned to the specific beliefs and understandings in that agent's motivational set. Williams, for example, examines the case of Owen Wingrave, the fictional protagonist of Benjamin Britten's opera of the same name. Owen's family wants him to join the army, and they believe that by doing so, he would be carrying on a proud tradition of military service among men in his family. Owen, for his part, despises the idea of serving in the military and shares none of his family's pride in this martial tradition. In this specific example, the family's claim that there is a reason for Owen to join the military is best understood as a claim about an external reason—it describes a reason that might be compelling or persuasive to an outside observer but which has not occurred to the deliberating agent or is of little to no significance to that agent. As Williams points out, these external reasons—whether in Owen's case or in other examples which bear an analogy to it—are disconnected from any explanation of an agent's reasons for action. When we say that an agent had a reason to do *x,* keep a promise, for example, and that the agent was irrational for not doing so, Williams argues that we are not saying much about their motivations and what *they* had reason to do. In his words: "There are of course many things that a speaker may say to one who is not disposed [to do *x*] when the speaker thinks that he should be, as that he is inconsiderate, or cruel, or selfish, or imprudent; or that things, and he, would be a lot nicer if he were so motivated. . . The sort of considerations offered here strongly suggest to me that external reason statements, when definitely

isolated as such, are false, or incoherent or really something else misleadingly expressed" (B. Williams 1981a, 111). The only way to make sense of an agent's action, and to determine whether it was genuinely irrational or somehow antithetical to their objectives, was to understand the reasons internal to their motivational set. In other words, it was only through the eyes of an agent that we could hope to make sense of or assess their actions. The apparent target of Williams' criticisms are theories that purport to describe reasons for action that ought to be binding on every rational actor by virtue of their rationality. Here again, Williams attacks the overreaches of philosophical theory to defend a philosophical perspective sensitive to the nuances of individual or ordinary ethical thought.

This was not the only early example of Williams' concern with internalism. In his most famous early career essay, he claimed that utilitarianism was incoherent at least partly because the moral motivation to maximize overall well-being could not be reconciled with widely shared beliefs about personal identity. Namely, while consequentialism commits each agent to act in a way that leads to the widest distribution of aggregate welfare, it is unconcerned with the agent's sense of integrity, their feeling of what it means for them to choose one course of action considering their commitments and their sense of who they are. Williams describes two fictional men, George and Jim, who face moral quandaries where, at first blush, utilitarianism seems to offer a straightforward conclusion (B. Williams 1973a). George is an unemployed biochemist whose family is destitute and is offered a job manufacturing biological weapons. George is a pacificist, and he is assured that should he decline the job, a colleague who will pursue the research zealously will be granted the position. On the other hand, Jim is a botanist caught up in a South American civil war. Stumbling upon a group of twenty prisoners at the mercy of soldiers from the ruling regime, Jim is offered the chance to execute one of the prisoners in exchange for others being allowed to go free. Should he decline, all the prisoners will be executed. For Williams, the nuances of these examples, and the gap between the answers suggested by utilitarianism and the values of the individual agents, reflect a

profound inability of large-scale moral theories to make sense of the guiding principles of individual behavior, namely the affiliations and values that inform our sense of self. Whether it is George's pacifism coming into conflict with his desire to save his family or Jim's reluctance to shoot a helpless prisoner even if it means saving nineteen others, utilitarianism, on Williams' telling, seems unable to adequately reckon with the sorts of commitments that define the experience of selfhood.[6] We will return to the importance of the internal or embedded perspective in the next chapter.

This multi-faceted disdain for the prominent strands of moral philosophy was most fully realized in Williams' following book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.* At the book's outset, Williams identifies what he calls "Socrates' question" as the main thrust animating moral philosophy. All reflections on ethics and morality ought to ultimately attempt to answer the query, "How ought we to live?" In the following pages, he deftly summarizes and dismisses each of the most popular accounts offered by moral philosophy—from the eudaimonic theories of Aristotle to consequentialism and deontology. In each case, as with his earlier critique of utilitarianism, he finds disconnects between the central assumptions of each and the conditions of modern human beings. The book's conclusion finds him rejecting, wholesale, the entire "morality system," which compels assent to the ideal of universalizable obligations measured against some single moral currency. In keeping with the general themes of his corpus, Williams finds that this concern to create a system of

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[6] Williams' discussion of moral luck provides another early example of his interest in internalism. In Williams' telling the desire of certain philosophers to regard only those values that are immune to chance as morally significant fails to consider that certain projects of tremendous significance to individual agents are entirely subject to contingency. Williams' example is that of Gauguin traveling to Tahiti. Should he fail to become a great painter then, Williams argues, he will be left without any way of justifying his actions either to himself or those critics who rightly bemoan his callous disregard of his wife and children. However, while his success will not launder his moral failings, it will provide a form of justification connected with his achieving his true self. As Williams writes about Gauguin, "If he fails, his standpoint will be of one whom the ground project of the decision has proved worthless, and this (under the simplifying assumption that other adequate projects are not generated in the process) must leave him with the most basic regrets. So, if he fails, his most basic regrets will attach to his decision, and if he succeeds, they cannot. That is the sense in which his decision can be justified, for him, by success" (B. Williams 1981b, 36).

abstract and often unconditional obligations undermines the foundations of lived ethical experience. In the book's scornful concluding sentences, he writes: "[M]orality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life" (B. Williams 1985a, 195). The book contains much else besides invective, in any case. Williams also takes up questions of the appropriate relationship between moral philosophy and ordinary ethical life, the interrelated questions of the truth of certain ethical statements, and their applicability across different cultural climes. Its epilogue, which I return to in my second chapter, also foreshadows Williams' late career interests, presaging the themes of the last two books Williams was to write and many of his other contributions to the discipline in the final seventeen years of his life.

The publication of *Ethics* in 1985 undoubtedly represented Williams' most impactful contribution to the discipline of philosophy, but the 1980s also found him deeply engaged in British politics. To be clear, Williams had long been involved in politics. Earlier in his career, he had been public in his opposition to the Vietnam War and broadly supported, with some critical reservations, the goals of 1960's student radical groups (B. Williams 2014q). He commented copiously on politics in his voluminous contributions to newspapers and magazines. In some of these pieces, for example, he wrote ruefully about the state of socialist politics in the United States and Western Europe or was ferociously critical of some of the peculiar opacities of British laws related to privacy and state secrecy (B. Williams 2014n, 2014o, 2014p). However, his political engagement went beyond mere commentary. Williams also participated in several public commissions throughout his life, most notably the 1977 Commission on Obscenity and Film Censorship, which he chaired, and the 1993

Commission on Social Justice, on which he was an active and vocal member.[7] The report produced by Commission on Obscenity and Film Censorship is significant in this regard as it has come to be identified as "the Williams Report" by both admirers and critics, in part because Williams published it as a standalone book in 1981. The commission defends a two-pronged strategy for regulating access to materials that a "reasonable person" might consider pornographic. On the one hand, the report proposes conducting the sales of such materials in a way that limits how often those who might be offended by them are exposed—for example, by regulating how they might be displayed. On the other, it is broadly opposed to outright prohibition—beyond materials whose creation involves any criminal act such as child pornography or "snuff" films—and defends a strict presumption in favor of a right of free expression which, the report presumes, is an irreducible fixture of Britain's democratic political system. For example, the report explicitly refuses to censor any written material finding that "its nature makes it neither immediately offensive nor capable of involving the harms we identify, and because of its importance in conveying ideas" (B. Williams 1981 [2015], 213). The report, in this vein, tries to identify an approach to regulating pornography that appeals to widely shared moral intuitions—namely, the importance of free speech and artistic expression—within British society while also trying to minimize the predictable harms associated with the sale and display of pornography.

However, the report was published as a book in part because when its findings were due to be considered by Parliament in 1979, the political headwinds of Britain had changed. When Margaret

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[7] He was additionally a participant in the Public Schools Commission in 1965 and the Gambling Commission of 1976. In Williams' words, as Prime Minister Harold Wilson had "an enormous disposition to create Royal Commissions all over the place" (Davies 1996, 15).

For proof of his vocal defense of the Social Justice Commission, see his account of the need for a broad-based inquiry into the question of social justice (B. Williams 1994c) and his response to Jerry Cohen's critique of the commission's published report (B. Williams 1997a).

Thatcher and the Conservatives swept into power that year, Williams was embroiled in another kind of political activism. Williams was vociferous in his criticism of the anti-intellectual and free-marketeering components of Thatcherism, commenting in one piece that "Sometimes [the Thatcherites] seem to forget that it is a country at all, and think of Britain just as an economic environment, with beady-eyed entrepreneurs running around like newly emerged mammals among the bones of the dinosaurs" (B. Williams 1987). In the same article, Williams argues for the need to "[encourage] humane studies in higher and further education" as a counterweight to the unreflective and pessimistic politics of Thatcherism and concludes that "unless that aim is taken seriously, which implies spending money on it, the old inarticulate country will not turn into a new and more reflective one. It will merely have become a resentful, disordered, despairing slum" (Ibid). As the Provost of Cambridge's King's College, Williams was the most high-profile of the academic critics of Thatcher during the 1980s. By 1988, one year after he had enjoined Britain to invest in the humanities as an antidote to unreflective conservatism, and after spending eight years lamenting the academic climate in Britain under Thatcher, Williams became even more prominent by leaving the country for America. His abrupt departure from British higher education for UC Berkley made him the face of the "brain drain" that British universities experienced during the Thatcher years. By his own account, he was recruited by his friend Donald Davidson. He was drawn by the independence that the academic culture of Berkeley granted him, which meant, in practice being freed from his teaching and administrative responsibilities. Still, his departure set off a firestorm of criticism that he had not necessarily anticipated (Davies 1996, 1225).[8] However, Williams returned to accept the White's professorship at Oxford two years later. He was later to tell Richard Wolheim that his return to the United Kingdom was at least in part motivated by his desire to return to political life and

[8] In the longest recorded interview of Williams, at least the longest one that is widely accessible, he explains, to Michael Ignatieff, in much greater detail, what his motivations in leaving for Berkeley were and how the criticism of the public nature of his departure affected him (Pilgrim 2022).

complained that in the United States, "he would always be a political outsider in that there would never be an American statesman about whom he would know something comparable in detail to the fact that Ken Livingstone kept newts" (Wolheim 2003).

Even after he returned to Oxford he remained on the faculty at Berkeley, and the latter institution's Sather Classical Lectures provided the foundations for his next book, *Shame and Necessity*. As a book, it takes up one of the challenges posed in the conclusion of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy:* It reexamines the traditional picture of Greek ethical thought and tries to connect that ethical framework to the conditions of the modern world. Namely, *Shame and Necessity* is meant to challenge the conclusions of certain "progressivist" scholars of antiquity. Williams' main concern is to challenge the contention that the ethical framework of the archaic Greeks—typified by a group of prominent Athenians which, broadly speaking, includes Homer (sometimes), Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Thucydides—is inherently more primitive than the one offered by contemporary moral philosophy. In this progressivist picture, the pre-Platonic Greeks believed in a world governed by capricious gods whose obscure purposes they were powerless to resist. They had a limited notion of moral agency and autonomy, embracing a shame culture in which individuals were compelled to act in accordance with social expectations. Perhaps most importantly, they lived in a patriarchal society supported by the institution of chattel slavery. The argument runs that it is only with the advent of Plato and Aristotle that something resembling a coherent approach to moral philosophy begins to emerge. In *Shame and Necessity,* Williams slowly unravels these traditional narratives, urging upon the reader the possibility that there is much to learn from the ethical imagination of the archaic Greeks. Williams also challenges the complacent belief that our modern moral philosophy is necessarily superior to theirs. Even in the case of slavery, Williams argues, it was widely accepted that the practice was not just. In fact, it was seen as the quintessential example of injustice. However, before Aristotle defended the institution's fundamental rightness, the belief was simply that slavery was

necessary: there was simply no way to maintain the polis without it. Williams urges that as citizens of a global world, we are similarly implicated in injustices that we likewise regard the same way the Greeks did slavery. Far from defending slavery or proposing "that anyone behave like a tragic hero," Williams' investigation of archaic Greece is meant to emphasize the resources that the tragedians provide for rethinking our own circumstances: an approach to moral philosophy that could avoid some of the pitfalls he had so strenuously criticized in his earlier work.

The philosophical output of Williams' final years was characteristically diverse while still displaying some key clear points of thematic continuity. His last published volume of essays ranges even wider than the two that precede it. It contains discussions of the evolutionary necessity of culture for human beings, the nature of the voluntary, a famous piece on Nietzsche's moral psychology, and the environmental movement, among many others (B. Williams 1995c). Williams' interests in ancient Greece are evident on the pages of those assembled chapters but also in his short monograph from the same period *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy*, and a few scattered papers on the relationship between tragedy and philosophy, most notably one that we will return to in chapter six of this dissertation on Sophocles *Women of Trachis*. Williams' work also became more clearly focused on political philosophy in particular. His final book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, sought to defend the idea of objective truth and the importance of particular "virtues of truth" as necessary features of contemporary liberal democracies. The work, which represented the culmination of another part of the research agenda he had laid out in the epilogue of *Ethics*, had been started years before but was ultimately finished amid Williams' battle with multiple myeloma (Nussbaum 2003; Wolheim 2003).[9]

[9] In a endnote to his 1995 festschrift volume, Williams refers to "a study, part historical part philosophical, of truthfulness and its relations to truth," which he says he plans "to complete in three years time" (B. Williams 1995d, 223 n. 22).

Williams suffered a heart attack on one of his family's yearly trips to Italy and died on June 10th, 2003.

Williams' intellectual biography helps to underscore why his body of work has not often been read holistically. In part, because Williams turned to political philosophy seemingly so late in life—with *Truth and Truthfulness* published the year before his death and the posthumous volume, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* coming out two years afterward—it is easy to see it as a distinctive and discrete phase of his philosophical career. His political theory is, on this view, akin to an entirely distinct section of the fossil layer, easy to separate from what came before it.[10] This interpretation is also supported by the incredible diversity of topics Williams chose to write about: His political philosophy might be another such, possibly fleeting, interest of Williams'. Williams' longstanding war against philosophical theory, his staunch defense of the internal perspective, and the ordinary moral consciousness often overlooked by moral philosophers, all of these undeniable themes of his work also provide a justification for resisting any account of Williams' work that proposes a unifying narrative. This also speaks to the second principal reason why attempts to reinterpret Williams' work holistically have been so uncommon: The enormous degree of textual challenges that such an undertaking presents.

Williams straightforwardly announces that various textual obstacles protect his work from holistic interpretation. Writing in his *Festschrift* volume, about the revival of "isms" in 20th-century philosophy, Williams boasts that: "it is at least respectable to have an overall philosophical outlook than can attract such a label. I believe, and I still very much hope that I do not have one" (B. Williams 1995d, 186). Indeed, as we have seen, Williams' eclecticism and his late career interest in

[10] As mentioned above, this interpretation is offered by Raymond Geuss who praises Williams' moral philosophy (Geuss 2005) while proposing to bury his political philosophy (Geuss 2014).

political thought make it difficult to succinctly explain what a consistent "Williams-ian" approach might resemble. Critics and commentators disagree, for example, about whether his work is better understood as a distinctively humanistic philosophical project—in the style of Hume and Aristotle – (L. Greco 2012; Lorenzo Greco 2007, 2019; Nussbaum 1995a, 2003; Korsgaard 1996) or better understood as a Nietzschean rejection of the all accepted frameworks for how ethical philosophy has been traditionally practiced (P. Sagar 2014; Geuss 2005). Jenkins suggests that Williams' interest in psychology is the defining feature of his work and the interpretative key needed to make sense of his corpus more broadly (Jenkins 2006). For Fricker, Williams is centrally a theorist of "ethical freedom" whose work emphasizes the degree to which ethical theory severely misunderstands and underdetermines the richness and depth of our obligations, purposes, and projects (Fricker 2020). Williams' style of writing nurtures and sustains these rival interpretations. As Fricker also suggests, Williams is fond of offering up suggestive generalizations that are either not supported by some of his other more substantive positions or outright contradicted by them.[11] In Fricker's words:

> Now commonsensical, now intriguing, now exhilaratingly against the grain, a first observation that readers might make is that [Williams' philosophy] is all expressed in a deceptively conversational style—deceptive insofar as a conversational style creates an impression of simplicity and easy reconstruction by the reader after she has closed the book. And yet, Williams's philosophy is not remotely simple, and it is famously difficult to reconstruct. Everything seems to depend on everything else without any single element being conspicuously primary and, when attempting a summary, one invariably discovers one has neglected to factor in some careful form of words that deftly keeps a generalization just this side of a universal claim, or represents a proposition as sufficiently compelling to steer the argument in a certain direction yet without quite committing to its truth. (Fricker 2020, 919)

[11] Simon Blackburn (1986) makes the same point in his review of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* noting that Williams' style led to that book being written in an over general manner that elided more substantive discussion of specific theorists. In Blackburn's words "one can start to wonder whether the resolute avoidance of simplicities, or refusal to linger at one point of the course or another, is in fact appropriate" (Blackburn 1986, 194).

Borrowing from Fricker's characterization, this problem of "everything depending on everything else without any single element being conspicuously primary" likely has most befuddled readers and contributed to the dearth of monograph-length treatments of his philosophy. Williams clearly intends for these barriers to impede holistic interpretation, as he regularly chides philosophers who willingly forsake "realism" or "imagination" to achieve systematic coherence within their work. It is as if Williams' work is, as he wrote of Nietzche's, "mined" against any wholesale distillation into a single method or consistent approach (B. Williams 1994b, 2).

For a reader of Williams working within political theory, these frustrating inconsistencies and textual peculiarities are made worse by the circumstances under which Williams wrote about politics. As noted above, Williams wrote extensively about politics but often in ways that leave his remarks somewhat fragmented or inchoate. For example, while Williams' reputation in political theory is connected with his critique of political moralism, he wrote very little about some of the key figures he associated with this tradition. While Williams wrote broadly positive reviews of both *Theory of Justice* (B. Williams 1972b) and *Political Liberalism* (B. Williams 2014j), he sounded notes of dissent against Rawls' core arguments in both books that he only sketchily took up elsewhere (B. Williams 2005h, 1981d). Though he directly challenged Ronald Dworkin's interpretative approach to political value in several different places (B. Williams 2001, 2014d, 2005c), these reflections did not take into consideration some of the ways that Dworkin modified his position later in his career (Dworkin 2011). In addition, while Williams mentions the work of Jürgen Habermas in a variety of mid-to-late career essays (B. Williams 2005h, 2002a, 1980, 1995 [2006]), most of these references take the form of brief discussions or remarks of a parenthetical character.

Beyond this lack of engagement with canonical figures in the discipline, Williams' explicitly political writings tend to be limited by the occasions under which they were composed. For example,

Williams' experience composing reports on the topic of obscenity, pornography, and censorship helped to inform his thinking in many subsequent treatments of the issues of censorship and toleration (B. Williams 1994 [2015], 2002a, 1996a, 2005a). However, the conventions of bureaucratic writing and the narrowness of its geographical and political scope (applying as they often do to the political and social circumstances of Great Britain alone) limit the generalizability of these conclusions.[12] Williams' critique of rationalistic models of nuclear deterrence (B. Williams 1984) and his attempt to construct a non-anthropocentric defense of environmentalism (B. Williams 1992 [1995]) share many of the themes of Williams' moral philosophy, namely in their respective attempts to synthesize philosophical criticism, social psychology, and cultural anthropology. However, both essays are constrained by the narrow scope of the edited volumes in which they originally appeared. Williams also routinely contributed journalistic articles to a variety of British and American publications on matters of politics or political philosophy (B. Williams 2014n, 1987, 1994c, 2014b, 1997b, 2014q, 2014g, 2014c). However, even though these publications frequently augur the direction Williams' work would subsequently take, they are similarly limited by their narrow focus or lack of theoretical depth.

In addition to these barriers produced by Williams' philosophical temperament and the circumstances under which he wrote about politics, various critics have argued that Williams' work suffers from severe shortcomings that undermine its basic value as political philosophy. Some have argued, for example, that Williams misunderstands topics central to his work. In this vein, critics have contended that Williams' critiques of consequentialism, deontology, and Aristotelian virtue ethics fail to appreciate the nuances of those theories (Louden 1996, 2007; John Cottingham 2009;

[12] Williams acknowledges this fact, noting that within the United States the "dubious advantage" of the 1st Amendment protection of political speech make many solutions to the problems of censorship difficult to implement (B. Williams 2014d, 1994 [2015])

Pettit 2012; Nussbaum 1995a) and that his accounts of moral luck (Kutz 2009) and integrity (J. Cottingham 2010) provide an intellectual veneer that disguises simple moral relativism. Even in terms of his political philosophy, Koopman contends that the method of "vindicatory genealogy," which Williams employs in *Truth and Truthfulness*, unwittingly leads Williams to commit the genetic fallacy and thus undermines the critical potential of Williams' approach to normative vindication (Koopman 2009). At a general level, Nussbaum has argued that Williams' emphasis on the centrality of "the horrors" of the human condition, and his blanket repudiation of systematic theory, entail an unacceptably passive attitude towards injustice in the world (Nussbaum 2009, 2003, 1997, 2001). Without systematic theory, Nussbaum argues, philosophy has only a limited capacity to redress entrenched social wrongs such as sexism and gender discrimination (Nussbaum 1997).

These concerns are especially acute among his critics in political theory. While Williams' much-cited essay "Realism and Moralism in Political Thought" has had a far-reaching influence on establishing the recent "realist revival" or "realist turn" in contemporary political thought, even theorists who draw extensively on Williams' work are quick to admit its shortcomings. Sleat argues that Williams' distinction between politics and "successful domination" cannot be sustained Thus, any fully-fledged model of liberal realism will need to transcend the limitations of Williams' account (Sleat 2013b). Forrester claims that Williams' use of Shklar's "liberalism of fear" is an ironic misunderstanding on Williams' part, given Shklar's respect for some of the political theorists that Williams set out to criticize, namely, John Rawls (Forrester 2012). Larmore (2018) and Scheuerman (2018) both chide Williams for attempting to insulate his understanding of "the political" from "the moral," claiming that any understanding of the former must necessarily involve some strong connection with the latter. More self-consciously radical critics of Williams's work, such as Geuss and Finnalyson, argue that Williams' realist defense of "milquetoast liberalism" (Finlayson 2017) effectively undermines the potential for transformative political change. Even Edward Hall—by far

the most thoughtful and thorough interpreter of Williams' work within the discipline of political theory—ends his most recent treatment of Williams' political thought (Hall 2020) with the conclusion that Williams' realism and "critical theory principle" represent fragile reeds on which to rest any constructive or critical political thought.[13] This is the general feeling of many of Williams' realist admirers: Williams' political theory is well suited to tearing moralistic theories down but leaves few foundations to build an affirmative body of political thought.

IV – "Scepticism without reductionism" and the Road Ahead

While these interpretative obstacles are manifold, their impact has been uniform: Bernard Williams' work has primarily been siloed across disciplinary lines. Moral philosophers largely read Williams' moral philosophy, and political theorists read his political theory, but there is precious little intermixing and no sustained efforts to cross-pollinate the two as a thinker who proposed blurring the lines between imaginative literature and philosophy and who saw the divide between analytic and continental philosophy as involving "a quite bizarre conflation of the methodological and topographical, as though one classified cars into front wheel drive and Japanese," his present disciplinary position would have undoubtedly galled him (B. Williams 1994b, 2). Williams' work is worth engaging with precisely because it refuses to accept these disciplinary boundaries as givens, and, as I argue throughout this dissertation, an exhaustive reimagining of Williams' "traditional" moral philosophy can provide both an approach to "doing" political theory in the style of Williams, but also provide political theorists with a range of substantive insights on topics of critical importance to theorists today. Namely, while I concede that such a reimaging of Williams' philosophy does not offer anything approaching a systematic theory of the sort that he disdained, it

[13] Hall (2013; 2015) also argues that Williams' critique of Rawls fails to appreciate the nuances of Rawls' later political-not-metaphysical turn and generally leads Williams to misconstrue the degree to which contemporary liberals are reliant on what Williams dubbed "political moralism."

does yield a historically grounded and interdisciplinary model of philosophically minded social critique. An approach he referred to as "scepticism without reductionism." Drawing on his body of writings, interviews, and specifically several of Williams' late career reflections on the nature of philosophy, I outline and explore what Williams thought such an approach entailed and what it would look like as a mode of political theorizing. Williams intends for his work to offer a defense of what he sees as "the values of the Enlightenment," namely, as we saw above, "a respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions" (B. Williams 1985a, 198). In my second chapter, I articulate how the approach of "scepticism without reductionism" weaves together and is consistent with several key themes of Williams' work. Namely, "scepticism without reductionism" flows from the overlooked social and political aims of Williams' philosophy, its historicist and internalist emphases, and Williams' interest in beginning philosophical inquiry from an identifiable cultural context, namely by drawing on what he called "deep dispositions" or "thick" cultural points of reference located within Wittgensteinian "forms of life." This latter component of Williams' work is critical because, as we will see, Williams argues that philosophy ideally should be a process of "shared social reflection" (B. Williams 2006b) prompted by "the failure to understand ourselves" (B. Williams 2002b) which requires a style of argument that is both "imaginative" and "urgent," while avoiding the conventionality of "clever" and "scientistic" academic philosophy (B. Williams 2006f). Williams' approach "accepts the insights of our primary ethical understanding and its relation to social practices, but leaves room for a radical critique in the name of interests not adequately expressed in the folk-ways" (B. Williams 2014f, 315) and provides "the possibility of deploying some parts of [a society's values and practices] against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers" (B. Williams 1992a, 37) I then demonstrate how Williams himself believes that such a method ought to be used. I do this by bringing together his late career reflections on the crisis of

liberal confidence that he claims is at hand for modern liberal democracy. I then outline the determinants of this crisis—the forces Williams discusses as potential threats to the stability of contemporary liberalism—and explore their relevance to defenders of Williams' Enlightenment values today.

Each of the following chapters pursues individual lines of argument from Williams' work and, I hope, demonstrates its relevance for political theorists today. For example, my third chapter reexamines Williams' political realism and his endorsement of Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear," utilizing my account of "scepticism without reductionism." Here I challenge the widely held view that Williams' (and Shklar's) liberalism merely proffer an unimaginative affirmation of the status quo. In fact, under Williams' approach to political theory and effective philosophy, the liberalism of fear is meant to provide more confident foundations for liberal Enlightenment values than Williams thought their defenders currently offered. Both Williams' and Shklar's accounts of the liberalism of fear are built on a similar argumentative structure and view of human psychology. Williams' use of it is an example of his broader demand that philosophy engage the "imagination" and provide a truthful defense of liberal society that is not based on disputable or metaphysically ambitious premises. By appealing to the fear of living under the arbitrary power of another—or living in constant fear of pain, suffering, and humiliation—Williams connects the value of liberalism to other core beliefs and historical experiences ubiquitous within a liberal democratic society. Williams demonstrates how liberalism can be defended in a manner consistent with the philosophical approach I outline in chapter two—since it links a defense of certain Enlightenment values to beliefs and experiences most relevant to citizens within liberal societies—as opposed to more abstract defenses of liberalism. In an often overlooked essay Williams defends environmentalism along similar lines. In particular, he justifies a concern for the Earth by appealing to the widespread

experiences of "Promethean fear" and awe at the splendor of nature. (B. Williams 1992 [1995]) In the concluding section of this chapter, I connect Williams' reflections along these lines with his broader writings on the liberalism of fear to articulate a tentative account of how the politics of fear offers a basis for addressing some of the most urgent matters of concern for liberal democracies, namely climate change and the corrosive effects of income inequality.

Chapter Four reexamines Williams' moral psychology and demonstrates its relevance to contemporary debates surrounding citizen competence and the supposed need to rethink democratic self-government. While Williams' moral psychology has received limited attention among commentators(for exceptions see Honig 1994; Lear 2004; Krause 2009), much of this treatment has left the nuances of Williams' account of ethical reasoning and judgment under-explored. At a time when critics have argued that liberal democracy is too reliant on an unrealistic model of citizen behavior, Williams offers a model of belief formation and ethical identity that is admirably suited to provide a more nuanced account of political identity and agency. Williams develops this model of moral psychology as a critique of what he saw as overly moralistic models of agency characteristic of ethical thought. Still, the model has broader ramifications for political theory. Williams' discussions of the concepts of shame and wishful thinking provide a framework for understanding what is at issue in recent debates regarding citizen competence. Williams argues that liberal democracy—when it exists against a background of social trust—is well suited to sustaining truthfulness at a social level, which in turn helps restrain the worst excesses of what he calls wishful thinking. While this capacity for wishful thought represents a danger to truthfulness and liberalism, Williams demonstrates that it is an ever-present feature of human behavior, often connected to the desire to live up to one's most central commitments or values. Among the criticisms one can make of these claims of democratic incompetence, I argue that Williams' work persuasively explains that certain politically pathological

behaviors among citizens of contemporary liberal democracies can be traced to the decline of social trust in the institutions that are critical for sustaining democratic deliberation and cohesion, and the concomitant deterioration of truthfulness and democratic hope. Indeed, even as critics have argued that democratic participation must be more severely constrained to remedy many of the contemporary pathologies of liberal democracies, Williams' work shows why this would be a myopic and shortsighted conclusion based on the historical evidence and given the normative goals he sought to advance (and which many of the contemporary critics of liberal democracy claim to share). I argue that a better understanding of Williams' moral psychology clarifies why Williams undertook his late career defense of liberalism.

My fifth and sixth chapters explore another facet of Williams' work that has broad political significance: the importance of tragedy and imaginative literature as supplements to philosophical reflection and powerful catalysts for it. I do so, first, by addressing the years-long debate between Williams and Martha Nussbaum about the relationship between tragedy and philosophy. Martha Nussbaum is one of Williams' most persistent and thoroughgoing critics. Nussbaum, Williams' student at Oxford, attacks Williams' work for both expressing too negative a view about the limits of human agency and too positive an opinion about the capacity of his non-systematic philosophy to address essential questions of enduring injustice. In particular, Nussbaum argues that Williams' use of tragedy merely provides a philosophical façade that disguises political and moral defeatism. Thus, in contrast to her views on the uses of tragedy within moral philosophy, Nussbaum holds that Williams' work only conveys a sense of "resignation" in the face of the world's horrors. In Chapter V, I take up the debate between Nussbaum and Williams and argue that many of Nussbaum's criticisms overlook essential distinctions within Williams' discussion of the value of tragedy as a corrective to moral philosophy and neglects the importance he accords to "imaginative literature" as the only means of conveying "the immediacy or concreteness or untidiness or imaginative echoes of

those ideas by which people really do live their lives" (Davies 1996, 15). However, while many of Nussbaum's criticisms fail to appreciate the subtleties of Williams' position, they do reveal how incomplete Williams' account of tragedy is and how it also needs to be supplemented by his other work in order to grasp how it could address the sorts of social and political horrors that Nussbaum thinks it justifies. By bringing Nussbaum and Williams into dialogue, I argue that Nussbaum does not recognize how Williams' discussions of imaginative literature and tragedy are not entirely distinct from her reflections on these subjects (Nussbaum 1995b, 1983, 2001) Williams' work provides all the necessary materials for creating a distinctively Williams-ian approach to deploying tragedy as a form of political critique. This form of tragedy as critique deviates notably from Nussbaum's famous theory of tragedy—which relies heavily on Aristotle's own account of its uses and his account of human nature. As I explain, Williams' account of tragedy is uniquely suited to serve as an example of the historically specific and culturally "thick" form of social criticism that Williams sketched in a later essay (B. Williams 2005c). I then put forward the work of Herman Melville as an example of realist social critique that helps to promote certain liberal Enlightenment values by vividly displaying the costs of forgoing them. This style of tragedy is distinctively well suited to promoting reflection among citizens of liberal democracies who might otherwise fail to recognize how their behavior implicates them in forms of conduct that are antithetical to the values they hold dear (including those who are held in the sway of their own self-deceptions). In my concluding chapter, in addition to the traditional aims of recapitulation and summary, I propose a range of different avenues through which the principal themes of this study can be expanded and extended.

Chapter II - Towards a Williams-inspired Political Theory

In this chapter, I offer a comprehensive restatement of some of the major themes of Williams' moral philosophy and an account of the political and social aims that animate his approach to philosophy. It will involve covering a rather lengthy bill of particulars, with frequent shifts between Williams' more well-known philosophical texts and several interviews and more overlooked essays. For example, I begin by outlining what Williams saw as his distinctive method of philosophy, a style he refers to as "scepticism without reductionism," and detailing how Williams characterizes this approach. I do this by drawing on interviews in which Williams describes the approach itself and by connecting these interviews to examples from Williams' moral philosophy, which demonstrate how he utilizes it himself. Additionally, I highlight how this approach also underscores the ambitions that Williams had for philosophy as a discipline; it reflects the range of virtues that Williams thought the very best philosophy ought to embody, specifically in its concern with engaging the imagination and addressing topics of urgent social importance to its readers. To establish all this, however, I need to segue into the interrelated questions of the political and social significance of Williams' philosophy, namely the urgent importance it assigns to protecting what Williams saw as the valuable political inheritance of the Enlightenment. Namely, three specific Enlightenment values, freedom, social justice, and a public culture of truthfulness, and the related system of liberal democracy that sustained them.[14] The unique condition of modernity, namely how

[14] When Williams uses the term "liberal democracy" it does not usually, or indeed often, refer to exclusively the American experience with the concept. Indeed, in his generally favorable review of Rawls' *Political*

"the negative inheritance of the Enlightenment" works to undermine traditional legitimating narratives in politics and promote an attitude of scepticism and suspiciousness towards all received practices, poses a particular problem for these worthwhile Enlightenment values and its political legacies. In particular, the very weapons of reflective critique that Enlightenment liberalism turned on its earlier political opponents ultimately call its foundations into question in a way that eventually undermines the "confidence" citizens of contemporary liberal democracies feel in it. This crisis of confidence leaves liberalism vulnerable to distinctively modern enemies, specifically what Williams describes as the politics of "political myth and superstition." "Scepticism without reductionism" is, in Williams' work, meant to, at least in part, identify defenses of these core liberal values at a time when their grip on the world seems particularly precarious. Indeed, I conclude this chapter by exploring a pair of often-overlooked essays in which Williams explains how to put a philosophical approach like "scepticism without reductionism" into social and political practice and how it can be deployed to serve the constructive political ends that Williams envisions for it.

I – "Scepticism without reductionism" At First Glance

For the reasons I outlined in the previous chapter, Williams' work in moral philosophy has, despite its influence, been the subject of only a single monograph-length study. While Williams laments the proliferation of companion volumes, collections of "essays in honor of," or *festschrifts* that often accompanied a great philosopher's work, analogizing his own such volume to a funerary wake at which the guest-of-honor is awkwardly still present for the mournful toasts, it would surprise him to learn that so many writers conclude that he has no distinctive approach to

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Liberalism Williams chides Rawls for lacking the "sociological imagination" when the latter describes the characteristic institutions of the liberal state—which to Williams' eyes takes on board too much of the American constitutional system and institutional framework. (B. Williams 2014j) More often, as we will see in the next chapter, Williams is thinking of something like the distinctively European social democratic system of democratic government, though he will readily concede that the similarities between the two merit consideration under the same grouping.

philosophy. Though Williams took great pains to ensure that his work could not be interpreted in a way that yielded a theory—a style of philosophical reasoning that proceeded by rote or used just a few principles to understand every possible obligation or ethical dilemma—he certainly thought his work had a distinctive style. The author of that sole book-length treatment of Williams' work, Mark Jenkins, begins his study of Williams by delving into this question of thematic continuity or philosophical style. According to Jenkins, Williams once claimed one of Nietzsche's many rhetorical questions as a fitting epigraph for his body of work (Jenkins 2006, 1). The question, "Do you think this work must be fragmentary because I give it to you (and have to give it to you) in fragments?" comes from *Human, All Too Human* and underscores a tension in Williams' work that he comments upon elsewhere.[15] Despite its eclecticism, its varying themes, and its largely destructive or negative character, Williams emphasizes that his work does have a central focus or ambition. In one of Williams' last large interviews, he muses that his whole career "has been about spelling out the notion of inner necessity. That someone who has to do something, has to live in a certain way or discovers something is really him, what he belongs to, what is his destiny – I'm drawn to all that" (Jeffries 2002). This might seem excessively individualistic at first glance and a generally unhelpful insight for a *political* theorist to dwell on, but throughout this chapter I argue that what Williams offers is a social and political analogue for this idea: That there is an identifiable philosophical style to Williams' work that can act as a form of distinctively political thought.

[15] Relatedly, Williams often compares the central themes of his own philosophy to those of Nietzsche, while readily conceding that it would be a "a very bad idea" for "anyone other that Nietzsche" to write philosophy in the style of Nietzsche (B. Williams 2002a). In one seminar he recalls a conversation with Jürgen Habermas who, according to Williams, "is very keen to get his opponents categorized," and who asked Williams "whether [Williams] was an Aristotelian or a Wittgensteinian." When Williams declined to accept either characterization, Habermas pressed him for a label, at which point Williams claims that "I was too modest to say 'I'm me', or something like that so I said, 'How about I'm Nietzschean?', and that really did put the petrol on the fire" (B. Williams 1999, 246).

In his *Festschrift* essay, Williams muses that there are two standards by which one can judge an author's particular philosophical corpus, according to "perceptiveness" and "coherence." Consistent with the theme of this chapter, Williams insists that indeed the major themes of his work and the positions he has taken do "hang together. . . like conspirators" in a way that critics have largely overlooked, especially those who insist that only truly systematic philosophy is rigorous enough to be intellectually worthwhile (B. Williams 1995d). In other words, Williams contends that his work does cohere around a central ambition or set of goals. Williams freely acknowledges that a truly free-wheeling approach to philosophical reflection might "misread perception by neglecting wider implications" but quickly emphasizes that a lack of systematic unity is often not the defining limitation of contemporary moral philosophy, rather "the characteristic fault of perception. . . is not that it is insufficiently linked to system, but that it is insufficiently perceptive and does not go deep enough. My concerns in philosophy, do, I hope, hang together, but this is the most in that direction that they are supposed to" (Ibid). Williams concludes the essay by calling for a kind of new philosophy that was sufficiently impure and able to understand itself and its core concepts in a way that involved using a more comprehensive range of intellectual resources than those offered by philosophy itself. Here Williams emphasizes that his approach to philosophy. At the same time, it refuses to sacrifice the virtue of perceptiveness on the altar of systematic unity, does have a unifying spark or underlying motivation, one that attempts to answer questions of the utility of philosophy to the broader social world. In two interviews, Williams was to outline this relationship, and how his approach to philosophy reconciled these two objectives in greater detail.

In a wide-ranging 1994 interview with the journal Cogito, answering whether there was a "Williams thesis," Williams offers a characteristically nuanced reply. In Williams' words, his philosophy "isn't full of positions and theses. But there's more unity to it than just in its areas of concern. I think there's a certain continuing element of style or approach which might be called

'scepticism without reductionism"' (B. Williams 1994a, 4). As he makes clear in the rest of this answer, both the scepticism and the aversion to reductionism, are critical to understanding his approach to philosophy. "I tend to be very suspicious of high-flown metaphysical answers to philosophical questions, while on the other hand rejecting scientistic reductionism (Ibid)," Williams observes. Later in this chapter, we will see why both elements were so critical for Williams, as he concludes that they are necessary features for any distinctively modern philosophy. For now, however, it remains to be seen what it means to philosophize in this style. Williams provides a deeper sense of his answer to this question in a much later interview. Asked about these same questions of approach or style, in what is assuredly the last published interview he gave, Williams argues that while his most famous contributions came through his challenging the belief that ethics could be given an external justification, the primary ambition of the ethical theories he attacks, he does not see his contribution as simply "tearing down" the foundations of ethics. Attempting to answer a question about why he disagrees with Aristotle's eudaimonic approach to ethics, Williams first emphasizes the limitations of Aristotle's account of phronesis, "When the news gets out that for the vast majority of human beings the virtues don't necessarily go together and that some of them are a great disadvantage. . . there is a strong tendency to say, 'The whole of the ethical is bogus!"' However, Williams continues by highlighting in a very consequential passage exactly how his approach differs from this kind of cynicism, writing, "[In these situations of radical scepticism] The business of defending *some* of the ethical becomes much harder. So we come to the point where most of my efforts have been concentrated: to make *some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing the whole thing out because you can't have some idealized version of it"[16] (Voorhoeve

[16] Emphasis in the original. The interviewer, Alex Voorhoeve, notes, however, that Williams did not live long enough to edit the interview (which was conducted six months before he died). As I will show, however, given the continuity of emphasizing these "somes" with much else that Williams argues, it does not seem like a stretch that they warrant italics.

2009, 203). Williams here offers a rather crucial interpretation of his work, one that links back to his emphasis on avoiding accepting high-flown metaphysics or systematic ethical theory on its own terms and likewise avoiding a tendency towards reductionism. The central ambition of his ethical thought, and as we will see later, crucially his vision for philosophy as a whole, is to try to identify defensible foundations for certain ethical or political concepts, ones that are necessary features of modern liberal democratic society; to critically assess the defenses offered for these values without taking them at face value or assuming they can be dispensed with altogether. We must first understand the ethical, from an internal view that avoids these temptations to reductionism or metaphysical excess, to see what part of it we need to preserve. This is the central aim and ambition of "scepticism without reductionism."

In the same interview, Williams offers additional clarifications about the underpinnings of this approach and what specific commitments define his style of philosophy. These will help us to understand, in particular, both the political aims of this approach and set the stage for why, given what Williams views as the essential features of liberal modernity, Williams sees this sceptical approach as the ideal way of defending whichever values or portion of the ethical require support. Williams emphasizes, for example, that he saw his approach to philosophy as having two principal features and that both of these currents had grown gradually stronger in his work. The first is a disposition towards a scrutinizing curiosity or a Ricœurian "hermeneutic of suspicion," which he feels he shares with thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In Williams' telling, "pretensions to certain kinds of value always aroused my suspicion" (Voorhoeve 2009, 198). This, straightforwardly enough, refers to the scepticism of "scepticism without reductionism." The second feature Williams mentions is a distinctive historicist turn, after which he has become convinced that "if you are puzzled by any idea that matters in human affairs, it is almost certain that you won't resolve your actual puzzlement merely by philosophical analysis" (Ibid). The only resolution,

Williams argues, is to better understand the term you're trying to make sense of in decidedly historical terms. Williams emphasizes three distinctive reasons why this historical emphasis is important not only within his work but as a feature of any meaningful attempt to make sense of modern ethics or politics. First, a historical outlook can help us recognize our own views' contingency. In Williams' words, "When we ask why we came to use some concepts rather than others that were prevalent at an earlier time, we typically come to see that history is not vindicatory" (Ibid). In other words, our values - and Williams mentions equal rights and the political value of equality in particular - are entirely contingent. These values did not, in Williams' description, "win *an argument*" with the values of monarchism or traditional social hierarchies because the "standards and aims of the argument practiced by the proponents of liberal ideas were not shared by defenders of the *ancien regime."* As Williams often quotes Foucault as saying, history is "gray, meticulous and patiently documentary" and provides no vindicatory stories to affirm our values.[17] The second way that historicism crucially benefits philosophy, according to Williams, is by helping us recognize how "our ideas seem incoherent to us" (Ibid, 199). Williams mentions, for example, that liberalism "has problems with ideas of autonomy that have their roots in Enlightenment conceptions of the individual, because these conceptions do not make sense to us" (Ibid). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of history provides "an understanding of the necessities of our way of life. The question 'What is possible for us now?' Is, I believe, really a relevant consideration in political and moral philosophy. This question demands empirical social understanding and insight. I would claim that you are not going to get such insight except by historical methods" (Ibid). These second and third points are consequential for the arguments in this chapter, and thus I deal with them at length before returning to Williams' reflections on his approach to philosophy.

[17] See (B. Williams 1994b, 2002a) for other instances of Williams using the quotation.

II – "The Deceptive Social Hologram" and the Conditions of Liberal Modernity

Notice that in the passages I have quoted above, Williams evokes the concept of historical "fit" in two different directions here. First, our political and moral concepts need to avoid incoherent or anachronistic elements because they belong to an era whose perspective we can no longer share. To take one of Williams' examples, it is hard to take Hume's moral philosophy entirely seriously because, in Williams' words, he suffered "from an almost terminal degree of optimism," which, to Williams' mind, means that "nobody who's got to 1999 can take [Hume] that seriously" (B. Williams 1999, 256). While Hume, for example, believes that an ethical sceptic can be convinced to accept the necessity of a shared system of ethics, namely by appealing to that sceptic's self-interest, Williams outright rejects this conclusion.[18] Outside of a brief flirtation with a Humean position in his first short book, Williams consistently maintained that there was no argument you could provide to, for example, the "fanatical Nazi" to make him or her rejoin a system of ethics that was incompatible with their Nazism. The same was true for the radical Callicles-esque ethical sceptic.[19] Hume's views express a naivete about human nature that Williams thinks, in the aftermath of Auschwitz and the in the wake of what were then recently concluded wars of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we cannot share. Thus, there must be an adequate fit between the concepts we hope to defend or hold on to and certain features or facts about "what is possible for us" or "our present condition" in Williams' view. When reflecting upon the desirability or importance of some ethical or political concept, the question must be posed whether or not it, with its particular history of uses and associations, suits a particular us, given our own experience and understanding of history.

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[18] This point, and one version of the contrast between Williams and Hume, is emphasized in (P. Sagar 2014).
[19] For Williams on the figure of Callicles and Plato's general approach to the attempting to refute the sceptic see: (B. Williams 2005j)

Second, the particular historical experiences of modernity make specific demands on what is possible for us as liberal citizens. Williams, as we will see, sees the citizens of modern liberal democratic regimes as the relevant constituency of his moral and political philosophy and believes that a few historical factors shape liberal modernity. The first is that the modern world[20] is defined by a historically peculiar form of self-consciousness or reflectiveness. For Williams, this reflectiveness is a byproduct of the Enlightenment. Indeed, he occasionally refers to it as the "negative legacy" of the Enlightenment. Put simply, the advent of the Enlightenment opened up space for citizens to question the underpinnings of specific shared values or social practices; it promoted a kind of suspiciousness and scrutinizing that began to undermine the foundations of traditional claims to authority. However, Williams does not see this reflective scrutiny as unambiguously positive: As with Nietzsche, he believes that the "will to truth" that the Enlightenment gives birth to can be applied in a way that undermines even itself. Most notably, the tension between the "pervasive suspiciousness" and "desire not to be deceived" that the Enlightenment has made possible in contemporary liberal democracies and the stability of the democratic political values and social practices it once affirmed, for example, is the defining feature of Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*. In that book, Williams explains that these twin attributes of modern liberal citizens can eventually erode faith in the existence of truth about historical events or the idea of truth as a necessary feature of politics altogether. The "negative legacy" of the Enlightenment means that any political or ethical values, even the values of Enlightenment itself, must be continuously justified or defended, or else they will be discarded as a kind of unjustified prejudice.

[20] Throughout, I use "modern world" or "modernity" in a manner that is consistent with Williams' usage, which is to say that I use it to refer to western liberal democratic modernity. Williams does make a few references to the developing or non-liberal world, but sees it as necessarily distinct from the world of European and North American societies.

The second and interrelated, historical feature of modern liberal societies is a widespread feeling of disillusionment or disenchantment. Williams occasionally invokes Weber's famous concept of "disenchantment" to describe this fact, agreeing with Weber that "the magic has gone out" of the modern world. In practice, Williams reframes Weber's point to argue that some combination of historical experience and the broadening of our scientific understanding has thoroughly discredited the grand theories of human progress. As noted above, Williams believes that modern liberal citizens can no longer accept the Kantian community of reason or some neo-Aristotelian ethics of virtue; Williams thinks that the modern sense of the horrors of the 20th century should make one despair at the likelihood of the existence of the first, just as our understanding of socio-biology and anthropology makes us doubt the possibility of ever finding something like the second. However, the malaise goes deeper than rejecting these grand moral theories and some of their political analogues. More specifically, just as contemporary liberal reflective scrutiny extends to our values, our disenchantment likewise engulfs them. In particular, citizens in the modern liberal world eventually, as Williams points out, come to recognize the wide range of ways in which their liberal practices are implicated in promoting human suffering both at home and abroad. As Williams writes, "A critic of liberal societies can point out that they. . . have brought about at home and elsewhere their contributions to humiliation and violence, and that they are high on hypocrisy, all of which are true" (B. Williams 2002a, 265). Any plausible understanding of history, then, will involve accepting the unsavory historical associations that our liberal societies, our ways of life, and indeed our most core political values have with the creation and promotion of human misery. This is why, as we consider at much greater length later in this dissertation, Williams argues that citizens of modern liberal societies are left with a somewhat ambivalent sense of their own society and its values. They can no longer accept the traditional justification offered by philosophy or "the religion it replaced," which used to provide a kind of certainty about the stability of their cherished political

values. As Williams writes in *Shame and Necessity*, aptly describing this contemporary fact of disenchantment:

> We are in a condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and Hegelian legacies. We have an ambivalent sense of what human beings have achieved, and have hopes for how they might live (in particular, in the form of a still powerful ideal that they should live without lies). We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, and that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities. We have to acknowledge the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value, including this reflective sense itself, and recognise that there is no redemptive Hegelian history or universal Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show that it will come out well enough in the end (B. Williams 1993, 166).

Notice here that the defining sense that those of us living in the modern world have towards the history of our past and even some of our values is one of ambivalence; the citizens of modern liberal societies are perpetually trying to determine if there is any way to reconcile ourselves the "hideous costs" of the human achievements we value, fully aware that we can no longer believe the old justifications. This, along with the demand to withstand social scrutiny, are the defining features of liberal modernity and, ultimately the characteristics that any defense of ethical and political values must be able to withstand. These are the kinds of historical factors that, as we will see, "scepticism without reductionism" is meant to be adequately responsive to. This is, at least in part, how Williams sees the role of history in shaping the moral and political horizons of those who live in modern liberal societies.

What sorts of concepts, especially political concepts, does Williams believe are most in the manner he describes? Put simply, Williams' primary interest in his latter work lies with defending the system of liberal democratic and Enlightenment values that he believes are in urgent danger. While previous commentators have noted the degree to which Williams' political theory offers a realist defense of liberal democracy, few have noted the centrality of Williams' political project throughout his later work. Indeed, this commitment to defending liberal democratic values is inaugurated in the

postscript to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.* That postscript offers the clearest glimpse into one of the foundational pillars of Williams' late career philosophy, and its necessarily political and social character. As previously discussed, the book is a ferocious criticism of all kinds of systematic moral theory. The ostensive purpose of the book's postscript is to ask what the future of philosophy ought to be. If philosophers accept Williams' withering criticisms of the ambition to build systematic theory, the postscript asks, what should they do instead? Williams connects this question of philosophy's future to another which he sees as a necessarily related: If we reject "abstract ethical theory" with its claim to universality, must we also reject the Enlightenment and its characteristic political ideals? This might seem an unnecessary association at first glance. However, Williams believes that they are deeply interlinked, and that the philosophy of the future must necessarily be concerned with the intellectual viability of the Enlightenment. For Williams, the Enlightenment and the schools of moral philosophy most typically associated with it remain in constant tension with one another, for the reasons just discussed. On the one hand, the Enlightenment challenges traditional claims to authority, especially those grounded in religion or tradition, through the "spirit of suspicion" that it promotes. The process of doing away with the old order, the *ancien regime,* was historically connected with the promotion of certain political values which Williams sees as indispensable features of any modern political or social system worth living in. In the postscript he offers that these values - "a respect for freedom and social justice and a critique of oppressive and deceitful institutions" - face a new kind of threat. Williams argues that the Kantian "community of reason," is in some ways more "disconnected from social and political reality. . . than the religion it replaced," and something modern liberal citizens cannot wholeheartedly endorse in 1999 or 2022. Williams thinks that we have reason to reject a Christian moral order, but he also thinks, as the arguments of *Ethics* make clear, that we cannot accept the picture offered by systematic ethical

thought.[21] In the absence of both, there is space for either radical critics in the style of Nietzsche or conservatives writing in a Hegelian or Aristotelian vein to argue that the Enlightenment, and its characteristic values must be rejected as either a false deviation from some truer or a more basically human form of social order. Williams contends that "the resources of most modern philosophy are not well adjusted to the modern world" precisely because these kinds of moral theories do not offer a truthful defense of these Enlightenment values, one that those of us alive today could reasonably accept.

The viability of liberal democratic self-government, and the Enlightenment values of freedom, social justice, and an ideal of public transparency, are topics that Williams also discusses in a variety of his published scholarship and interviews after the postscript. In some of his final works he argues that these values, and the project of democratic self-government, face a crisis of confidence, a concept which has a lineage in Williams' work which I explore below. This crisis has come about in part because, absent some kind of affirmative defense, Williams foresees a range of new threats facing these values. In his final published interview, in response to a question about the

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[21] Williams' views on the topic of religion deserve a degree of attention that is impossible within the scope of this dissertation. Williams was an atheist, though he was interested in religion as an anthropological phenomenon. For example, he chides the late J.L. Mackie for spending *The Miracle of Theism* poking holes in all manner of philosophic argument for the existence of god. For Williams, the findings of Darwin and modern science made Mackie's enterprise fairly uninteresting. "It is only if God exists," Williams writes, "that the most interesting arguments about him are those about his existence" (B. Williams 2014e, 189). For the same reasons, for example, that we can no longer have confidence in other atrophied social practices or the kinds of optimistic moral theory he rejected, Williams saw religion as simply incompatible with our modern circumstances, and frankly beneath consideration as a possible explanation of our existence or foundation for the social world we live in. This is one of the defining features of his otherwise generous reviews of the work of Charles Taylor and Alasdair Macintyre; he simply has no patience for the idea that a moral order grounded on belief in a Christian god was any sort of a realistic alternative in our modern circumstances. By contrast, Williams thought that, understood as an entirely human phenomena, religion offered a revealing portrait of the philosophic and social needs of human beings. He writes, for example: "For those who do not believe in a religious ethics, there is some evasion in continuing to argue about its structure: it distracts attention from the significant question of what such outlooks tell us about humanity. Nietzsche's saying, God is dead, can be taken to mean that we should now treat God as a dead person: we should allocate his legacies and try to write an honest biography of him" (B. Williams 1985a, 33).

relationship between "mistrust" and philosophy, he offers an answer that is emblematic of much else he has said on the topic and worth parsing out in some detail. Williams says:

> Modern entertainment, modern communication, and modern saturation with 'information' may make effective criticism impossible. Just as the tabloid newspapers get obsessed with the day's scandal and the Internet becomes dominated with the same kind of 'news,' it is possible that our self-examination and questioning become merely superficial phenomena, and that there are a lot of unquestioned assumptions about how life is being led that are really quite unsatisfactory. If expressed, I don't think people would really believe in them, but they have no option but to go along with them. . . if one means *effective* criticism and self-examination, there is a very big question mark over it. Of course, a lot of what one has in mind when one thinks about social critics—I mean both conservative social critics on the one hand and defenders of liberalism on the other—is a very intense and serious form of criticism which was the product of modernity, when the thinker was still protected by the institutions of an earlier time. Now that these institutions have devolved into one gigantic market, it is very unclear whether anyone will have thoughts of this highly directed kind at all. So the idea of a space in which philosophy and related kinds of critical and questioning activity can go on may itself be under threat (Voorhoeve 2009, 209).

Williams emphasizes, here and elsewhere, the deep-seated tension between the primary means of disseminating political information in contemporary liberal societies and the sorts of "critical and questioning activity" that are necessary to sustain it. Williams again foregrounds the historical arbitrariness of the system: The sort of self-reflective criticism that Williams saw as the defining feature of the Enlightenment was only made possible by institutions that pre-dated it. Williams argues that the growing proliferation of superficial criticism—and the Gresham-esque way in which it displaces genuine self-examination—have a number of sources. First, as he alludes to in this excerpt, the modern media ecosystem is driven almost entirely by market imperatives which seriously compromise its ability to reliably transmit factual information about politics in a way that is necessary for the maintenance of a democratic political order. As he was to write elsewhere, "liberal historiography" occasionally overstates the virtues of the market system because it "tends to treat the history of science as a triumph of the market over restrictive practices" (B. Williams 1996e, 612). However, this is incorrect because, in Williams' eyes, "free scientific inquiry is itself a clear example

of a managed market, and it must be, since it involves such things as an increasingly high entry fee in terms of training and, necessarily, a powerful filter against cranks" (Ibid).[22] However, judged against the standards of what modern democratic societies need from their media-systems, whether it is protecting against tyrannical abuses or fostering an informed citizenry, an marketplace does quite poorly. At least in part because it allows "messages to compete for attention and cancel each other out," but also because it allows "messages" to be "picked out for reasons that need not have much to do with truth," and offers no "structured context for understanding messages" (B. Williams 1996e, 211). This is a particularly acute problem for the Internet which Williams criticizes in eerily prescient terms. In a passage from *Truth and Truthfulness* he writes:

> "[P]ost modern technology may have returned us dialectically to a transmuted version of the pre-modern world, and the chances of acquiring true beliefs [through the Internet], except for those who already have knowledge to guide them, will be much like those in the Middle Ages. At the same time, the global nature of these conversations makes the situation worse than in a village, where at least you might encounter and perhaps be forced to listen to some people who had different opinions and obsessions. As critics concerned for the future of democratic discussion have pointed out, the Internet makes it easy for large numbers of previously isolated extremists to find each other and talk only among themselves" (B. Williams 2002a, 216).

Notice that the problem is not simply that the Internet's particular structure undermines the aspiration of an ordinary user to identify and acquire true beliefs about matters of fact. The more significant problem with the Internet is that the medium allows its users to avoid democratic deliberation and cross-cutting dialogue of the sort that might prompt self-reflection. This problem, and the form of self-deception that it foments among the "previously isolated extremists," has its roots in the broader failings of the market system. Williams writes that the system as a whole is

[22] See also Williams 2002, 217: "Critics of the marketplace approach to the First Amendment doctrine have pointed out that in institutions that are expressly dedicated to finding out the truth, such as universities, research institutes, and courts of law, speech is not at all unregulated. People cannot come in from outside, speak when they feel like it, make endless, irrelevant or insulting interventions, and so on; they cannot invoke a right to do so, and no-one thinks that things would go better in the direction of truth if they could."

responsible for promoting a politics of myth and reactionary superstition. This is partly because the marketplace model is "better designed for," portraying politics as a kind of entertainment, a process which further undermines the conditions necessary to sustain liberal democracy. Williams worries that in the contemporary news-media "political leaders and aspirants" are portrayed in a way that:

> [C]reates to a remarkable degree an impression that they are in fact characters in a soap opera being played by people of the same name. They are called by their first name or have the same kind of jokey nicknames. . . the same kind of broadly sketched personalities, the same dispositions to triumphs and humiliations which are schematically linked to the doings of other characters. . . It would not be right to say that when one takes the view of these people that is offered in the media one does not believe in them. One believes in them as one believes in characters in a soap: one accepts the invitation to half-believe in them" (B. Williams 1996e, 213).

Williams sees this phenomenon as distinctively older than television or soap-opera, indeed the tendency to treat figures in this way "is as old as storytelling." Indeed, this kind of embellishment, and the half-belief it engenders, is merely one modern form of a much older practice, that of creating myths. In Williams' estimation myth has long shared a certain important relationship with reality by depicting events and individuals that is neither an example of "positivist historiography" nor "merely fictional."

In the modern world, however, Williams saw this mythologizing of the political as one of the sources of widespread self-deception, in his words as a form of "collective self-deception." Accepting the "invitation to believe" in the popular portrayal of politics leads us to collectively enter a world in which "politicians, the media, and the audience conspire to pretend that important realities are being seriously considered, that the actual world is being responsibly addressed." This conspiracy, "comes closer [than conventional myth] to self-deception, the great enemy of truthfulness, because the wish that is expressed in these relations in subverting a real truth, that very little of the world under consideration, our present world, is in fact being responsibly addressed." The problem with these kinds of widespread delusions is that, as Williams writes, they create "a

deceptive social hologram" in which willing believers and deceivers project upon one another their desires in a way that undermines the kind of Enlightenment self-reflection needed to maintain a liberal system of government. However, the problem goes deeper than this. The system, as we have seen, also opens up venues for the most committed enemies of liberalism—reactionary, populist, or anti-democratic movements—to flourish in. In Williams' telling the "need to interpret the past reasserts itself" in all liberal democratic societies. The "negative legacy of the Enlightenment," which "soaks in suspicion" all historical narratives even those that defend the values of liberalism, along with the particular features of the modern media ecosystem, make more insular and parochial narratives, of the sort that can be easily exploited for darker anti-liberal ends, far more appealing. In particular, Williams foresees the possibility of such reactionary forces seeking to impose their imagined history of a society in which traditional practices and prejudices are left unchallenged and liberal pluralism is abandoned altogether. It is the particular irony of liberalism that it ostensibly protects the rights of such groups to undermine it, such as the "reactionary historian" who "with much force and truth shows liberal society in its most empty and self-destructive aspects," or who wish to replace its Enlightenment ideal of self and social reflection with a politics of myth and superstition (B. Williams 2002a, 266).

These reactionary impulses were, additionally, strengthened by the historical conditions described above. Williams' final book attempts to provide a "vindicatory genealogy" of the concept of truth, and to defend the possibility of articulating a reasonably truthful historical defense of liberalism itself. The problem is, as Williams makes clear, that we are collectively ambivalent about the values of public truthfulness or liberalism, and we are predisposed to a kind of hyper-active scepticism: We are so determined to avoid being deceived and so pervasively suspicious that we think of the old historical narratives of our societies as the byproducts of ideology and see liberal democracy as just another venue for coercion and dominance. We are aware of a wide range of

"very compelling true accounts of the world that could lead anyone to despair who does not hate humanity," accounts which could, paradoxically, generate a certain degree of pressure to abandon truthfulness altogether (B. Williams 2002a, 268). Williams is explicit throughout his different discussions of this kind of anti-truthful backsliding that it is practically impossible to consciously abandon truthfulness at a social level, that a society cannot self-consciously decide to give up on self-conscious reflection. However, in his later work, and especially in *Truth and Truthfulness* he explicitly advances the idea that "people will make sense of the world in terms that help them to survive in it," and that the question in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and in the wake of the threats we have encountered above the primary question has become "how truthful those terms can be" (Ibid). Indeed, while he describes the Enlightenment as a kind of "irreversible" development in the history of the western-world he is also quick to note that there are "other and brutal ways" in which it might be undone.

Williams' own prognosis for the future of liberalism and this broader array of Enlightenment values is perhaps more hopeful than one might guess. He offers, in *Truth and Truthfulness* most notably, a hopeful account of the future of liberalism and a similar degree of optimism that truthful history can help to extrapolate the advantages of a liberal order and the consequences of allowing a politics of myth to supplant it, and do so in a way that offers its readers hope for the future of the system as a whole. Williams quickly points out that the "need for an interpretation of the past to be hopeful offers no publication funds to Pollyanna" though (Ibid). There can be no teleological history of liberalism's success in part because "there can be no teleological history of anything." Thus, friends of liberalism or of the Enlightenment must reckon with its utterly contingent and precarious nature (Ibid). There is no certainty that liberal democracy, saddled as it is with the historical baggage of its past injustices and its complicity in the promotion of human suffering, will retain the confidence of those who live under it; indeed, as Williams makes clear, there is nothing to

stop people from disavowing the various legacies of the Enlightenment given the prevailing conditions of modernity.

In an often-overlooked essay, Williams explores these tensions by discussing Nietzsche's account of truth and its relationship to "the old metaphysical picture of the world" that had been largely destabilized by the advent of the Enlightenment. Nietzsche, as Williams observes, was scrupulously committed to tearing down "large scale interpretations of the world and value systems that go with them," namely "historical narrations which help us to make sense of those values—accounts of how human beings came to be where they are now: an account for instance of the Enlightenment, moral progress, the rise of modern ideas of freedom" (B. Williams 2005l, 328). These stories carry in them the demand for closure "embodied in the two ideas that there is one set of true values to which we are, with luck, moving closer, and that there is one correct narrative of how we came to be where we are" (Ibid). Nietzsche wants to simultaneously hold that all these narratives are false but recognizes that "reflection itself and the self-consciousness of modernity can weaken or destroy the power to live confidently. In this respect, as he also knew, he is in a battle with his own philosophy" (Ibid, 329). Late in the essay, Williams notes that there is at least one such historical narrative that Nietzsche is obliged to accept: The "negative narrative of the Enlightenment" or the narrative of "God's death." Williams, in turn, asks whether or not those of us alive today must also accept this narrative, namely whether we ought to accept the belief that the Enlightenment, and the aspiration to live without lies or large-scale metaphysical narratives, marks an improvement over what preceded it. Williams holds that it should be seen in these terms, that it ought to be one of the only grand historical narratives we accept partly because of what it would mean for our politics were we to give it up. As he writes: "Some of us would be more disposed than Nietzsche was to say that, unless we face the world truthfully, any hope for a better politics will be doomed," and continues by contending that "we might think, too, that this understanding that the

old metaphysical picture of the world was a fiction is one thing, at least, that has been achieved by all this suffering, and it would be pitiful if it were just thrown away" (B. Williams 2005l, 330). However, as we might expect given his characterization of the circumstances of modernity, Williams does not think that it is inevitable that people will accept this characterization of our historical experience or hold on to a belief in public truthfulness. In a slightly ambivalent concluding note, he remarks: "But Nietzsche will certainly remind us that if it needs to be thrown away, then it will be. Perhaps people will come to forget all this and live under some new conception of the 'one truth', some new illusions. Or perhaps they will not have such a picture, nor know that they do not, nor remember that people once did and then lost it: they will not have any need to believe in any meaning to life at all" (Ibid). If the seductive appeal of a world without reflection proves too great for a society, in other words, the inherited institutions and social order made possible by a belief in the value of truthfulness can simply be disposed of. This will be true, Williams argues here, no matter what the cost of achieving them in the first place was. It does not matter how pitiful it might seem to have all that historical suffering rendered in vain.

This discussion of Nietzsche nicely encapsulates Williams' sense of the crisis facing contemporary liberal and Enlightenment values: it is primarily a crisis of confidence. For Williams, the central preoccupation of his philosophy after *ELP* was, in one way or another, to articulate defenses of the values he thought were in danger of being discarded when their more metaphysically ambitious foundations in ethical theory fell apart. In particular, his efforts were mainly along the abovementioned lines: He tries to defend *some* version of these values without attempting to salvage their most abstract or philosophically elaborate form. However, while I have highlighted some of the central commitments of scepticism without reductionism, and the historical and contemporary features that inform Williams' philosophical and political project in the broadest brushstrokes, I have not addressed the more central question of how one philosophizes in this way, how one might

practice this form of philosophy as a form of political theory. What style of argument does Williams believe might be equal to the task of defending liberal Enlightenment values? And what does Williams see as the hallmarks of effective philosophy, and how might these be connected to a broader body of social and political inquiry and critique? To answer these questions, I need to range widely into Williams' collected work, drawing on his famous account of "confidence" and the relationship between truth and ethical values, his different late career articles and lectures on his hopes for the future of philosophy, and also a range of less widely discussed articles on the possibility of developing a "radical," and "left-Wittgensteinian" form of political and social critique. These different components provide the foundations for the reimagining of Williams' political theory that I conduct throughout the rest of this dissertation.

III – "Scepticism without reductionism" Revisited: Confidence and Embedded Critique, the Further Features of a Reimagined Approach to Williams' Political Thought

As discussed above, Williams is sceptical about the enterprise of academic philosophy. He is sceptical, for example, of the idea that philosophy is uniquely well-situated to help people make sense of their values. As he writes in a discussion of the objectivity of ethical values across cultures, "to think about these questions is to also think about a lot more than philosophy. It is to try to think seriously about a decent life in the modern world, and it is a platitude to say that it needs more than philosophy to do that" (B. Williams 1995e). In a similar vein, he often describes an education in philosophy as roughly equivalent with other subjects in what it provides: it might help students to think clearly and write analytically, but he did not believe that philosophy professors could pretend that this distinguishes it from other subjects in the humanities and social sciences. Williams was quick to insist that, as we have seen in his discussion of history, philosophy needed to embrace other disciplines to make sense of questions that had historically been seen as part of its exclusive purview.

As he writes in another essay about the discipline, "If we believe that philosophy might play an important part in making people think about what they are doing, then philosophy should acknowledge its connections with every other way of understanding ourselves, and if it insists on not doing so, it may seem to the student in every sense quite peculiar (B. Williams 2006c, 198). However, Williams is also quick to dissociate himself from those he thinks seek to undermine the special virtues of philosophy. For example, he rejects Roger Scruton's criticism that philosophy has become too technical and analytic and should, instead, "say something useful to the ordinary person"(B. Williams 2014g, 365). He also routinely scoffs at Wittgensteinian or Hegelian critics of philosophy who insist that "unhealthy philosophy" interferes with the "healthy" practice of ordinary life, and who insist upon an "inarticulate conservatism of the folkways" as an antidote to philosophical meddling (B. Williams 2014f, 315). To return to his efforts to defend the values of the Enlightenment, it seems clear that traditional philosophical argument, unalloyed by the perspective offered by other disciplines but also by some sense of what is relevant to a particular society or group of people, will not be sufficient. Indeed, in this section I will begin by laying out Williams' vision for what he hoped the future of philosophy might resemble, while also highlighting the explicit political relevance of this discussion, and explaining how these considerations are grounded in his broader discussion of truth in ethics, and why on Williams' terms, effective philosophical critique must appropriately balance considerations of urgency, relevance, and fit in order to achieve its ends.

Williams' most famous remark about the deficiencies of philosophy as a discipline came on the opening page of his first monograph. Williams begins *Morality* by claiming that "Writing about moral philosophy should be a hazardous business. . . for two special reasons. The first is that one is likely to reveal the limitations and inadequacies of one's own perception. . . The second is that one could run the risk, if one were taken seriously, of misleading people about matters of importance"

(B. Williams 1972a, ix). Williams expands the sceptical implication of the apposite in the last sentence in what follows, writing, "While few writers on the subject have avoided the first hazard, very many have avoided the second, either by making it impossible to take them seriously, or by refusing to write about anything of importance, or both" (Ibid). This sense that modern moral philosophers were engaged in too insular and self-contained an academic enterprise to be taken entirely seriously, and rarely deigned to consider a topic of genuine urgency to most readers, never left Williams and indeed his final discussions of the topic of philosophy's future find him continually insisting it take a different path. In these later works his discontent about "bad" philosophy often hinges on the idea that prevailing disciplinary trends threaten to make philosophy a particularly "peculiar" subject. There is not, however, one single threat. Williams laments, for example, the allure of "scientism" in philosophy.[23] The first way that scientism can threaten philosophy is by undermining the non-reductive character of philosophy inquiry. Williams, for example, laments the rise of a kind of popular "email-philosophy" which is a "familiar self-conscious and busily professional activity" (B. Williams 2006f). This style of scientism fashions the language of philosophy and the natural sciences together to offer popular and reductive treatments of difficult questions. Williams railed against this sort of self-satisfied form of academic practice and saw it as a growing threat to meaningful inquiry, saying in an interview: "In philosophy the thing that irritates me is smugness, particularly scientistic smugness. What makes me really angry these days are certain kinds of reductive scienticism that knock all the philosophical difficulties out." He continues by

[23] While Williams finds scientism to be a pernicious threat to the internal structure of philosophy and, as we will see, he is an ardent defender of the humanities, he is not a sceptic of science. Nor does he think, as he makes clear, that the best way to defend the need for a philosophy free of scienticism is to deploy the resources of philosophy to the end of discrediting the achievements of the natural sciences, so that they become nothing more than just one kind of local and parochial sort of discourse. In one representative passage he remarks that he thinks it is misguided to pretend that "natural science constitutes just another part of the human conversation, so that, leaving aside the small difference that the sciences deliver refrigerators, weapons, medicines and so on, they are in the same boat as the humanities are" (B. Williams 2006c, 188).

identifying Steven Pinker as a characteristic example of this style of thinker, explaining that, "I heard [Pinker] talk recently. He's a smooth performer, very clever, but utterly glib. He just runs roughshod over the real philosophical problems" (Jeffries 2002). Given Williams' emphasis on avoiding reductionism in his work, and his efforts to understand concepts and practices in their proper historical context, it is unsurprising that Williams would reject all slapdash efforts to make sense of complex human phenomena in the language of TED-Talks.[24] It is not only among charlatans and intellectual con-men that scienticism presents a threat, however.

In addition, a different sort of scienticism threatens to undermine the work of earnest and well-intentioned philosophers. Namely the belief that philosophy is an academic discipline equivalent to the natural sciences creates problems of "style and procedure." Whereas scientists do not need to be appropriately connected to the history of their discipline in order to successfully pursue the subject, Williams naturally thinks that it is a mistake for philosophers to accept "the parallel conclusion" of a "senior figure" in a famous American philosophy department who put up a sign reading "JUST SAY NO TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY" (B. Williams 2006f, 204). Likewise, while the structure of the natural sciences means that "there are perfectly well established methods of getting local results, and even if the results are not very exciting, they are results," the same is not true of philosophy (Ibid). In particular, the problem is that small and narrow contributions to philosophy, especially those connected with the "professionalization" process of graduate study, writing a dissertation, and navigating a field defined by the mantra "publish-or-perish" leads to the proliferation of "quite a lot of philosophical work that is unrewarding by any standard: unhelpful, boring, sterile" (Ibid). The demands of professionalization within philosophy, he writes elsewhere, undermine both the quality and imaginativeness of philosophical work as a

[24] For a Williams-inspired critique of similarly reductive popular philosophizing about technology see (Morozov 2013).

whole. This is an especially dire problem because, in Williams' words, "unless [philosophy] is moderately good, it's probably no use to anybody" (Davies 1996).

As we have seen above, Williams also rejects philosophy which is merely "clever," and strenuously rejects the impulse to create anything like a systematic theory of ethics. What form is left for philosophy to take, then? Williams' answer emerges from a number of different reflections on the topic. First, and most importantly, Williams claims that philosophy should be imaginative. This is not simply a weightless adjective to Williams; in requiring philosophy to be imaginative he is not committing the mistake he once attributed to Robert Nozick of "finding some happier way of saying the same thing" (B. Williams 1982). Instead, imaginativeness is a characteristic with actual philosophical substance. First of all, imaginativeness is a matter of style. Williams, for example, argues that the contributions made to the discipline of philosophy by "Plato, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, indeed John Stuart Mill," are indistinguishable from "the imaginative and expressive powers of their work" (B. Williams 2006f). By contrast, the "colourlessness, the lack of history, the technicality" of Aristotle's work suggest that for all of his influence, the picture of Athenian society he created were "fictional" and evasive[25] (Ibid). Moral and political philosophers, Williams writes, need to "give us a picture of life and society and the individual, and to give it in a way that integrates

[25] It is puzzling at first glance that Williams, given his philosophic sympathies, would celebrate Plato and repeatedly decry Aristotle's influence on philosophy. While Williams' earlier work is often interpreted as having distinctively Aristotelian sympathies (see (Korsgaard 1996; Nussbaum 1995a), and in at least one article he defends the Aristotelian notion of "human being" as a superior category in ethical philosophy to the concept of "personhood," (B. Williams 2005f), Williams himself was quick to disclaim this influence. While ready to admit that Aristotle was the author of one of the "half dozen" works of moral philosophy actually worth reading (B. Williams 1994a), Williams denounced Aristotle's attempts to portray his parochial and conservative interpretation of life in Athens as a universal human ideal. Williams, in an interview discussed above, described the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "an astonishing piece of cultural wish-fulfillment," because "that absolutely cannot have been what Athens in the fourth century BC was all about." Williams continues to say: "If you consider the Athens of which Plato gave a far more honest, though also jaundiced, picture and you consider that it was, after all, on its way to the collapse of democracy, then the idea that all these people were swimming around in this state of huge self-satisfaction and in harmony with the universe, the policy, and their own desires is completely ridiculous! Aristotle was a provincial who became exceedingly impressed by a conservative view of a certain sort" (Voorhoeve 2009, 201).

it with what he or she cares about" (Ibid). This means that, unless these authors consider how to "express these concerns adequately," they will likely have "failed to carry reflection far enough." Philosophy about matters of ethical or political consequence, thus, "should sound right," which, far from being an arbitrary demand "imposed by those with a taste for literature, or history, or for excitement," is a requirement that follows from philosophy's "ideal of reflectiveness, an ideal acknowledged in the subject's most central traditions" (Ibid 206). A concern for the importance of the matters at hand, measured by the way one discusses these subjects, and whether that discussion "rings true" or not, is a central component of imaginativeness (B. Williams 2014g). Here Williams is insisting on a point he returned to repeatedly: While philosophy should not be reduced to just another genre of imaginative literature, it ought to embrace the resources offered by literature for compelling "imaginative association," and its practitioners should be less afraid of attracting "the kinds of criticism applicable to imaginative literature" (B. Williams 2006f, 212). It needs to bring certain ideas into imaginative relation in a way that elicits a response from its audience that is as much emotional as it is rational. Something is imaginative if it taps into a deeper sense of urgency, of feeling, and if it resonates with the particular problems or matters that are urgent for the reader.

Genuine or worthwhile philosophy should, on Williams' terms, emerge as part of a process of "shared social reflection" (B. Williams 2006f) prompted by "the failure to understand ourselves," (B. Williams 2002b). Thus, the issues it considers must be "urgent" for the society in which the philosopher lives. Williams takes great pains to emphasize that philosophy should not "instantly address the urgent and the deeper," as does "much cultural criticism and supposed philosophy which sounds, superficially, very urgent" (B. Williams 2014g, 369) Some such treatments end up reductively treating urgent topics and end up "only too heart-breakingly involved in the end of humankind or the horrors of the 20th century" (Ibid). Unlike these shallow efforts, philosophy must insist upon a kind of truthfulness, which often requires an interest in "the less obvious roots and

consequences of our concerns" (Ibid). Philosophy then requires a truthful understanding on "what is alive and what is dying in our time," which is often a matter of "real history, rather than a mythical story of severance" (B. Williams 2006f, 211). Thus, as we might expect, Williams' ideal philosophy must be deeply grounded in the specific histories of the concepts and values it contends with, and have a sense of their particular associations in the contemporary world. Taken seriously, Williams suggests that this requirement would require philosophers to "remember that work might be unimaginative not because it is badly argued but because it is arguing with the wrong people; not because it has missed an argument, but because it misses the historical and psychological point; not because it fails to be clever, but because it is stupid" (Ibid 212). All this is to say that effective ethical but more importantly political philosophy must have a keen sense of its intended audience but also its adversaries, it must be particularly connected to the concerns of its audience but in a way that demonstrates a truthful understanding of their needs and discontents. It must be focused on being imaginative while also, as Williams was to write, "getting it right." Such a philosophy must be simultaneously concerned with "imaginative association" and the "rhetoric of plain statement." It must be linked to other adjacent disciplines in the humanities and social sciences while also "[remaining] true to the practice of the subject" (Ibid, 212).

This conception of philosophy will likely seem very historically and socially specific, as it straightforwardly assumes that the author writes for an audience with a particular range of concepts, values, and concerns for philosophy to address. Indeed, Williams argues that ethical and political philosophy must begin from within what Wittgenstein describes as "forms of life," specific communities or entire societies defined by a framework of shared practices and values. As Williams was quick to emphasize, and as we will see momentarily, it was only in discussing a "'we' that is relevant to a real community, a set of people whose ethical language and practices have a genuine social identity," that philosophical critique can hope to make help make any kind of positive

difference (B. Williams 2014f). As we have seen above, Williams argues that philosophy must be engaged with history in order to actually reckon adequately with any particular value or social practice it might want to better understand. This will ultimately require, Williams argues, a keen appreciation of a particular culture, and a sense of the intricacies of the forms of life that define it. However, this point goes a bit deeper in Williams' philosophy and to elaborate upon it requires a momentary shift to discuss his broader discussions of truth in ethics, which I will turn to now, and his famous discussion of confidence, which I will continue with afterwards.

For Williams, one of the defining features of the contemporary world is the existence of a plurality of incompatible systems of value and social practices, both at present and throughout history. These different forms of social organization and ethical values are part of what contribute to the crisis of liberalism, in Williams' view, because the unceasing reflectiveness of liberal society poses a problem for claims to the universalism of liberal values. Williams, for example, discusses the "queasy liberal" who recognizes that people in past societies were not liberals, and yet feels it is inappropriate or silly to believe that those people must have therefore been "bad, stupid, or something on those lines," and thus concludes that "liberalism cannot be correct" (B. Williams 2005e, 67). Instead, Williams believes that the queasy liberal should abandon his universalist presumption and accept that liberalism does not need to be rejected simply because it is not universally accepted. The problem posed by these relativistic dilemmas can be resolved, Williams believes, by accepting a theory of "relativism of distance." According to Williams, the challenges posed by relativism should not necessarily lead the queasy liberal's rejection of liberalism or the posture of Rorty's liberal ironist who, because they cannot reflectively endorse liberalism, must "stare at [their] commitments in ironical amazement" (B. Williams 2005k). Instead, if we are going to accommodate the fact of relativism "we must not simply draw a line between ourselves and others, but recognize that others are at varying distances from us" (B. Williams 1985a, 160). It is open for

the liberal, according to Williams, to see the relationship, and ultimately the depth of incompatibility, between their own society and other ways of life in terms of degree. Some, historically or culturally different societies are not "real" alternatives for modern liberal societies, especially if they would involve totally unwinding the political and social changes brought about by the Enlightenment, for example. By conceptualizing the problem in this way Williams argues that we can distinguish between "real," and "notional," confrontations between different systems of values, which renders certain social forms, like "the life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai" as options we cannot adopt (Ibid, 161). These outlooks, if we were to reflect upon them, certainly would come into notional conflict with our liberal values, and reflecting upon them might "inspire some thoughts relevant to modern life," but they are too far disconnected from every other feature of contemporary social life to be "real" options. Williams is thus suspicious about the politics of cultural nostalgia and of claims to do away with "modern industrial life" altogether, seeing these as impossible in different ways. He is also suspicious of the impulse to assign particular values a kind of timeless or absolute significance, which also contributes to his emphasis on philosophy working within the culturally particular and historical contingent space provided by Wittgensteinian forms of life.

Philosophical reflection, to help navigate debates about political and social values, must begin from within a particular social and political context rather than attempting to seek a "ultimate basis of ethical understanding." Instead, it operates from within "some shared social space," where we presume that the disputants share some kind of common historical and social materials which make it possible to adjudicate their disagreement (B. Williams 1995e, 147). Philosophy must operate within this kind of shared space in part because, as he was to turn to repeatedly, there are plenty of reductive arguments that hold the contrary and claim that there is something like a human cultural ideal, or something like a universal set of thick moral values to be identified. He was dismissive of

attempts by evolutionary theorists, for example, to claim that evolution by natural selection selected for certain cultural attributes, for example, and instead insisted that the only thing the evolutionary and historical record reflected was a likely human need to live under a culture. (B. Williams 1995a, 1995b) He contended that virtue ethicists in the style of Aristotle, who claim that there is a universal cultural ideal were, absent momentous discoveries in socio-biology and cultural anthropology, "drawing on a bank that is bankrupt." In other words, there was no empirical evidence that any set of cultural values, virtues, or thick ethical concepts were intrinsically or inherently better than any others. There is no hope of finding a permanent external justification for a particular set of values and to "suppose that the values of truthfulness, reasonableness, and other such things that we prize or suppose ourselves to prize, are simply revealed to us or given to us by our nature," for Williams, is "not only a philosophical superstition, but a kind of weakness." "If that's the best we can say for them," Williams writes, "we do not deserve them" (B. Williams 1995e, 148). The realization that there are entirely alien or even realistic alternatives to our "thick" ethical concepts or our ways of life does not need to undermine them. As Williams writes we do "not need to be hesitant or double-minded in using our own [concepts]; if we are not it just means that we can sustain them with a certain measure of confidence" (B. Williams 1995d, 208).

Confidence is an important concept for Williams, as it is the attribute that distinguishes ethical beliefs which have attained the status of ethical knowledge from those beliefs which we might come to reject through reflection. In other words, it is paramount to understanding when, for example, people within a particular social formation abandon certain practices or values or modify them in the face of changing circumstances. This point will be critical for what comes later in this chapter. Williams does not think that ethical and political values, or our "thick concepts," are rejected in the same way that, for example, scientific principles are rejected. Instead, we accept or reject pieces of ethical knowledge according to the degree to which it fits with our broader form of

life. Philosophy by itself, Williams is quick to insist, cannot bring confidence about, since it is ultimately a "social and psychological question what kinds of institutions, upbringing, and public discourse help to foster it" (B. Williams 1985a, 170). As Williams writes,

> This does not mean [confidence] has nothing to do with rational argument. Social states can be affected, one way or another, by rational argument. Moreover, if we try to generate confidence without rational argument or by suppressing it, we are quite likely to fail, but, besides that, we shall be sacrificing other goods. Confidence is merely one good among others: it has a price, and the price should not be set too high. . . One question we have to answer is how people, or enough people, can come to possess a practical confidence that, particularly granted the need for reflection and its pervasive presence, will come from strength and not from the weakness of self-deception and dogmatism (Ibid 170-171).

The example Williams frequently returns to is that of "chastity."[26] In the Victorian era, as Williams repeatedly notes, ideas of chastity were considering a critical component of female sexuality. However, as the material conditions of society change, making it an unwieldy system to adhere to, and as the broader background values that supported chastity as a virtue likewise shift, it loses the power to withstand reflection. The recognition, for example, that chastity in incompatible with equal rights or equal treatment, or the realization that it might be little more than a "device for supporting male power," can destabilize the concepts ability to stand up to any kind of philosophical scrutiny (B. Williams 1999).

This, ultimately, returns us to Williams' account of the crisis of liberalism and its Enlightenment values. According to Williams, in the late 1990's and early 2000's, this system of values faced a crisis of confidence, namely of the kind he describes here. As we saw above, some of this crisis came from changes in how information is diffused and consumed in the modern world, changes that undermined a realistic or truthful view of the world and which likewise inculcated habits of mind that were antithetical to philosophical reflection and the sorts of practices needed to

[26] See (B. Williams 1995f, 1995d, 1999)

sustain democratic self-government. However, elsewhere Williams describes other contributing factors: the rise of a resentful new form of cultural and economic conservatism as a political force, the corresponding explosion of income inequality, and a systematic public underinvestment in the humanities, all of which I examine in this dissertation. For now, though, it is enough to emphasize that Williams thinks that these corrosive forces all chip away at the foundations needed to sustain liberal Enlightenment values. Williams saw British conservatism after the rise of Thatcher as deeply anti-intellectual. In one lecture he describes it a mixture of a "demure" and "anti-theoretical temper" combined with "large reserves of resentment, individual and national" (B. Williams 2005i, 60). In his withering review of Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* he points out that while Thatcherian politics are "deeply involved in ideas," such as a "fixation on the competitive market and contempt for public assistance to the non-competitive," the political movement "lacks imagination" (B. Williams 2014b, 294). The individuals responsible for developing the ideas are "public accountants, publicists, and blinkered theorists of the market, rather than anyone who reflects more imaginatively on anything else" (Ibid). As a practical matter, this hidebound and unreflective free-marketeering had undermined the possibility of adequately confronting questions of social justice. Williams believes that discussions of the obligations between the haves and have nots in society are motivated by the "pressure of social and political circumstances," pressures which he feels were non-existent following the "upturn of the business cycle" at the end of the 1980's. However, as he writes, "the growing inequalities within many developed countries, notably the US itself, demand *some* account of what the relations between the disadvantaged and the rest of us are supposed to be, and neither party at the moment has such an account"[27] (B. Williams 1989, 68). Unless this growing gap is reckoned with, he reasons, society will become starkly unequal the successful will be confined to a condition analogous to living in "a brightly lit and heavily guarded tent, surrounded by wasteland of

[27] Emphasis in the original.

bitterness and disappointment" (B. Williams 1994c). Likewise, humanistic self-reflection, Williams argues, is a necessary feature of maintaining a political and social order free of widespread deceit and coercion. In one such defense, he argues that while it is possible to be "an absolutely outstanding and original scientist but at the same time be an unthinking conservative," while maintaining that an appreciation of history or other "humane studies" make it impossible to view the social and political world in the same unthinking way. (B. Williams 2014r) Williams does not emphasize this contrast to claim that, for example, national funding should be taken away from the study natural sciences and diverted to the humanities. Instead, his point is that the piddling level of support for the humanities makes a form of politics possible that is incompatible with the broader requirements of democratic self-government. The political implications of this are clear for Williams. As he writes: "If it is right that the Humanities as subjects make an essential contribution to the understanding of society and that the understanding of society is essentially connected to ways in which we can reflect on it, question it, and hence try to change it: then questions of who should be taught how much of the Humanities are essentially connected with questions of how open or transparent a society should seek to be" (Ibid, 273). Only a society which wishes to be ruled by an elite who govern in "a relatively unquestioned way," can afford to skimp on instruction in these subjects, and thus for a democratic society it is "vital that the Humanities should be pursued as on-going subjects, [and] that access to them, and some kind of knowledge of them, are things that should be as widely spread as they can be" (Ibid). However, Williams' writings and interviews from the time of his death do not betray any confidence that these additional threats had been meaningfully addressed. Instead, in the closing pages of his final book, he strikes a hopeful note that some further defense of liberalism and Enlightenment values might be articulated or that an adequately imaginative and truthful form of political philosophy might help to avert this continuing crisis of confidence.

Two decades after Williams' death, these contributing factors, far from abating, have become more deeply ingrained in democratic societies, and thus the need for a new and imaginative approach to responding to them has only intensified. The gap between rich and poor within the United States and European societies has grown to the point where the only historical analogies lie in the Gilded Age and the era of the *ancien regime* (Stiglitz 2012; Savage 2021). To be poor, and in particular to be unable to complete a bachelor's degree, in the United States today is to live a life more likely to be riven with pain, emotional distress, and a far higher propensity to die a "death of despair" from overdose, alcohol-induced liver disease, or suicide, threats that the educated and well-to-do are largely exempt from (Case and Deaton 2020). The asymmetry between rich and poor is at least partially responsible for the decline of support for democratic values in the United States (Case 2022) and in European democracies (Cagé and Camiller 2020).[28] Likewise, the past twenty years have seen the rise of a new conservative populism, typified by the rise of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote of 2016 (Norris and Inglehart 2018). In its own way it is the perfect embodiment of everything that Williams detests, resentful, unreflective, and profoundly undemocratic, committed to an untruthful Manichean mythos of elites domineering over ordinary citizens at the same time as it tries to destroy the institutions that make democratic accountability possible. The heroes of this movement, at least in the United States, are yet again figures without ideas, supposedly self-made men who make it clear they do not read let alone deal with ideas in an imaginative way. The academic study of the humanities is mired in a decades long crisis of divestment with both students (Schmidt 2018) and institutional stakeholders (Smith 2019) turning their backs on the subjects. This is to say nothing of the other roots of the crisis mentioned earlier. For example, the Internet's turn towards a model of surveillance (Zuboff 2019) and commodified attention (Tolentino 2019), and away from a model of written communication or reflective scrutiny altogether, seemingly confirms

[28] On evidence of declining support for democratic values see: (Foa and Mounk 2016; Bartels 2020)

Williams' worst suspicions about how the medium might develop.[29] If there is hope to be found in this moment of liberal crisis, then it remains to be seen what form it could possibly take.

IV- The Political Dimensions of "scepticism without reductionism."

Here I propose that my reimagination of Williams' political thought can offer a model for political theorizing in the style of Williams. This model transcends conventional assumptions about Williams' political thought. As I argued earlier, the conventional understanding of Williams' work is that it offers a kind simple affirmation of the liberal status-quo (Geuss 2014; Finlayson 2017), or that it is intellectually vacuous at best and pernicious at worst (Edvayne 2019). Even admirers of Williams' work have turned his posthumous realist essays into something that Williams would have despised: A kind of academic industry in which specific arguments of Williams' are analyzed piece-meal, so that analysts expose his "critical theory test" (Paul Sagar 2018) or his contrast between politics and "successful domination" (Sleat 2013b) to scrutiny, in a way that reflect the sort of academic incrementalism he found so distasteful. Though this one version of his defense of liberalism is familiar enough to political theorists, many have overlooked his broader discussion of political theorizing in part because they have overlooked some of his own reflections on how philosophy might be profitably deployed to serve what he called "radical" and "critical" ends. No work has sought to situate this concern for defending liberalism into the broader constellation of his work in moral philosophy, nor has any study attempted to identify and articulate a distinctive Williamsian approach to political thought, one that demonstrates the importance of defending certain key Enlightenment values and how it forms the basis of "scepticism without reductionism." However, Williams' work offers the resources to do exactly that, and in fact his essay on the

[29] On the recent drift of social media away from the communication of the written word and towards an "embodied" form of communication prominent in TikTok videos, see (Guinaudeau, Munger, and Votta 2022). For an interpretation of this development that would have been a bit too sanguine for Williams' taste, see, (Munger 2022).

possibility of developing a "left-Wittgensteinian" approach to social philosophy provides a template for applying Williams' "scepticism without reductionism" to productive political ends.[30] It is in examining this particular thread in Williams' work that we can finally integrate "scepticism without reductionism," Williams' discussion of the characteristics of worthwhile philosophy, and see their general relevance to political theorists.

Written during the height of both the battle between Rawls and his communitarian critics, the essay attempts to develop a method of philosophical critique that avoids the perils of both the abstract moral perspective of Kantian "foundationalism" and the Hegelianism of many communitarians. While Rawlsian foundationalism preserves "pluralism, and the ideology of toleration" that makes coexistence with diverse groups in liberal society possible, it also "tends to reduce the conception of the ethical powers of human beings to too thin a basis" (B. Williams 2005b, 32). Rawls' "sense of justice, is too abstracted from other affections, commitments, and projects that make people what they are," Williams argues, and the moral framework for modern liberal states that he proposes—the overlapping consensus— has the potential to leave the members of different groups socially alienated. Likewise, Williams observes that those who espouse more communitarian political commitments, which Williams argues are often centered around a Hegelian understanding of society. These individuals are often left advocating for a more traditional society "with greater ethical density," which will be "culturally more homogenous, [and will contain] some feature of the society's past that is supposedly missing from its disenchanted present"[31] (Ibid, 33). If

[30] In a recent article Queloz and Cueni examine the article in question though, I would argue, they fail to appreciate its broader implications for Williams' moral and political philosophy. See: (Queloz and Cueni 2021)
[31] Of course, Williams admits of differences of degree in the communitarian position, even if his broader attitude towards the term was one of measured disdain. Though he was a critic of "high" or "moralistic" liberalism, Williams resents the fact that he is often lumped into the "communitarian" camp. For Williams, the work of Michael Sandel perfectly embodies the liabilities of the communitarian position for modern liberal states (B. Williams 1993, 216 n. 54), whereas thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor express different reservations about liberalism that likewise me they are miscast as communitarians. In one telling, if slightly exasperated, endnote Williams remarks:

the communitarians see foundationalist Kantians as propagators of some soulless and unreal polity, Williams points out that foundationalists reply that the Hegelian alternative leaves little room for "local practices and traditions to be criticized" philosophically (Ibid).

Williams, as we might expect, finds this a fraught dilemma to navigate. Williams, as we have seen, insists that philosophy ought to work within a system of shared values, and deal with concepts and practices with an identifiable history, which pulls him towards the communitarian position. However, given his liberal values and his desire for philosophy to offer a sceptical view of convention and accepted practice, that is ultimately an unacceptable conclusion. Instead, Williams offers what he calls a "left-Wittgensteinian" alternative. Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in Williams' estimation, has proved popular with conservative communitarians who wish to claim that his critique of the unreality of much abstract philosophy, has been thought to "yield conservative conclusions" (Ibid, 34). Wittgensteinians of this conservative variety, view social practices as part of a larger whole, and hold that "suppression or criticism [of one practice] must involve a distortion of the functioning whole" (Ibid). As he was to emphasize in a similar but earlier essay, in fact, right-Wittgensteinianism can share "with a certain kind of Right-Hegelianism. . . a cultivation of an inarticulate conservatism of the folk-ways" (B. Williams 2014f, 315). Wittgenstein's work, however, can be appropriated for other purposes. In modern societies, in particular, ethical life has "a genuinely historical and local structure, one that is peculiarly self-conscious about its own origins and potentialities" (B. Williams 2005b, 34). If we—as citizens within a specific society—view it in this way, "we will have less temptation to assume that it is a satisfactorily functioning whole; and we

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"If Taylor and MacIntyre will forgive my putting them in mere cartoon sketch, one set of relations between our positions might be perhaps put like this: Taylor and MacIntyre are Catholic, and I am not; Taylor and I are liberals, and MacIntyre is not; MacIntyre and I are pessimists, and Taylor is not (really). A word that seems to me not to help in describing any of these positions is 'communitarian.'" (B. Williams 1995d, 222 n. 19)

shall be more likely to recognize that some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts" (Ibid, 37). In practice this means that, "the resultant picture of ethical thought without foundationalism is made socially and historically realistic. . . it provides the 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." (Ibid) In other words, the self-awareness of modern societies about the historical origins of their values—and their recognition that other forms of political and social life have succeeded—is what enables them to engage in a kind of social criticism that is non-foundationalist yet avoids a quietist retreat from posing uncomfortable questions about one's own customs and tradition. Consistent with his discussion of confidence, Williams holds that social values are sustained on the basis of their ideational fit alongside other accepted values, beliefs, and practices. In other words, it is open to this sort of historically embedded, sceptical, and imaginative philosophy to selectively challenge or attempt to shore up these values by showing how some widely shared practices or values are either consistent with or inconsistent with "perfectly plausible extrapolations of others." Especially when read alongside another late career essay, this left-Wittgensteinian alternative offers a lens for understanding the political dimensions of "scepticism without reductionism."

In a later essay, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline," Williams expands on these themes. While the essay contains much else besides, including one sortie in his many disputes with Hilary Putnam,[32] its central thrust is to outline the importance of history and cultural embeddedness for philosophy as a discipline.[33] In the later sections, Williams emphasizes that the utter contingency of

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[32] This particular skirmish is part of a series of engagements including Williams' review of Putnam's *Realism With a Human Face* (B. Williams 2014k), Putnam's reply in and criticism of Williams' "absolute conception" of the world (Putnam 1996), and concluding with Putnam's eventual reply to the article I discuss here (Putnam 2001).

[33] Moran incisively presents the essay as the key text in understanding Williams' contempt for the style of reductive argument encountered earlier in this chapter. See (Moran 2017).

history, and the lack of any truly vindicatory narrative in history that redeems liberal values, for example, against all competitors, should not dissuade us from being attached to and interested in the status of our particular values. As Williams writes, "Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is and formation is significantly the same" (B. Williams 2006c, 193). Appreciating this fact, Williams continues, would free us from what he calls the scientistic error of searching for "a system of political and ethical ideas which would be best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free from contingent historical perspective" (Ibid, 194). In Williams' account this error conceals the broader truth that there is "no inherent conflict" among three different activities, namely, "the first order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level, and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from" (Ibid). Indeed, Williams sees these activities as continuous and as necessary components of any philosophical outlook that will be adequate to the requirements he places on meaningful philosophy. Williams thinks that if we accept this sense of contingency, and the "politically realistic" model for philosophy he describes here, then we will be able to understand when, for example, our own values are incoherent to us. If as we saw above, our sense of autonomy or freedom are partially incoherent to us because of the "Enlightenment conceptions of the individual" they are based upon, then Williams argues that this culturally particular and historically minded form of social inquiry will help us to recognize this. If the incoherence in our ideas is, as Williams writes, "severe enough," it will, in his words, "present itself to us, who hold the outlook, as a crisis of explanation: we need to have reasons for rearranging and developing our ideas in one way rather than another" (Ibid). In fact, in such moments of crisis, we

need to identify reasons, internal to our outlook, to help "explain ourselves to people who are divided between our present outlook and some contemporary active rival." This may involve trying to ground our defense on considerations or particular values which are so foundational to a particular "us" as to be ethical bedrock. These are the kinds of values which are so ever-present within a particular form of life so as to be, in Williams' phrase, "simply there," or "fixed points." Williams offers an example of the liberal belief that "every human being. . .deserves equal consideration" (Ibid, 195). This belief is "simply there," in the sense that there is "nothing more basic in terms of which to justify it" (Ibid). These "*unhintergehbar"* beliefs or elements are features of our outlook to which, as we saw in our discussion of confidence, a particular "us," would be unable to imagine an alternative; "we" could not envision ourselves holding some future version of our outlook today that did not include this principle of equal consideration. While we might be able to picture some future version of our own perspective—a kind of anti-pluralist democracy, or a darker authoritarian alternative which future citizens of our same society might hold, in which equal consideration was abandoned—we cannot "overcome our own outlook." We can only imagine a world without what is "simply there," for a particular us, in this case equal consideration, Williams argues, as one that "makes no ethical sense to us, except as a scene of retrogression, or desolation, or loss" (Ibid, 197).

Taking these two essays together, the model of philosophically charged social and political critique that Williams proposes is entirely consistent with the major themes of Williams' scepticism without reductionism. It can defend certain key components of "the ethical" by understanding them with the kind of embedded, historically grounded, philosophy that Williams favors. In particular, given the arguments Williams offers throughout his work, it seems clear that the surest way to defend the Enlightenment values of social justice, truthfulness, freedom, and the trappings of democratic self-government is to connect them with ethical beliefs, emotions, or other values that

are foundational to the particular ethical framework of a given society. Additionally, this approach can "give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices and powers," namely the kinds of practices and prejudices likely to undermine the values that Williams esteems, by showing how these things are inconsistent with what is most ethically primary in a particular society or political system. In either direction, whether attempting to shore up the sorts of practices and values compatible with the principles of the Enlightenment or undermining those practices which would undermine them, Williams' approach to philosophy-as-social-critique starts from a perspective internal to a particular Wittgensteinian form of life and involves associating different elements of that particular social unit's ethical fabric in a way that grips the imagination of the philosopher's audience. In doing so, as Williams suggests above, the philosophically inclined critic helps his or her audience to see who they are and causes them to reflect upon what exactly they hope to stand for. I discuss this particular facet of Williams' philosophy, and its relevance for political theory, in a subsequent chapter.

There is much more to say here, but one crucial point that must be made concerns the political dimension of these considerations. Williams, of course, insists that philosophy's intellectual authority has limits to it—rational argument alone does not necessarily carry with it the power to convince the committed anti-Enlightenment conservative, or again the "fanatic Nazi," to change their mind. The role of philosophy must invariably be to carry forward social reflection, prompted by moments of crisis or when we "fail to understand ourselves," among the constituency of individuals who already accept some form of the values in question. In contemporary terms, the Williamsian-critic will not appeal to sympathies of the unrepentant enemy of liberal pluralism or the individual who celebrates the arrival of what has been called our "post-truth" political moment. Instead, he or she will use a logic of extrapolation and inconsistency to show his or her fellow liberals the necessity of, for example, of holding fast to certain key values. Williams himself offers an

account of how this works in practice in an answer he gives in the seminar on his work encountered above. Asked why he celebrates Rawls' model of reflective equilibrium while rejecting the claim that consistently following such a method would necessarily generate an ethical theory in the style of the original *Theory of Justice*, Williams explains:

> What authority [has such a theory] got? And people say, well it's much more elegant, or it's simpler, or with fewer principles or it has a certain rational structure. . . So what? . . . Why are those properties of any interest whatsoever. Of course, if somebody tells me that something I naturally take for granted is actually selfish, or that a group loyalty is a prejudice, then I will listen and we'll talk about that. For instance, if I'm told that. . . certain attitudes are sexist or implicitly racist, then let us talk about that. . . We'll talk about them psychologically, socially, historically and in such terms, and we will probably end up changing our views. That is what reflection is (B. Williams 1999, 246).

What Williams is prescribing, in other words, is a minimalist theory of philosophical persuasion through a kind of deliberation. He aims for a philosophy to persuade by seizing upon widely shared intuitions or values without achieving a higher ideal of justification, necessarily. It begins from a clear sense of the "historical," "social," and "psychological" materials of a particular society and utilizes them in a way that appeals less to rational argument and more to a sense of the imagination. In this example, by appealing to the widely shared belief of equal consideration, of a basic belief in the dignity of all human beings, an interlocutor shows how, in concrete historical, social, and psychological terms, the behaviors in question are inconsistent with what their fellow citizen stands for. This is why, as I show in subsequent chapters, his later work attempts to leverage the ethical emotions of fear and shame to make its audience rethink what they stand for and what it might lead to. In Williams' own words, one goal of effective political thought lies in showing its audience, "what they have got, and how it might go away," and I will examine how Williams repurposes Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear" to serve these ends in the following chapter (B. Williams 2005i). However, Williams also describes deliberation among those with a shared register of values as a mechanism for shaping more incipient sentiments of a particular agent into more

committed beliefs. As he writes, "In practical reasoning as much as elsewhere we can help to sustain each other's sense of reality, both in stopping wishes' becoming beliefs when they should not, and also in helping some wishes rather than others to become desires" (B. Williams 2002a, 198). I consider this more fully in Chapter IV, but for now I mention it to emphasize that here we see the major themes of Williams' underappreciated approach to political thought at work: Within the context of shared social space, the Williamsian social critic can seize upon those most ethically bedrock values, practices, and beliefs to offer both warnings and aspirations to their fellow citizens. It is a matter of bringing about a kind of social-self-realization, recognizing and articulating what a particular "we" truly stands for and is. Here it offers a social analogue to the description Williams offers of the central idea of his philosophy: In holding up a mirror to a society, and showing it what it is and what it might be, scepticism without reductionism attempts to articulate the demands of social and historical necessity.[34]

Williams' work, then, when read in this way yields an entirely novel and distinct approach to political thought beyond what is offered by his explicitly "realist" essays. It can be deployed to challenge the primary threats to Williams' Enlightenment values, threats that, as mentioned, have hardly abated since Williams' death. In fact, it provides an account of how to respond to the critics of democratic self-government today that operates in the space between philosophical reflection and practical political action. To be a political theorist in this style means to leverage materials drawn from a range of different disciplines, from history, literature, and the social sciences, to make sense of the present crisis of liberal values. It requires providing an historically self-aware conception of the differences between the modern world and other historical epochs, for example—while not lapsing into an empty affirmation of contemporary liberalism. The point of the reflection it

[34] I explore this theme more fully in Chapters V and VI.

promotes must be to selectively challenge or affirm the other powers, prejudices, and behaviors likely to either support the values that lie at the heart of the Enlightenment, which might mean challenging some of the practices that happen to be connected with democratic regimes as a matter of fact, as I show in the next chapter Williams thought that untrammeled free-market capitalism, and the institutional arrangements we associate with neo-liberalism were entirely incompatible with the requirements of democratic citizenship. However, demonstrating this to others is a matter of engaging in a sort of argument that involves historical archeology, and an awareness of contemporary political head-winds, as much as philosophical acuity. In the rest of this dissertation, I spell out the different forms that political theory in the style of scepticism without reductionism can take as well as the other insights that Williams offers for political theorizing in an age where the crisis that captivates him is more evident than ever.

Having outlined the unappreciated political dimensions of Williams' work after *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, and reconstructed a distinctively Williamsian approach to both ethical and political philosophy, and shown how it is grounded in the major themes of his work more broadly, I now turn to a particular example of the constructive possibilities of this style of political theory. In particular, I examine how this reimagining of Williams' work can, on the one hand, make better sense of Williams' avowal of Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear, then can critics of Williams who see the liberalism of fear as another example of his mealy-mouthed affirmation of the actual. Instead, I revisit Williams' essay endorsing this conception of liberalism, and his late career political advocacy. I argue that by crosspollinating this earlier work with the main themes of "scepticism without reductionism," reveals the more radical potentialities contained within Williams' version of Shklar's model. Indeed, I will demonstrate how reimagining it along these lines shows how a Williamsian interpretation of the liberalism of fear offers a practical basis for political action to respond to looming threats such as pronounced inequality within contemporary liberal societies and the

problems of climate change that have vexed much contemporary moral and political philosophy. From there I extend this study to outline its further potential as both a novel reconceptualization of Williams' political thought as well as a model for an interdisciplinary form of political theorizing today.

Chapter III - Reimagining Williams' Political Thought: How Conservative are Realism and the Liberalism of Fear?

In this chapter I explore one of the concepts that is widely associated with Bernard Williams' political thought, "the liberalism of fear." This marks a slight departure from the aims of the dissertation to this point. Instead of highlighting entirely new facets of Williams' moral philosophy, facets which have not previously been seen to have relevance to political theorists, I turn to something that has been conventionally understood to be part and parcel of his political thought. While I explore a familiar concept I hope to show how many commentators misunderstood how Williams saw the critical potentialities of the liberalism of fear. I intend to demonstrate that Williams' liberalism of fear, understood as a kind of historically and socially embedded mechanism of critique, actually offers a novel foundation for addressing some entrenched and vexing social and political problems that moral theories have a more difficult time making sense of. In particular, I offer an account of how it might be understood as offering a distinctively political conception of how to address problems of climate change and conceptualize the harms involved in climate inaction.

I begin by first examining Williams and Shklar's discussion of the liberalism of fear, and specifically I emphasize how Williams' usage differentiates from Shklar's. In Williams' hands, the liberalism of fear becomes a more expansive mechanism for identifying harms that are basically incompatible with what he and Shklar call the "*summum malum,*" of widespread fear and social arrangements that engender relationships of power and powerlessness. The widespread prevalence of these social relationships is, for both writers, incompatible with the basic requirements of liberal democratic citizenship. Likely as a result of her own experience as a refugee during the Second World War, Shklar saw the state as the primary, and indeed the most central, instrument of arbitrary

coercion and cruelty of the sort that undermined liberal citizenship.[35] Williams, meanwhile, argues that the liberalism of fear is not merely a bulwark against the encroachment of state power over private freedoms. Instead, he contends, it is best understood as a mode of organizing widespread and culturally embedded emotions to criticize social practices that are basically incompatible with the goal of allowing democratic citizens to live without fear of being dominated by the powerful.[36] Williams' approach offers an entirely political and historical account of the value of liberalism and the basic inconsistency of certain relations of power with liberal democracy as a form of government and society, but Williams also, contra Shklar, emphasizes that this style of defending liberalism as a strategy for advancing new positive claims, for articulating new demands against liberal regimes to extend and protect new rights to its citizens in the face of new modern fears. Shklar and Williams both agree that the liberalism of fear offers an entirely non-utopian justification of liberalism, but Williams goes further in seeing deeper critical potentialities in this approach to justifying liberalism. After I outline these differences, I then apply them to the problem of anthropocentric climate change, with an interest in showing how the entirely political approach offered by Williams' liberalism of fear represents a novel way of responding to one of the great challenges facing contemporary liberal regimes. I do this first by reviewing the phenomenon of anthropocentric climate change and some of its unique features as a political problem before concluding with a

[35] In her Charles Homer Haskins Lecture in 1989, Shklar points out that her interest in political theory emerged from the fact that for her family, as German Jews living first in Russia and then Latvia, "politics dominated our lives," and that they were forced into a situation in which "everyone around us wanted us to be somewhere else at best, or to kill us at worst." Shklar has some typically mordant observations about her and her family's treatment upon arriving in Canada and the fact that their eventual home, Montreal, was "politically held together by an equilibrium of ethnic and religious resentments and distrust" See (J. Shklar 1989b).

[36] There are obvious analogies between this approach to defending liberal democracy and the republican account of liberty as freedom from domination (Pettit 1997), and Ian Shapiro's recent investigation of the primacy of non-domination to democratic politics (Shapiro 2016). Space does not permit a fuller account of the differences between these positions, though Brooks (2011) offers a simple summary of some of the differences between the work of Pettit and Williams' liberalism of fear (Brooks 2011). However, Brooks' discussion suffers from many of the shortcomings of past interpretations of Williams' liberalism of fear described in this chapter.

discussion of how Williams' liberalism of fear marks a salutary difference from these other ways of conceptualizing the problem. Additionally, I argue that examining the problem of climate change through the lens provided by Williams' political thought helps to resolve some disciplinary misconceptions about the supposed conservative elements of Williams' realism.

Williams' use of the liberalism of fear is, as I have mentioned, well-studied by critics and sympathizers with Williams' realist political thought. Most political theorists who write on Williams see it as a key feature of his realist approach as a whole. Sagar, for example, takes the liberalism of fear as the perfect form of liberalism for ethical sceptics like Williams, who cannot stomach more moralistic justifications of liberalism (P. Sagar 2016). Flatham and Hall both see the liberalism of fear in similar terms: It is a model of liberalism that perfectly complements Williams' broader philosophical sympathies (Flathman 2010; Hall 2014). Both authors conclude that the liberalism of fear is consistent with some of his earlier writings on the limitations of moral theory as well as his later political theory realism, in part because it offers, as we will see below, an entirely non-moralistic and historical account of liberalism's value. Others have been far more critical of the concept and Williams' use of it in particular. Walzer claims that the concept is inherently conservative and effectively forecloses the possibility for criticism of any but the most egregious violations of human rights by modern states. The liberalism of fear ends up being a sort of quietist brand of "negative politics," which offers little to those hoping to address the most pressing contemporary political problems (Walzer 1996). Fives only passingly comments on Williams' use of the concept, but sees it as a fundamentally monistic approach to settling conflicts of value in liberal society—something that is at odds with Williams' and Shklar's dogged insistence that such conflicts are an irreducible feature of a pluralistic society (Fives 2020). Forrester contends that Williams misunderstands Judith Shklar's own views on, for example, the attractiveness of the Kantian constructivism of John Rawls as a model of political thought (Forrester 2012). Shklar did not see her critique of utopian political

thought as necessarily implicating liberals like Rawls, whose work she admired, and so Williams' use of the liberalism of fear cannot serve as part of his broader critique of the "high moralism" of thinkers like Rawls, Forrester reasons. Forrester here hints at something which I think is undoubtedly true: Williams' version of the liberalism of fear is, indeed, distinct from Shklar's original version.[37] In fact, I would go so far as to say that, unbeknownst to most commentators, Williams' own pledge of fealty to Shklar's liberalism contains some subversive elements that make it distinctively his own, and indeed make it serve the general aims of the Williamsian "scepticism without reductionism." This will be one of the aims of this chapter: To highlight the ways in which Williams' liberalism and Shklar's are in fact distinct. A brief genealogical account of the term's origins, and Williams' use of it, can helpfully underscore where these distinctions emerge from.

Williams' first use of the phrase "liberalism of fear" comes at a rather ambivalent point in an otherwise glowing review of Shklar's *Ordinary Vices* in 1984. While Williams generally lauds Shklar, as one might imagine, for the historical rootedness and literary sensibilities of her survey of humanity's most notable peccadilloes, his review of her concluding chapter is somewhat more critical.[38] This concluding chapter is also the first place where Shklar herself uses the phrase "the liberalism of fear." In it, she claims that if one takes her argument throughout the book seriously, and places cruelty first amongst the vices, then one will be led to endorse a liberalism that acknowledges that

[37] I will confess that I also cannot see how Forrester's position represents any kind of a repudiation of Williams. Forrester's central point amounts to saying that Williams misunderstands the liberalism of fear because he misunderstands the enormous degree of admiration that Shklar felt for Rawls and overlooks her repeated praise for the imaginativeness of her Harvard colleague's work. However, setting aside the fact that Williams himself repeatedly praised Rawls along these lines (B. Williams 1999, 1972b), Forrester's contention seems to establish unsustainable interpretative barriers around how political concepts can be used by later authors, barriers that Shklar herself did not even endorse. Shklar, for example, invokes the non-liberal Montaigne as the basis of her liberalism of fear while freely conceding that Montaigne would have rejected the theoretical pillars of contemporary liberalism.

[38] He is also critical of her treatment of snobbery, writing for example that Shklar is, "very much so," an American and that "American snobbery. . . tends to be rather simple: uncomplicatedly unpalatable, like some kinds of American food." To write well about snobbery, Williams concludes, "one had better be English (for instance) and a snob" (B. Williams 2014m).

"one fears nothing more than fear" (J.N. Shklar 1984, 237). This "fear of fear" is a powerful foundation for justifying liberalism, Shklar argues, because "The fear of fear does not require any further justification, because it is irreducible. It can be both the beginning and an end of political institutions such as rights. The first right is to be protected against fear of cruelty. People have rights as a shield against this greatest of public vices" (Ibid). Shklar makes it clear that the principal target of the liberalism of fear is the state, in part because modern states have "the most instruments of intimidation closest at hand," which is why "the liberalism of fear concentrates so single-mindedly on limited and predictable government. (Ibid)" In his review, Williams notes that "Many have felt, in the past, and once again now, that it is impossible to reconcile, to the extent that liberalism needs, a state seen merely as impersonal regulation, and an ethical life understood in terms of personal character and sentiment. [Shklar] does not claim to tell us how to do it, and she may possibly underestimate its difficulties: but she rightly makes this question central, and she leads us in a compelling way to some of its deepest implications" (B. Williams 2014m, 245). Here Williams' central point reflects the general tenor of debates in political theory at the time—given that he was writing after Macintyre's *After Virtue* (which he had reviewed in 1981) and in the same year that Michael Sandel would publish "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," which Williams was familiar with[39]—the typical basis of liberalism as a system of rights and restrictions is seen as too thin to offer adequate foundations for the kinds of political and moral identity necessary to sustain a functioning social and political system. Shklar's attempt to ground liberalism on a widely shared sentiment, indeed a universally shared on Shklar's telling, represents a small step in the right direction, but does not necessarily settle the question.

[39] See (B. Williams 2014a) and (B. Williams 1993, n 31).

In a later article Shklar provides a more thorough explanation of what the liberalism of fear offers as a model of liberalism. It is meant to contrast with "the liberalism of natural rights" which "looks to the constant fulfillment of an ideal normative order or God's, whose principles have to be realized in the lives of individual citizens through public guarantees. (J. Shklar 1989a)" It is also distinct from "the liberalism of personal development," which holds that "freedom. . . is necessary for personal and social progress," and, without this freedom, "we cannot make the best use of our potentialities" (Ibid). She takes John Locke and John Stuart Mill as the spokesmen for these two views respectively and concludes that neither of them "had a strongly developed historical memory, and it is on this faculty of the human mind that the liberalism of fear draws most heavily" (Shklar). The liberalism of fear takes for granted, on Shklar's telling, that "every page of history" documents the ways that those with power abuse the powerless. Cruelty, suffering, and humiliation are the worst things "we do to one another," and thus the things that everyone across all time and cultural divisions have the most reason to fear. This is why the liberalism of fear conceptualizes citizens not as "discursive and reflecting persons, not friends and enemies, nor patriotic soldier-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful. And the freedom it wishes to secure is freedom from the abuse of power and intimidation of the defenseless that this difference invites" (Ibid). The liberalism of fear latches onto the "universal," and "physiological" nature of fear, the fact that we all feel it so viscerally, to argue that the central aim of any well-ordered society must lie with preventing "public and private intimidation" and ensuring that the inevitable and unavoidable asymmetry of power that exists between government and citizen is not deployed to wantonly inflict cruelty upon the weakest within society. Liberalism is justified in as much as it shields citizens from these abuses, mainly by preserving boundaries between "the spheres of personal and the public," and likewise limiting the actions of "extralegal" power within society and unaccountable public power. Drawing on a distinction from Emerson, Shklar concludes that adherents to the liberalism of fear belong to

"the party of memory," while their more optimistic counterparts belong to "the party of hope" (Ibid). Joining this party of memory means being more cognizant of the ubiquity of cruelty inflicted by the powerful upon the powerless today. With her characteristically acerbic style, Shklar writes:

> If I sound like Caesare Beccaria, or some other refugee from the eighteenth century, it may well be that I have read the sort of reports they read about the ways of governments. The foreign news in the *New York Times* suffice, as do its accounts of the prevalence of racism, xenophobia, and systematic governmental brutality here and everywhere. I cannot see how any political theorist or politically alert citizen can possibly ignore them and fail to protest against them. Once we do that, we have moved towards the liberalism of fear, and away from the more exhilarating but less urgent forms of liberal thought (Ibid).

Williams was later to revisit Shklar's more comprehensive account of the liberalism of fear and, as I mentioned above, his account of its main implications differs from Shklar's in some key ways. His second engagement with Shklar's theory came in a lecture he gave in 1996, and eventually collected in the posthumous collection of essays *In the Beginning Was the Deed.* The lecture in question begins with repeated praise of Shklar, who had only recently passed away, and her work. The lecture proper—after these reflections and a few Williamsian jokes—begins with several lengthy quotations from Shklar's later essay on the liberalism of fear, emphasizing its "entirely nonutopian" character and its central focus on the relationship between the powerful and powerless within a society. However, it quickly transitions to a discussion that will be vital for much of what I will have to say below. Namely, it takes up the question of the audience of any particular piece of political philosophy. Political philosophers need to "distinguish between, on the one hand, people who may be expected or hoped actually to read and be influenced by such a text, and the people or persons whom, in terms of its content, it purports to address" (B. Williams 2005i, 56). Williams regards the "people actually expected to read the text," as its "audience," and the "person actually addressed" as a text's "listener" (Ibid). Much contemporary political philosophy, Williams argues, is written for a broadly inclusive audience: It addresses "the public at large" or even "the public of more than one

state" (Ibid, 57). However, these same texts purport to speak to a listener who is in power. It is as if these texts are meant to address someone like a Supreme Court justice with the power to make decisions that bind and loose. Williams' chosen targets are Ronald Dworkin, whose work, of course, addresses Supreme Court justices quite explicitly, and John Rawls, both of whom he believes practice a sort of "Founding Father philosophy."[40] As Williams was to write elsewhere, the implicit listeners of these philosophers' texts are often "utopian magistrates or founding fathers" who are unencumbered by the ordinary "constraints" and "machinery" of democratic politics (B. Williams 2005k, 12). By addressing empowered officials of this sort, this style of political theory ignores the actual situation of most agents who might read the work and thus "displaces" the most bedrock facts of democratic political life; it elides the clash of interests and the institutional mechanisms that define what democratic political actors see as possible. In Williams' words, "Such political philosophy deals in ideals, or natural rights, or virtue, and it addresses a listener who is supposedly empowered to enact just what such considerations enjoin. And no actual audience, no audience in the world, is in that situation, not even the Supreme Court" (B. Williams 2005i, 58).

These reflections are important to Williams' discussion of the liberalism of fear in part because he believes this style of liberalism has a unique relationship with its listener and audience. Its focus on the ever-present dynamic of power and powerlessness, suffering, and cruelty means that even when it addresses an empowered listener, it does not "displace" the stakes or mechanisms of politics in the same way that these other styles of political thought do. Like Machiavelli's *The Prince*, with which it shares "a close relation," the liberalism of fear "takes seriously power and the surrounding distributions and limitations on power in any given situation. . . it has the same sense of what is important and what is on the other side" (Ibid, 59). Just as *The Prince* addresses an

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[40] For Dworkin's most explicitly jurisprudential writings see (Dworkin 1974, 1986)

empowered listener, the liberalism of fear "has historically been taken to have such listeners. But when it is so taken, it naturally attracts the traditional criticisms, because what it can be taken to enjoin is the extreme limitation of state power, the message that indeed it has traditionally conveyed. And that will not do for us, now, because it is not state power that we have the most to fear. And when we ask what it has to tell legislators who are in that situation, it is less than clear what it has to add" (Ibid, 59). In this way, Williams begins to reorient one of the foundational pillars of Shklar's argument: The liberalism of fear should not be fixated exclusively on "the extreme limitation of state power," and must instead consider a wider range of potential relationships of domination and subordination in contemporary society. For Williams, this kind of liberalism is adaptative in the face of historical change while remaining, as Shklar argues, universal. Indeed, it "can be taken as having a different and much wider set of listeners: roughly, everybody. . . Its listeners, unusually, form a much larger group than its expected audience. It speaks to humanity. And it has a right to do this, a unique right, I think, because its materials are the only universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities." What sort of "reminders and warnings" such a theory of politics offers depends on the situation of its audience, it depends "in particular," Williams writes, "on the politics of that situation" (Ibid). For example, while the liberalism of fear might have historically been concerned with the domestic politics of the nation-state, Williams posits that "the politics of now" are "to a diminishing degree those of the nation state. The centres, certainly, of economic power are international." Here, Williams' point is that the liberalism of fear's "genuine universalism, and its awareness of politics," leaves it better placed to recognize "the actual limitations of state power" when compared against theories "addressed to listeners assumed to be, within a given state, at the relevant level (the level set by the theory) omnipotent." The liberalism of fear acknowledges both that what we have most to fear is not always the arbitrary power of the state, but most notably the arbitrary power of private actors left unchecked by the state. It is meant to

emphasize, on Williams' recasting of the theory, the very clear limitations of state power at a time when multinational corporations have acquired an increasing share of economic might.

It is also meant to serve other ends under the "more favorable" conditions of established liberal democracies. Namely, Williams believes that in a "relatively happier and better ordered society," the liberalism of fear does not lose its basic importance. It can, first of all, remind individual citizens of "what they have got and how it might go away" (B. Williams 2005i, 60). The main threat to liberal order, Williams believes, is an ever-present well of reactionary sentiment within these societies. For example, Williams mentions that the admonitions of the liberalism of fear can be used to rebuke the communitarian opponents of liberalism who often "bear an unnerving resemblance to. . . Carl Schmitt or Gentile" (Ibid, 61). However, it can also combat illiberalism in places like the United Kingdom, where "a more demure and less theoretical temper combines with large reserves of resentment, individual and national, to yield another but again disquietingly familiar tone on the anti-liberal right, the tone of Vichy" (Ibid). What Williams touches on here is familiar enough: In established liberal democracies, the liberalism of fear offers a kind of bulwark against anti-liberal thought. It can offer an explanation of liberalism's value against more philosophical critiques, of the sort that Williams associates with American academia, but it can also offer the foundations or intellectual resources for resisting reactionary public sentiment, as in the United Kingdom.

Williams' later book *Truth and Truthfulness* deploys the liberalism of fear in precisely these ways. For Williams, as discussed in the last chapter, there was a deep tension at the heart of liberal society: It promotes, and indeed encourages, a pervasive feeling of scepticism and suspiciousness among its citizens and calls into question all the old legitimating narratives that might allow its historical enemies—religious orthodoxy and authoritarianism—to be viable alternatives to it.

However, in promoting this atmosphere of critique, its own foundations are inevitably called into question. Unless a particular liberal society can provide a story about its origins and the value of its liberal institutions, then it risks being supplanted by a reactionary politics of political myth and fantasy. These latter illiberal movements take advantage of the difficulties that liberal societies have in telling an inclusive story, one that can face the scrutiny of different groups' epistemic demands. A reactionary politics of myth, for example, can provide a comprehensive narrative—often steeped, as Williams mentions, in racial and political resentment—to justify its claim to power and eventually use the same narrative as a pretext to do away with liberal institutions altogether. However, the liberalism of fear, Williams reasons, can offer a kind of story about the value of liberalism that could be accepted widely enough to preserve it. Even if, as Williams writes, "liberalism may have destroyed in some part its distinctive supporting stories about itself—certainly its spirit of critique has soaked them in suspicion," it was still the case that "the resources of the liberalism of fear, which work everywhere, might keep it afloat. A truthful history will remind one of those resources and of what it costs in terms of quite basic human loss if a mythical order takes over" (B. Williams 2002a, 265). Written two decades ago, these passages are eerily reflective of the situation of contemporary liberal citizens. Reactionary social movements have latched onto a politics of violent cultural nostalgia and adopted a set of fantasies about a past iteration of their societies which bears little resemblance to any form it ever took. Williams, here, suggests that the allies of liberalism should foreground the historical awfulness of such mythical political movements and emphasize what everyone stands to lose when these groups take power and dispense with the niceties of liberal politics.

However, this is not the only thing the liberalism of fear offers in established liberal political orders. As Williams writes, even when liberal institutions are stable, advocates of this fearful defense of it are not "confined to uttering warnings and reminders." Instead, if "primary freedoms are secured and basic fears are assuaged, then the attentions of the liberalism of fear will move to more

sophisticated conceptions of freedom, and other forms of fear, other ways in which the asymmetries of power and powerlessness work to the disadvantage of the latter. . . the fears that are most basic in human terms do not map neatly onto fears that are most urgent in political terms" (Ibid, 60). Here more than anywhere else, Williams' account of the liberalism of fear veers away from Shklar's. Whereas Shklar's version is predominantly focused on the limitation of state power, practically at the expense of all other values, Williams insists that the liberalism of fear can just as readily make positive claims for new rights and make new demands for what sorts of social provision is necessary for people to be free of fear. In this way the liberalism of fear is not simply a blanket endorsement of private freedoms, nor does Williams intend it to be a blasé affirmation of the kind of 18th century political philosophy, of the sort that he thought bedeviled American politics.[41] The liberalism of fear can trade some liberty for other goods. As Williams writes,

> Just as [the liberalism of fear] takes the condition of life without terror as its first requirement and considers what other goods can be furthered in more favourable circumstances, it treats each proposal for the extension of the notions of fear and freedom in light of what locally has been secured. It does not try to determine in general what anyone has a right to under any circumstances and apply it. It regards the discovery of what rights people have as a political and historical one, not a philosophical one (Ibid).

Here we can see how liberalism of fear most directly latches onto the main ideas of "scepticism without reductionism." What it insists upon will be a byproduct of what sorts of threats "the condition of life without terror" most directly faces, as well as what sorts of rights the citizens of a particular liberal society insist upon. Agreement on what these forces and rights are will have to come from within the political and cultural conditions of a particular society and cannot be given in advance.

[41] According to Geuss, Williams was known to disdainfully remark that the United States was "the most 18th century country in the world" (Geuss 2014, 180).

In this way, many of the arguments about the conservative nature of the liberalism of fear, at least Williams' account of it, are largely overstated. The liberalism of fear is, indeed, meant to be historically grounded and aware of the politics of the society it is a part of. However, Williams still supposes that it can be aspirational. What it offers is something less than a full-blown theory of politics. Indeed it addresses its readers in the same way a pamphlet would, which Williams was to describe elsewhere as the ideal way for a contemporary political theorist to regard their work's relationship to its possible readers (B. Williams 2005i, 12). Rather than being a hidebound endorsement of the actual, the liberalism of fear represents a concrete example of how to put Williams' "scepticism without reductionism" into practice. Williams' broader philosophical aim, as we saw in Chapter 2, is to utilize philosophy as a form of social criticism, namely to develop a philosophy that is deeply embedded within a particular cultural backdrop. For Williams, the task of social philosophy, in general, is to show how certain practices, behaviors, institutions, or policies are basically incompatible with values and practices that its citizens hold to be more ethically primary. If a government is responsible for minimizing the extent to which its citizenry lives in fear, which is the most *politically* primary responsibility of liberal regimes of all, then—Williams argues here—its citizens can insist on more robust notions of what freedom from fear entails as certain conditions are secured. The liberalism of fear, of course, always insists on the importance of maintaining stable liberal institutions, a particularly important condition today as these institutions strain, but it also provides one particularly powerful resource for advancing new claims by connecting their importance back to this ever-present need to create political and social conditions that protect the powerless against the powerful and shrink the circumstances under which some are forced to live under conditions of uncertainty and within the arbitrary power of others. Against Shklar's dogged insistence that the liberalism of fear must forever be utilized to limit the scope of state power, Williams' reimagining of it presupposes that those relationships of power and powerlessness, and the

sorts of fears that "are most urgent in political terms," evolve in response to what has been secured within a particular society. It also suggests that the organizing power of fear, being, as Williams writes, perhaps the only truly universal political emotion, can be channeled into demands for change beyond simply ensuring that basic liberal democratic conditions are met within a society. What citizens within a particular society see as necessary for a life free from fear is a matter of the politics and history of their present circumstances, and thus the conditions necessary for this sort of life to be widely shared must always be subject to change. In fact, at the conclusion of his lecture, Williams subverts Shklar's quotation from Emerson, and in his retelling, while the liberalism of fear must be an entirely non-utopian style of political thought: "that does not mean that it is simply the politics of pessimism which has not collapsed into the politics of cynicism. In the words that Shklar quoted from Emerson, it is very importantly the party of memory. But in good times, the politics of hope as well" (Ibid, 61).

What might it mean to utilize this kind of liberalism of fear as a form of political critique? Some of Williams' later work on social justice, specifically his various defenses of the report of the Committee on Social Justice, which he was a member of, offer hints as to how Williams himself employed it. In an article published in *The Times of London,* defending one of the initial publications of the Committee, Williams paints a bleak picture of British society at the time, citing rather gloomy data about joblessness, crime, childhood illiteracy, and other social pathologies. Beyond these figures, though, Williams posits that "there is a less definite disquiet and depression" about the future of the country and a general sense of disillusionment with politics in particular (B. Williams 1994c). Williams then outlines four principles of social justice—the equal worth granted by citizenship, the necessity of meeting all basic needs of every citizen, the need for equal opportunities, and the minimization of all unjust inequalities—that the commission agreed upon, which may seem, in his words "incontestable," and reflect what widely shared beliefs within British society. However,

he argues that they are actually quite radical and points to "equality of opportunity," which "so far from being an anodyne substitute for real equality, would be a dramatic instrument of change if people took it seriously" (Ibid). Williams defends the specific proposals of the commission by appeal to the changing historical circumstances of Britain: the "emergence of the global economy" and the fact that "macro-economic power is shared at the European level rather than held by individual nations" means, for example, that the recommended investments in education and labor laws demanded by social justice "coincide therefore with the barest demands of economic survival" (Ibid). The cost of failing to ensure that Britain's economic system leads to widely shared prosperity, of the kind required to guarantee economic survival and even success, will be to invite "squalor and crime," which "carry enormous costs to us all." The costs of maintaining the arbitrary and unjust current system are just too high, Williams argues, even for the winners: "The interdependence of social justice and economic success is obvious to anyone who has recognized the discouragement and anger that seep through our society, and which make people feel uneasy if they themselves are successful. Whatever their personal prospects, people fear for their own and their children's futures in such a society. They do not really want to live their lives in a brightly lit and heavily guarded tent, surrounded by a wasteland of bitterness and disappointment." Here Williams latches onto fears that are, to his mind, widely shared and politically basic enough to demonstrate what British citizens give up by settling for the status quo: How their life prospects are diminished, and they are forced to live in fear because of the pathologies of an arbitrary and inegalitarian economic system. The especially powerful image of a "brightly lit and heavily guarded tent" calls to mind a dystopian society that is basically incompatible with even the most modest interpretation of the Commission's four principles of social justice; a world that is equally oppressive to the economic winners and losers.

In reply to an essay by G.A. Cohen, one critic of the Commission's findings, Williams adopts a similar argumentative strategy. One feature of Cohen's argument was that a superior conception of

social justice should work to abolish free markets rather than taking the prevalence of markets for granted, as the Commission did, because "the immediate motive of productive activity in a market society is typically some mixture of greed and fear," and that these unattractive motivations should form no part of a conception of justice (B. Williams 1997b, 57). Williams' reply, beyond his observation that economic activity within markets is not exclusively motivated by greed and fear, is to note that these motivations should not be disregarded simply because they are unattractive. Instead, Williams argues, they should be regarded as critical components of a struggle for a more egalitarian future, especially in a democratic society where the existing motivations of individuals are what any social movement must hope to appeal to. In Williams' words: "aspirations for equality and a sense of community must be applied, by defensible political power, to a world which is significantly driven by other sorts of motivations" (Ibid).

Notice here that Williams claims that advocates of a more egalitarian society should be cognizant of the need to appeal to the motivation of fear to achieve their aims through the democratic political process (through "defensible political power," in other words). More to the point, this is exactly the sort of defense he offers of the value of social justice, constantly evoking the specter of economic survival and the possible misery a future society as a way of defending the urgent adoption of the Commission's findings, without which the possibility of equal citizenship and a life free from fear and suffering will be all but impossible. While Williams himself was a lifelong socialist, he had abandoned any hope for a centralized or managerial style socialist economic order, and had come to see the recognition that these systems had failed as necessary for any contemporary advocate of socialism (B. Williams 2014p). To deny their failures was to ignore historical reality. The only viable path to the social democratic alternative he preferred was through mass political action; a movement in which philosophical reflection could play an important role without necessarily providing an exhaustive template of aims. The only way such a movement could succeed was by

connecting the value of their aims to widely shared existing values and beliefs, and, in the case of the liberalism of fear, showing how the current situation was basically incompatible with the requirements necessary for maintaining a life free of fear. In adopting this strategy, utilizing fear to justify a more expansive view of what liberal democratic citizenship entitles one to, Williams is employing the same approach favored by the officials who created the modern welfare state in the aftermath of the Second World War. Tony Judt, the great historian of the period, argues that the elected leaders of the United States and Western Europe saw the creation of a more egalitarian society as a compact with the poorer rungs of society: These societies agreed to share a larger slice of the economic pie with the middle and lower classes and offer a wide range of public goods and institutions to them in exchange for their continued support of liberal democratic institutions (Judt 2010).[42] It was the fear of fascism which motivated this change. The ravages of the war, and the widespread desire to avoid a return of such an apocalyptic event, made this new expansive understanding of what a liberal democratic state *had* to provide to its citizens far more appealing. It is well recognized that this particular contract has been violated in the same countries that fashioned it, and, at least in the United States the affluent have utilized the language of liberal individualism in their endless crusade to remove the government from their collective back and replace a more equitable economic order with one fit for a new Gilded Age; a system in which the rich and the educated prosper and the losers are left to pain, despair, and suicide (Case and Deaton 2020). As if through an act of dialectic magic, this dogged insistence on the absolute inviolability of narrowly defined individual rights has brought us right back to the precipice that Roosevelt and Attlee stood next to. As we ponder the potential illiberal futures that may await us, where we shall be lucky if the

[42] Fittingly, given Williams' insistence on the contingency and precarity of ethical values, Judt's masterful history of postwar Europe helpfully underscores how absolutely haphazard, and near to failure the establishment of social democratic values was, involving the formation of electoral coalitions that had no precedent in European history. These ingrained principles of social redistribution represent as contingent a development as one could reasonably imagine (Judt 2005)

government is only on our backs, the rationale of this long-forgotten post-war deal and the importance of never forgetting "what you have got and how it might go away," both offer important lessons for those who still fight a rear-guard action in defense of liberal democratic values.

The liberalism of fear, then, offers distinct advantages as mode of political theory for this era of democratic decline: It offers a framework for defending basic liberal rights and democratic freedoms, insisting that the price of doing without these is too high, whatever other appeal anti-democratic social movements might offer. However, it offers a similar framework for advancing the scope of these rights and freedoms, not by offering a grand philosophical blueprint for them, but rather by providing a style of argument to justify the importance of securing these additional protections. In both approaches, the liberalism of fear is meant to appeal to the broadest possible constituency, and to do so in a way that connects with the deeply held values of liberal citizens. In this way, I argue below, it provides a novel philosophical approach for responding to some of the most pressing problems of the 21st century, especially the problem of anthropocentric climate change, the problem to which I now turn.

II – The Liberalism of Fear and the Crises of the 21st Century

Revisiting Williams' discussion of the liberalism of fear offers additional benefits beyond making better sense of the topic itself. First, returning to the liberalism of fear and connecting Williams' discussion of it with the account of "scepticism without reductionism" provided above can help to clarify some misconceptions about Williams' broader and more widely analyzed discussion of realism. As discussed above, Williams' posthumous essay "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," has been the primary point of departure for commentators interested in Williams' political thought. In the article in question, Williams outlines what the calls the first question of politics, "the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation," a

question which must be "first" because "solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others" (B. Williams 2005k, 3). Williams articulates a principle, what he calls the "basic legitimation demand" or BLD, which he argues a particular state must meet to be considered legitimate at all. Put simply, on Williams' terms a state must offer an acceptable answer to the first political question, and do so in a way that can justify the exercise of authority over one group of people over another. In Williams' words, "*Something* has to be said to explain (to the less empowered, to concerned bystanders, to children being educated in this structure, etc.) what the difference is between the solution and the problem, and that cannot simply be an account of successful domination" (Ibid, 6). When states cannot provide an answer, one that "makes sense" historically to those subject to their rule then they are, according to Williams' argument, illegitimate. Williams points out that the condition of "making sense" is based on historical and psychological factors: What would have made sense, as an answer to this first political question, to people in the distant historical past or in a wildly different cultural context, might be entirely unacceptable to modern liberal citizens. However, this returns us to Williams' discussion of relativism encountered above. Even if, for these same historical and psychological reasons, there are very few ways, as Williams posits, of meeting the BLD today that does not involve something like liberal political order, that does not mean that those past societies or all non-liberal societies today are necessarily illegitimate. Williams insists that conceptualizing the foundations of political legitimacy in this self-consciously "realist" way is superior to moralistic explanations of legitimacy and the basis of liberal political order because Williams' account rejects the "priority of the moral over the political" (Ibid, 8). It also offers something like a "theory of error," accounting for the ubiquity of liberalism today while being able to explain its ultimately historically specific and contingent character.

For many critics, however, Williams' focus on realist legitimacy betrays a conservative temper: An interest in merely affirming the status quo. Alan Thomas describes Williams' anti-

moralist conception of legitimacy as weak and hazardous because it allows Williams and others to hedge "as to whether or not. . . a hierarchical society meets the basic conditions of legitimacy" (Thomas 2017, 316). For others, such as Fabian Wendt, embracing the "context specificity" of Williams' criteria of making sense eviscerates the capacity to criticize widespread injustice: It would allow the Russian Tzar or the Babylonian slave-holder to simply wave away complaints against the awfulness of their political and social orders by insisting that their authoritarian regimes provide a minimum of social order in a way that makes sense to those subject to their power (Wendt 2016). Lorna Finlayson argues that, even within liberal societies, a focus on simply meeting the conditions of legitimacy undermines the more radical potentialities latent within realism. Realist thought, because it is meant to be grounded in historical and social realities, is well-positioned to criticize a wide range of entrenched injustices, but this potential is squandered, on Finlayson's view, because of Williams' (and others') preoccupation with legitimacy in particular (Finlayson 2017). The common thread to this argument is that, much in the same way that others criticize the liberalism of fear for being too narrowly state-focused and interested in the preservation of individual liberties, that Williams' realism fails to offer an adequate basis for contemporary social and political criticism. As long as a liberal state, or any state really, maintains order and prevents the worst forms of internecine civil bloodletting, then it must be legitimate on the terms provided by Williams.

However, I argue that there's an alternative way of understanding Williams' interest in realist legitimacy, one that is roughly analogous to the way that I propose reinterpreting the liberalism of fear. In fact, this complaint that Williams' realism simply fetishizes the status quo falls apart if we read Williams' discussion of legitimacy alongside the more nuanced understanding of Williams' broader philosophical project, the liberalism of fear, most of all, that I provided above. Legitimacy, as Williams says, is necessarily context-sensitive. It is a function of what "makes sense" to those who live under the rule of a particular regime. However, this requirement does not yield a necessarily

conservative bias against political critique or wholesale political change. Just as any acceptable solution, "now and around here," as Williams writes, must have some liberal features, it does not mean that today a minimum threshold of liberalism solves the first political question for good (B. Williams 2005k, 8). In particular, as Williams also writes, the scope for what sorts of threats count as unacceptable to modern citizens or what circumstances represent an acceptable degree of social stability are themselves historically variable. "Insofar as things go well," Williams writes in the same article, "the conceptions of what is to be feared, of what is an attack on the self, and what is an unacceptable exercise of power, can themselves be extended" (Ibid). Here we return to the liberalism of fear and scepticism without reductionism: the standard for assessing what sorts of threats undermine the fundamental right to live free from the arbitrary power of the powerful, and to avoid living in unaccountable fear, ultimately providing a basis for a form of political critique that works from "the ground up," beginning with the sentiments and values that are ethically bedrock within a particular society and elaborating them into a form of social critique. I turn now to the question of climate change to show how, contrary to the criticisms made by Thomas, Wendt, and Finlayson, Williams' political thought can provide a template for realist political critique.

The topic of climate change is exactly the sort of social problem that Finlayson believes Williams' realism fails to address. In spite of the now undeniable scientific consensus about the reality of anthropogenic climate change and its probable and catastrophic impacts the habitability of Earth, political action to address it has been slow and fitful. The status quo is unsustainable, and private actors and nation-states have mostly offered hopeful promises to meet the challenge. The topic has helped to generate an enormous body of moral and political philosophy. However, as Dale Jamieson argues, the problems posed by climate change pose serious difficulties for the traditional moral and ethical frameworks of liberal modernity. These moral traditions, Jamieson argues, developed in "low-population-density and low-technology societies with seemingly unlimited access

to land and other resources" (Jamieson 1992, 37). Thus, the accepted understandings of responsibility, for example, come unglued with a problem like climate change. Individuals are only directly responsible for infinitesimal contributions to an outcome that is collectively ruinous, leading to a wide range of what Derek Parfit calls "mistakes in moral mathematics" (Parfit 1984).[43] Likewise, the question of duties is complicated by a range of further complicating factors: Given the ubiquity of greenhouse gas emissions in the contemporary global economy, and the fact that such emissions have already accrued to the point that devastating consequences are now unavoidable, it seems plausible that present persons ought to forswear such emissions. However, even if this were possible, it would, in all likelihood, create enormous pain for the least well-off both within individual nation-states and globally. This is what Henry Shue describes as the "cruel dilemma" of climate change: the emissions of greenhouse gases are zero-sum in a way that forces us to choose between protecting "against undermining by severe climate change the ability of people of the more distant future to enjoy their rights to life, subsistence, and health," or we can choose to protect the rights of the poor of "the present and the near future to enjoy their rights" (Shue 2011, 312). These complications, in addition to the challenges posed by the structure of international politics, have been felt within several prominent strands of political thought concerning climate change.

Consider, for example, the family of "rights-based" approaches to the topic. Some theorists within this tradition freely acknowledge the limitations of other consequentialist and contractualist schools of thought in responding to the problem. Indeed, Steve Vanderheiden explicitly contrasts his approach with these different moral theories with the work of Rawls and Parfit in particular—singling the latter out for particular scorn. Vanderheiden's rights based approach attempts to split the difference between the two approaches, arguing that future generations are entitled to a range of

[43] For mistakes on moral mathematics applied to climate change: See (Vanderheiden 2007).

particular moral rights grounded in our responsibility not to inflict harm. He argues that claims about the uncertainties of the future—how the needs of human beings may change, or how potentially unpredictable the consequences of our actions may end up being—are vastly overstated. We can reasonably conclude that people in the future will want to drink clean water and breathe fresh air, and we have a clear sense of how our actions today contribute to predictable harms to future persons. This vests them with a moral right to be free from our harm—since, as Vanderheiden notes, in moral terms their temporal remoteness to us does not mitigate the "badness" of our choosing to hurt them (Vanderheiden 2008). This right can, Vanderheiden believes, be extended to all future persons who will actually exist. This, in turn, places a moral obligation on us to refrain from causing such harm, and requires that we forbear from engaging in behavior that might harm them. A concern for the rights also animates the work of Peter Singer, who advocates for developing an equal right for each person to emit greenhouse gases, and Simon Caney, who advocates for a set of economic rights that would empower the world's poorest citizens while simultaneously diminishing our reliance on fossil fuels (Singer 2002; Caney 2007).

As a way of understanding and responding to the wrongs of climate change, theories of intergenerational rights offer several notable advantages as grounds for criticizing the wrongs of climate change and serve as a philosophical basis for social criticism. In fact, such accounts of our obligations to future generations have two key strengths. First, they offer an interpretation of our relationship to future persons that captures an intuition touched upon by Vanderheiden: We cannot know who specifically will populate the Earth in the distant future, but many of us feel that the difficulties which attach to this question should not yield the conclusion that we owe nothing to the future, or that future persons' wants and desires will be radically discontinuous with those we ourselves happen to have. Second, by representing the relationship between ourselves and future persons (or in the case of Singer and Caney, present persons) in terms of rights, these theories

provide some of the same advantages offered by traditional legal systems of rights. Like recognized legal rights, theories that take this shape offer clearer cut frameworks for assessing wrongs and for rallying popular support against perceived violations. Existing efforts to address climate change are dependent on international legal frameworks drawn up in similar terms: The polluter pays or precautionary principles resemble Vanderheiden's duties of prudential forbearance to a degree that makes the latter seem like an appropriate extension of them. Their primary disadvantage is that, in spite of these strengths, they are nothing like codified legal rights. As Williams wrote elsewhere, questions of rights are less a matter for moral reflection to settle and instead a historical or perhaps anthropological question: "Political projects are," Williams memorably wrote, "essentially conditioned not just in their background intellectual conditions but as a matter of empirical realism, by their historical circumstances" (B. Williams 2005g). Thus, proposals for universal human climate rights need to be assessed, at least in part, against the backdrop of political reality against which they will be implemented. The attractiveness of such systems of rights, especially climate rights, needs to be weighed against the probability of bringing them into being. At present there is no system of enforceable universal human rights that does not admit of innumerable exceptions and opt outs. This is not to deny the tremendous value of the existing system of international law, or the historical significance of, for example, the UN Declaration of Human Rights. However, for all its promise the UN Charter, section 2[7] has, as a matter of historical practice, granted to states a blank check to ignore even the most universally accepted human rights. Even the Declaration, aspirational as it is, contains passages that have been interpreted to allow states to shrink the scope of protected individual rights to nil. In the same article referenced above, Williams agrees that utopian thought has its uses in practical politics but concludes that, "the nearer political thought gets to action, as in the concrete affirmation of human rights, the more it is to be frivolous if it is utopian" (Ibid). There are pressing questions, given the universal reach that rights theorists claim for their arguments, about

not just how these theories might be implemented but whether we can envision the current international system of self-interested states agreeing to anything like the institutional framework that would be necessary to implement them. Under these international conditions it is difficult to envision states unilaterally codifying environmental rights for the unborn without assurances that other states would follow suit. Without some hope of converting these more abstract "moral rights" into defined legal rights it is hard to see what this body of thought contributes to any existing political program to address climate change.

This highlights a more basic problem with much of the political philosophy of climate change and intergenerational justice: As examples of applied ethics, each of the theories considered above present themselves as a guide to policy as if they offered particular guidance to concrete political action. However, all of them, even those which seem to offer suggestions for public policy, are very far removed from the processes of politics. They seem to offer exactly what Williams detests: An approach to political theorizing that offers a template to be imposed from above by some empowered agent or international law-making body entirely different from any that currently exist. Here Williams' insistence on treating political theory as if it were a pamphlet, providing inspiration, and challenging certain assumptions, all without trying to articulate a system of organized ethical thought, provides a helpful contrast to this moralistic approach. It also highlights how a realist approach, one better attuned to the structure of historical circumstances and what is possible, might serve the cause of climate advocacy better. If philosophical reflection is to offer anything to the cause of preventing irreversible climate change it will have to come from the bottom-up rather than the top-down. In this way, Williams' realism, which I argue is by its nature bottom-up, can serve this role.

For Williams, the prevailing modes of political-philosophy as applied ethics generate questions about who the intended audience is. Ultimately these are questions that he believes philosophers have only limited or unsatisfying answers to. On the topic of humanity's relationship to the environment, for example, he finds that while philosophy has a clear role to play in raising "questions about the nature of values that are at issue in environmental discussion," moral philosophers often offer theories which "run the risk of seeming frivolous or indecently abstract when questions of practical urgency are at the front of political attention" (B. Williams 1992 [1995], 233). There is, Williams claims, "no special way" that philosophical reflection can join practical political debates and indeed he argues that such contributions join it "in the various ways in which other forms of writing or talking may do: ways that include not only marshalling arguments, but also changing people's perceptions a little, or catching their imagination" (Ibid). Too often, he concludes, philosophers seem determined to "reduce the number of thoughts that people can have, by suggesting that they have no right to some conceptions that they have or think that they have" (Ibid). Political philosophy, if it is to be helpful along these lines, should not ignore what people happen to believe most intensely as a matter of historical fact. Here we return to Williams' earlier points about audience and listeners: the values that philosophical reflection should begin with are those shared by the public at large within a particular society. Ideally, as we have seen, any kind of philosophically rigorous model of social criticism ought to start from deeply embedded social values and "deploy some parts of [a society's values and practices] against others, and [reinterpret] what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers" (B. Williams 2005b, 37). This is what, as I argue above, Williams sets out to do through the liberalism of fear and his focus on legitimacy: It is meant to "catch the imagination" of readers or "change their perceptions a little" in order to show the inconsistency between certain accepted social practices and the conditions necessary to sustain liberal democracy, it moves from more fixed points

to challenge behaviors inconsistent with those bedrock values, in other words. The task of social philosophy, in general, ought to be showing how certain practices, behaviors, institutions, or policies are basically incompatible with values and practices that its citizens hold to be more ethically primary, and, a life free from fear is, for Williams, effectively ethical bedrock.

At first glance the liberalism of fear might seem miscast as a political theory to contribute to the broader project of preventing the worst ravages of anthropomorphic climate change. Even though Williams insists that its protections can be extended to the actions of non-governmental entities, this might seem inadequate to one of the most central facts of climate change: The main source of human fear and uncertainty is not even other human beings, but the climate of the planet itself. Even the most modest and optimistic climate projections offered by the IPCC hold that we have already crossed an ecological "point of no return," where human activity has made some of the worst effects of climate change "inevitable and irreversible" (Harvey 2021). On this line of reasoning the natural world itself is what threatens us, and the ideas of power and powerlessness and preventing the wanton infliction of cruelty by one group onto another, are of little to no help in seeking climate justice and constructive political change. While this certainly reflects one set of truths about the situation, I think this intuition is mistaken. However, identifying the mistake here involves further examination. It is indeed true that what many of us fear is precisely the idea that the planet has been unmoored from its natural processes in a way that will eventually render it uninhabitable. This is why the slogan "There is no planet B," has caught on among climate activist groups and why the mere idea of the "Anthropocene" is so profoundly disturbing: Humanity has unconsciously meddled in processes it did not understand and these actions have left us in a situation of profound uncertainty about whether we have uncovered our folly too late.[44] While

[44] Mike Berners-Lee in his book *There is No Planet B*, places the point at which humanity acquired the power to irreversibly harm the planet at the end of the Second World War, by that point our position has become

uncertainty about climate change, of the sort that was widely discussed a decade ago, has never really supported the conclusion that climate change is not real, there is considerable disagreement about whether or not certain threshold events—involving the degradation of the oceans or the overexploitation of the Amazon—might generate an inevitable and unalterable downward pressure towards planetary inhabitability. If our single greatest enemy is the planet that past generations have bequeathed us, then what sense is there in using a framework of human oppression and injustice as a mechanism for blunting the worst effects of climate change?

I will return to this idea below, but even this story—for all of its truth—should elicit a very straightforward response: There are still identifiable human agents and groups who, fully cognizant of the existence and human origins of climate change, have simultaneously taken steps to contribute to the processes which exacerbate climate change and insulate themselves from the effects that they now conclude are inevitable. This is why, for example, fossil fuel companies and private equity firms have increasingly accepted climate change as inevitable and moved to broaden their portfolios and, for example, use the profits derived from contributing to global emissions to structure their investments with the looming climate apocalypse in mind (Baron 2019). This is to say nothing of the fact that the unsustainable lifestyle of the ultra-wealthy is one of the single biggest contributors to the rapid degradation of our remaining "budget" of emittable greenhouse gases (Paddison 2021). Further, we know enough about the most probable consequences of climate change—from the wider prevalence of mosquito-borne illnesses, the collapse of certain kinds of agriculture, and the more rapid occurrence of severe or extreme weather events—to suggest that those who currently prosper under our unsustainable economic institutions are likely to be better prepared to weather the storm. This is true both within developed countries but also of their relation to developing countries

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increasingly more precarious as our grip on the ability to meaningfully change the future habitability of the planet becomes ever slighter in the face of past emissions behavior. See: (Berners-Lee 2020)

or those who face the most catastrophic forms of climate induced disasters. It is entirely plausible, in other words, to retain the human-centered notions of power and powerlessness, cruelty and the desire to live without being in the arbitrary power of another, when applying the liberalism of fear to climate change. Indeed, it seems particularly apt given how most of us will likely see our life-prospects drop precipitously if steps are not taken to blunt the worst effects of climate change. Remember that the "liberalism of fear" makes the basic human desire to avoid the worst forms of mistreatment and fear its primary ethical framework: It draws on the political ubiquity of these emotions as its fundamental method of determining what to insist upon. The fact is that most citizens in developed countries see themselves as likely to be personally harmed by climate change, and so here the liberalism of fear would suggest that here the gap in probable life-prospects, among those who stand to benefit the most or suffer the least, must be the first organizing principle of political action to address climate change (Bell et. Al. 2021). As Mike Davis shows in his classic *Ecology of Fear*, the politics of apocalyptic ecology are inherently regressive: Federal and state agencies offer a blank check to defend high-property value "fire-belt suburbs" like Malibu, waging war against nature made unwinnable by unsustainable development practices carried out in the name of zoning (Davis 2022). At the same time, as city budgets are slashed, urban building fires are regarded with the same detachment with which we ordinarily treat acts of God, especially when their politically-influential owners are not required to comply with even the most basic fire-code ordinances that might save the lives of their politically powerless tenets. It does not take much intellectual effort to find analogies to these older examples in the structure of climate change: You do not even have to leave Los Angeles to guess at how the impacts of sea-level rise, a catastrophic increase in the fear season, and a decline in water in hotter climates, will be experienced very differently by the rich and the poor, absent some kind of concerted political effort to challenge the status-quo. These clear asymmetries between the powerful and the powerless ought to be the focus

of any effort to respond to climate change. Unless a sufficient number of us hope to be invited onto the rocket ship to Mars or given a spot in the hurricane-proof arcology, we may find that it is still helpful to structure our understanding of the ethics of climate change around who benefits and who stands to lose the most.

However, Williams also offers the philosophical resources for incorporating the fear I outlined above: The idea that our primary adversary is not other human beings but, instead, a planet that we cannot control and whose natural systems may already be irretrievably compromised. In his discussion of environmentalism, Williams argues that what the environmental movement ultimately needs is a philosophical framework that is built not on moral accounts of human duties towards the environment, but instead one that draws on more universal cultural attitudes towards the environment which might be plausibly converted into the basis for a non-anthropocentric model of environmentalism. In particular, Williams argues that, as a matter of cultural anthropology, nearly all European societies contain various cultural and artistic expressions of what he describes as "Promethean fear" towards the natural world" (B. Williams 1992 [1995]). This widely expressed fear is one of "taking out relations to nature too lightly or inconsiderately," and that this "artistic reaffirmation of the separateness and fearfulness of nature became appropriate at the point at which for the first time the prospect of an ever-increasing technical control of it became possible" (Ibid, 239). Williams believes that this emotion, as well as the similarly widespread depiction of awe at the beauty of nature, is the appropriate emotion to draw upon because it not only reflects a widely shared sentiment about nature but also emphasizes the fact that the natural world is something "that is independent of us, not made, and not adequately controlled" (Ibid). Building from a sense of Promethean fear means emphasizing how we need to tread lightly when we upset processes we can only obliquely understand and whose distant consequences we can estimate only imperfectly. The planet is, in this view, something like an agent who stands outside of our power and indeed whose

power we find ourselves in. As Williams writes, this widespread cultural intuition rests on "on a sense of opposition between ourselves and nature, as an old, unbounded and potentially dangerous enemy, which requires respect" (Ibid). In this view, our basic relations to the increasingly precarious global environment can be understood as very much akin to the relationship between the powerful and powerless in Shklar and Williams' treatments. The analogy would hold that, should we wish to live free from the fear of being held in the arbitrary power of this potentially dangerous adversary, at once both familiar but increasingly unpredictable, that we should take whatever steps are within our power to reduce the scope of our meddling. In fact, the unpredictability of climate change related disasters—and the uncertain speed at which the onset of the direst consequences might occur—highlights the value of interpreting our situation in this way. Our concern does not need to lay with the quality of life we pass along to future generations, though this might also influence us, instead it ought to be grounded on the very real precarity of our own situation. We live on a planet that teeters, in one popular description, over a precipice of utter disaster in the same way that automobiles often do in disaster films. While we might still retain some control over the outcome it might also lie beyond our power to meaningfully change. Under circumstances such as these the liberalism of fear would insist we must take steps to utilize what power we have left to extricate ourselves from our entirely uncertain circumstances. In a situation of this sort, we have more than an obligation of rational forbearance: We owe ourselves a duty to secure the conditions of our very survival against an opponent that is entirely indifferent to our existence.

Framed in this way, I would say the politics of fear provides the only robust foundation for an ethical framework adequate to the demands of dealing with climate change. By being resolutely political it avoids the apolitical and ahistorical perspectives of most moral theories that touch on the topic of climate justice. By emphasizing the importance of avoiding fear and minimizing the scale of preventable cruelty it demands that we, a nearly universal we at that, take steps to minimize the scale

of climate change and avoid its most dire impacts. While it does not conclusively settle questions that are central to this field, concerning for example historical responsibility for past emissions and the obligations of the developed world to those in the global south, it offers a number of virtues and templates for social critique that address what is most needed right now. It is also resolutely pragmatic, as I will emphasize below, and catered to the demands of making meaningful progress on the topic of climate change in societies like the United States where national level environmental policy is often blown about by shifting partisan political headwinds. A climate politics of fear would insist that practically all forms of climate mitigation and most realistic forms of adaptation are worthwhile strategies for local, state-level and national activists to pursue. It would seem to reject the most widely discussed examples of geo-engineering in part because these projects do virtually nothing to address the fear of meddling with the planet so central to this politics of fear, and in part because the sorts of institutions and oversight necessary to implement any such policies seem as foreign to the realities of climate governance today as Vanderheiden's imagined system of rights does.

It is easy enough to marry the liberalism and environmentalism of fear together. Crucially what such a merger would insist upon is that any government which allows enormous inequalities of life-prospects to form among its citizens, and which does not attempt to redress or respond to this widespread sense of Promethean fear, fails Williams' test of liberal legitimacy. A government that slouches towards environmental oblivion also undermines the most basic liberal rights of life, liberty, and equality and fails additionally to address the basic promise of the liberalism of fear for its citizens: It fails to prevent inequalities of power from manifesting themselves in preventable fear and cruelty. This is why an approach to combatting climate change that employs the perspective offered by the liberalism of fear offers a range of specific advantages over more moralistic alternatives. As I have said, the phenomenon of climate change offers a range of both predictable consequences and

more uncertain possibilities. We cannot be certain if modest reforms to our pattern of GHG emissions will be enough to avoid stumbling past the threshold of the "lynchpin" events described above. Rather than presenting the issue as one of moral duties to future generations or emphasizing our duty to respect the basic human rights of others alive today, Williams would insist that we see these wrongs, and the possibility of inadvertently crossing one of these turning-points, as basically odds with the historical responsibilities of liberal governments to confront widely shared fears. If we cannot be certain that it will only be those alive in the far future who will suffer the worst effects of climate change, then we exist in a preventable condition of fear—utterly within the power of the privileged and the mostly inscrutable workings of our own planet. It is only when we compel the regimes we live under to respond to these threats that we can begin to ameliorate these fears. To the extent that the most determined opponents of continuing anthropogenic climate change are coextensive with the remaining defenders of liberal democratic values, the liberalism and environmentalism of fear offers an entirely historical and political conception of how to mobilize popular support and frame the issues as of a piece: A government which fails to respond to these challenges will ultimately fail the test posed by the liberalism of fear.

This framework could very easily be applied to other central ills of contemporary American society in particular. America's political and economic institutions have been dominated by the wealthy and the well-to-do for generations.[45] From the unparalleled political influence granted to the top income earners in the United States, to the myopic tax-revolts and "not-in-my-backyard" politics of America's upper-middle class, the United States has already begun to reify the future Williams describes in his defense of social justice. America today is, in many respects, the "brightly lit and

[45] There are of course even older analogues to America's present condition in its history, but the excellent historical scholarship of Rick Perlstein very cogently identifies the roots of its present discontent in the social and political forces that prompted Barry Goldwater's insurgent campaign in 1964. See (Perlstein 2001).

well-guarded tent" Williams envisioned, only its guards and its discontented alike are armed to the teeth. The amount of wealth concentrated within American society is truly staggering, but it is an enormous outlier in the developed world when it comes to death rates, health care costs, infant mortality, suicide, traffic fatalities, and increasingly rates of vaccination. It is, in the words of one recent commentator, "an expensive death-trap," where even the winners fear for the future of their children and see the country ominously heading in the wrong direction (D. Thompson 2022). Here again the liberalism of fear can begin from this shared sense of dissatisfaction, the enormous gulf in power between rich and poor, and the fear of what will come next if nothing is done to redress the looming crisis. In almost all these cases what people fear is the workings of an unfettered private actors, a system of free markets that have come unmoored from their liberal roots and instead work to actively undermine the basic principles of liberal citizenship. The sort of fears that loom particularly large in the American imagination are not the result of an overbearing government but will likely require a more vigorous response from its elected officials. Such a response will, Williams insists, be most effectively brought about by starting from the most bedrock political emotions and attempting to connect these back to a platform for meaningful social change.

Of course, as Williams argues, what the liberalism of fear will insist upon in each of these cases, or in the case of climate change specifically, is helpfully ambiguous. On the topic of climate change this ambiguity is helpful for the very reason that makes more top-down approaches less workable as frameworks for political action. Certain existing climate movements, like the Extinction Rebellion, have already adopted an appropriately pragmatic approach to highlighting the potential consequences of climate inaction, one that Williams' approach undoubtedly supports. Within the United States the system of federalism and the prevalence of different policy venues open up a wide range of avenues for addressing the problem many of which do not require national political action. In some cases, mitigation might be brought about through manipulating individual economic

behavior, as with California's recent effort to "sunset" the sale of gas-powered automobiles, or the national Inflation Reduction Act, whose uncharacteristically uncapped benefits for the purchase of electric automobiles will likely have far-reaching impacts on the distribution of private automobile emissions in the United States. However, the environmentalism of fear is just as likely to endorse other forms of regulation—such as the IRA's reclassification of GHG emissions as "pollution," which allows them to be dealt with in the framework of environmental case-law. Indeed, this understanding of the need to address climate change will regard the looming climate disaster with a spirit of appropriate panic, and it will recommend whatever can be, in Williams' words, accomplished within the scope of legitimate political power to avoid the possibility of absolute catastrophe. As Williams also insists, such an approach should rightfully be considered universal, and that the demands it makes will fluctuate depending on what is politically possible. It addresses those in Washington D.C., but it assumes that the sorts of fear and the relationships of power and powerlessness that concern it are universal enough that they can rightfully offer guidance to anyone whose society allows for it and who can hope to compel even the slightest actions towards mitigation or adaptation. It will support all sub-national, state level, and international efforts that can meaningfully reduce the sense of ever-present terror that anyone must regard climate change with.

This richer understanding of the liberalism of fear is not the only thing that a deeper examination of Williams' moral philosophy can offer to interested political theorists. Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, Williams' work offers a salutary set of insights into debates about citizen competence. In particular, in recent years one strain of political science and political theory has held that certain facts about human psychology, specifically a capacity to form tribalistic attachments to arbitrary markers of identity, undermine the project of democratic self-government. These attachments, the argument runs, undermine our ability to reason impartially about politics. Depending on the critic's perspective this either means that democracy is either incompatible with

human nature because democracy is predicated on citizens exercising such a capacity or else it means that democracy deeply harms the normative underpinnings of the human personality by allowing these group commitments to run roughshod over our ability to reason. Williams' work, I argue, offers a richer understanding of identity, one that contends that such attachments are what are fundamental to human psychology, and which defends an alternative account of the relationship between identity and democratic engagement against these sceptical critics.

Chapter IV - Identity and Necessity in Williams' Moral Psychology

Having established that Williams' political thought contains the radical potentialities that he ascribed to it, in this chapter I address one potential concern about the limits of such an approach. Namely, I address the question of how far a self-consciously realist approach to political theory can be compatible with another facet of Williams' political thought: His avowed support of liberal democracy. This question is particularly pertinent because, as I emphasize, a diverse range of commentators believe that the available social scientific and or historical evidence, a sensitivity to which must be an integral component of Williams' approach to political thought, suggests that citizens are plainly unqualified to govern themselves. These other approaches, each of which claims a kind of realism for themselves, hold that a frank appraisal of the psychological makeup of individual citizens, which shows that people are led to behave irrationally because of a commitment to their "team" or "tribe," and the performance of democratic regimes on various benchmarks of competence, necessarily undermines the claim to legitimacy of democratic regimes. While not all of these different commentators do not universally agree that democracy ought to be abandoned as a form of government altogether, the exemplar of this anti-democratic view that I discuss here, Jason Brennan, contends that democracy can only be justified in its most limited aggregative forms: Any more elaborate form of democratic politics, especially if it rests on or requires greater citizen participation or deliberation, is indefensible and stands against all available evidence. Brennan claims that democracy makes its citizens "worse," by fostering ignorance, promoting tribalism, and allowing misinformation to flourish. Moreover, it allows the ignorant, partisan, and misinformed to exercise power in a way that neither places limits on the political power that accrues to them nor challenges their bias or incompetence.

Williams does not share this view. He holds out hope about the future of democracy, and indeed he seems to believe that a political system that fostered greater democratic deliberation might serve as a counterweight to illiberal political forces. What is even more curious, though, is that he endorses this kind of minimalist account of deliberative democracy while also arguing for the ubiquity and importance of group ties in shaping the ways that human beings reason about politics. In fact, in the same way that many commentators, and Brennan in particular, laments the proliferation of irrational behavior, Williams worries about these same social forces. He agrees, in other words, with the anti-democracy camp, typified by Brennan, that individual citizens are indeed shaped by group ties and attachments, but concludes that this strengthens rather than undermines the case for democratic participation. I delve into Williams' previously underexamined account of reasoning and moral psychology to show why this is the case, before returning to the political implications of Williams' argument.

Why consider Brennan's book *Against Democracy* in relation to Williams on this subject? Brennan's work stands in a curious set of relations to Williams'. Brennan's argument, which avails itself of what Brennan takes to be incontrovertible social scientific evidence, is profoundly a moralist one at its core: A ruthless critic of democracy he decries the impermissible control it grants some over the lives of others, and the ways in which it privileges political partisans and others in the clutches of group prejudices to exercise authority over their intellectual and moral betters. While it may be defensible on prudential grounds as a way of, say, protecting basic liberties and rights, the fact that it enables citizens to exercise powers over others in ways that are, potentially, foolish and harmful undermines any possible defense of it. We are obliged, Brennan argues in one of his grating metaphors, to abandon the "ugly pig" of democracy, even though we do not know of any superior alternative at the moment, and instead find an "actually pretty pig," or a form of government that is

more just than we are obliged to pursue it. [46] Epistocracy, his chosen replacement, is meant to diminish the political power of the majority while simultaneously improving their moral character by keeping them away from the perversions of politics. It reaches, despite starting with a Williamsian interest in social scientific evidence, profoundly un-Williamsian
conclusions.

I propose that Williams' work offers a novel alternative to this anti-democratic jeremiad for two reasons. First, Williams' work provides an account of the relationship between identity and moral/political reasoning which departs from these critics' accounts. Namely, in earlier work but also in *Shame and Necessity* and *Truth and Truthfulness,* Williams develops a model of self-hood in which our capacity for ethical and political judgement is entirely derived from our relationships with others. Indeed, without the partiality and attachments provided by our group ties and the influence of others upon us, we simply would not be able to have definite values to begin with. Williams ultimately offers what some critics would describe as an accurate diagnosis of some of the central pathologies of contemporary democratic political life. His discussions of "wishful thinking," the allure of political "myth" and "superstition," and the modern threats facing the virtue of truthfulness in democratic societies, all reflect some of the important underpinnings of what seems most wrong with contemporary democratic politics. In other words, he offers an account of some of the worst forms of democratic bad behavior, what Brennan terms "incompetence." However, even though he shares many of the worries of these critics of democratic citizen competence, he argues that the

[46] On ugly and pretty pigs see: Brennan 2016, 205. Brennan's books contain a number of rhetorical tics which grate: Overgeneralization about data, the wanton proliferation of bullet-point lists, an overreliance on summaries of other author's positions, examples that allow him to engage in low-grade gloating all abound in each of his books. Sometimes these various predictions come together, when, for example, he dismisses objections to the fact, which he freely admits, that if he were empowered to create a voter qualification test it would disproportionately empower "white, upper-middle to upper-class educated, employed males," by claiming that "on implicit bias tests, I score many standard deviations lower than the average person" (Ibid 228). The fact that the results of a measure, whose specific methodology is still enormously controversial, is cited as incontrovertible proof that Brennan's motives are unimpeachable here prefigures many of the flaws of Brennan's general argumentative approach while also suggesting that, perhaps, Brennan is trying to convince himself of what he writes.

solution does not involve abandoning democracy or defending it in the sparest of instrumental terms. Instead, he proposes a range of solutions, mostly notably centered on rethinking the conditions in which democratic deliberation and discussion take place in order to overcome the challenges posed by these various threats. The problem with contemporary democratic politics, and forms that group identity has assumed within it, is not that people are somehow cognitively unfit to participate, or that group attachments undermine their ability to reason about politics, but instead that modern democracies lack both epistemic "guard-rails" to limit the spread of misinformation in the new-media eco-system, and also the sorts of institutions that affirm or promote inter-personal trust in democratic deliberation. For Williams, it is this lack of adequate concern for the conditions which ought to attend upon democratic life that is responsible for our current moment of democratic malaise as opposed to some existential fact about democracy itself.

Concern about the epistemic underpinnings of democracy is, as mentioned, driven or at least supported by the dispiriting behavior of citizens in liberal democracies today. Social scientists argue that polarization has become shorn from meaningful disagreements about policy and is instead primarily "affective" (Mason 2018). In other words, at the same time that voters' assessments of the trustworthiness and basic decency of members of the opposite party have hit an all-time low, they have shown greater policy *convergence,* suggesting that their disagreements are far more unbridgeable and have become something of a matter of identity. This partisanship metamorphosis has taken place in an era when misinformation and conspiracism have become "mainstream" phenomena—both in the sense that they are a ubiquitous feature of the discussion of politics in America, especially online (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018), and because the mantra of "just asking questions" has become the defining commitment of many political elites in the United States (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). Considered in this light, it is unsurprising that greater swaths of the American

public support the idea that any election result they dislike is simply illegitimate.[47] All this is, naturally enough, deeply antithetical to the basic spirit of a democratic society which, following Aristotle, minimally involves "ruling and being ruled in turn." Still less is it surprising that a wider range of democratic principles—from support for basic human rights to the importance of the peaceful transfer of power—have been atrophying year over year (Bartels 2020; Foa and Mounk 2016; Mounk and Foa 2020).

Relatedly, commentators have also increasingly begun to express concern about the basic competence of voters. These sorts of concerns are, to reiterate, hardly novel in the history of democracy, nor even in the history of the social sciences. For example, it is a long-accepted datum of American social science research that Americans are woefully uninformed about politics—and possess an embarrassingly shaky grasp on even the most rudimentary facts about politics. However, a range of particular historical developments have helped to spark renewed anxieties along these lines. First, the rise of right-wing populism, and right-wing populist leaders poses questions about the preferences and beliefs of democratic citizens across the globe.[48] These leaders, most of whom evince a contempt for the institutional practices and trappings of democratic life, as well as a range of authoritarian characteristics, have won the presidential elections in several high profile countries such as the United States and Brazil in recent years, and become dominant forces in parliamentary democracies such as Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. While their legislative agendas and record of achievements in office are mixed, given the wildly different political circumstances they find

[47] Overall faith in elections, in recent history, has been asymmetrical and often tied to inverse incumbency effects: The voters of a party who controls the White House have historically been confident that American elections are free and fair, while the party out of power feels the opposite. Norris, Garnett, and Grömping find that trust in conspiracy theories and populist values, independent of party orientation, are predictors of distrust in US elections. See: (Norris, Garnett, and Grömping 2020).

[48] While the dominant ideological space these movements occupy is right wing there are left wing analogues, particularly in the case of Venezuela and Bolivia. However, as my interest here is largely with the experience of North American and European democracies I will focus primarily on right-wing populism (which has been particularly influential in these countries).

themselves in, as a whole the populist movements have eroded democratic norms and institutions as well as profoundly mismanaged the economies they are entrusted with leading, ironically, to enormous economic pain for their constituents (Matt Phillips 2021). The fact that voters would willingly support such anti-democratic and, often, inept figures has helped to reinforce the older belief that voters are unqualified to critically assess the quality of the candidates put before them. This belief is further substantiated by similar examples of voter incompetence: Such as the nearly terminal short-sightedness demonstrated by British voters who chose to separate themselves from the European Union only to be surprised at the enormous social and economic ramifications that "Brexit" was to carry with it. This can be buttressed by a wide range of studies of American state-level ballot initiatives, many of which purport to show how myopia and political ignorance often see voters work against their own interests when given the chance.

Naturally, these different developments, the rise of extreme polarization and misinformation on the one hand and examples of poor voter decision-making on the other, are not necessarily of a piece or entirely inextricably linked. However, they represent the backdrop against which the "citizen competence" debate has taken place. Moreover, there is a sense that some of these troubling developments reflect some kind of darker fact about human cognition. In particular, one of the most common forms this argument takes is that people are ill-suited for democratic politics because of some innately tribalistic or group-centered facet to human nature itself (Chua 2018). All of these strands of democratic bad behavior, in one way or another, can be traced back to this propensity: Partisan misinformation finds a receptive audience because it appeals to our motivated desire to believe that our group is fundamentally good while members of rival parties are depraved, which seemingly overwhelms our capacity to employ unbiased reason (Ditto et al. 2019). Some locate the appeal of populism, and the rash of anti-liberal populist electoral successes noted above, as a function of its ideational component: The way that it divides the world into venial and corrupt elites

and a homogenous and virtuous people (Forgas and Crano 2021). The argument often continues that democracy is either unworkable or undesirable if human beings are unable to look beyond the interests of their group; voters who cannot reason in an impartial way, disconnected from their group loyalties are doomed, in other words, to reproduce in an irrational politics (Caplan 2007). As we will see some parties to this debate, especially Jason Brennan who I turn to now, contends that democratic self-government is incompatible with a basic fact of human nature: For Brennan what he sees the human propensity to form group attachments as irreconcilable with the kind of reasoning he believes democratic self-government requires. Here I will attempt to briefly summarize some of the most prominent arguments within Brennan's work before offering an account of Williams' own position.

Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* offers a skeptical critique of democracy. Brennan marshals a wide range of social scientific evidence along the lines described above: Ordinary voters are prone to a wide range of different cognitive biases, partisan motivated reasoning foremost among them. Asa political philosopher, however, his attention is unsparingly focused on the moral faults of democracy. In particular, Brennan is concerned with three discrete but interconnected problems with democracy as a form of government. First, according to Brennan, democratic government "makes us worse." In particular, Brennan argues that democracy encourages citizens to be ignorant and partisan but then empowers either those who are ignorant about politics or biased to the position of being able to exercise authority over the lives of others—something he finds to be morally unjustifiable. In particular, Brennan divides human beings into three archetypal classifications: Hobbits, Hooligans, and Vulcans. Hobbits are uninformed about politics, and often totally apathetic about the process as a whole. There is nothing wrong with this on Brennan's accounting; there is, as Brennan notes, a long-standing body of research which makes the case that it is rational be ignorant about politics in a democratic system. The bulk of political power, however,

accrues to the Hooligans, who represent the predominant share of voters in a democratic society. Hooligans look and sound like engaged citizens: They can cite relevant information about politics, offer evidence for their point of view, and can also formulate policy preferences, assess candidate quality, and all of the other normal functions required of democratic citizens. However, the quality of their reasoning is deeply biased. Hooligans are unrepentant partisans, and process information in a way that comports with their existing beliefs. Again, the system of democracy is to blame for these faults: It promotes a system of government in which "the most active people tend to be true believers who rarely talk to people who have contrary points of view and cannot articulate why someone might disagree with them" (Brennan 2016, 51).

Hooligans merely have a "taste" for politics in the same way that someone else might have a "taste" for a specific sports-team. This means, ultimately, that Hooligans try "to be faithful to the team [rather than] processing information in the most rational way" (Ibid 40). Their political identity exists prior to conscious thought, or at least exerts a kind of irresistible cognitive gravity: Once we form attachments to a particular group, it can "override our commitment to truth or morality," which Brennan sees as a damnable fault of a political system that, ultimately, empowers Hooligans to rule. Partisanship, Brennan writes, is corrupting as when criticizes the propensity of Democratic and Republican voters to prefer job applicants of their same ideology as "irresponsible and corrupt behavior," which he reasons, "is just the kind of behavior one would expect of hooligans. Politics makes us worse" (Ibid 233). What is wrong with Hooligans is, fundamentally that the process through which they reason about politics is corrupt, and thus whatever conclusions they reach about politics are *ipso facto* corrupt. Brennan does not accept, for example, the observation that democracies perform better than, say authoritarian governments do, especially when judged against

the standards of well-being and human flourishing he occasionally gestures towards.[49] Instead, even when democracies "get it right," they do so for the wrong reasons. The rule of the Hooligans is always unjust and morally arbitrary because of the weight that group attachments play in shaping their decision-making.

Brennan's final group, the Vulcans, stand apart from the intellectually negligible Hobbits and unreasonable Hooligans. Vulcans are, for Brennan, the ideal of impartial individual reason. They process information in a way that is entirely free from cognitive bias, and are determined to avoid error at all costs. They are, in a rather peculiar way, both "interested in politics and dispassionate," a perspective they adhere to because "they actively try to avoid being biased and irrational" (Ibid, 5). These rationalistic exemplars are, nonetheless, only a tiny fraction of the population, and thus do not exercise the same kind of influence within the political process that Hooligans or Hobbits, who are, per Brennan, apparently more likely on average to become Hooligans rather than Vulcans if they acquire information about politics, do. Brennan's ultimate normative argument is that democracy must be replaced by a system which replaces the judgement of the irrational with the "rule of the knowers," government, in other words, by Vulcan. This system of epistocracy, he claims is preferable to democracy because the latter can only be justified on purely instrumental grounds, and makes us appreciably "worse" on Brennan's terms. By forcing us to pick teams it makes us biased and corrupt when it does not encourage us to be ignorant. It is a moral imperative, he insists, that the more rational and informed among us exercise outsized influence in the political process.

[49] For example, in one passage Brennan writes that democracy is responsible for failing to eliminate poverty and for the proliferation of unnecessary wars (Brennan 2016, 24). However, this ends up being mere rhetoric at least in part because the standard of assessment, as I note below, ends up being something like a Platonic or Kantian one: Only decisions reached according to impartial reasoning are just, and the historical successes of democracy are as unjust as its failures because of the biased nature of the citizen decisions that led to them.

In Brennan's book the case *for* democracy is often presented as a kind of inherited prejudice, a defense of a social practice at variance with all the available social scientific data. Indeed, Brennan explicitly frames his argument in the language of social sciences at several junctures of the book, drawing on Mill to present democracy as a kind of long-running experiment: Whether or not democracy has "made us better" is a testable hypothesis, and if the available evidence suggests that the answer is no then we must consider the experiment a failure. This Joe Fridayish concern with "the facts" is evident when Brennan sets out to demonstrate the unworkability of alternative conceptions of democracy, namely deliberative democracy, which he dismisses in a rather breezy chapter that manages to mangle what most deliberative democrats actually argue.[50] All this is particularly galling given Brennan's insistence that epistocracy be treated differently.[51] There are, of course, few historical analogies to be drawn to what Brennan argues *for*, but regimes have certainly made epistocratic or technocratic claims to political authority, with no or minimal basis in democratic legitimacy.[52] Singapore and, perhaps, the popular understanding of China a decade ago, provide the best modern examples of states that, at the limit, were presented as autocratic but competent; scrupulously able to respond to problems like climate change without the messy inefficiencies and horse-trading democracy required. Setting aside, for a moment, how desirable the prospect of living in either society actually is, the existing evidence does not suggest that, on Brennan's terms, citizens are made "better" by elevating a class of Vulcans or other epistocratic elite

[50] This point has been noted in the critical reception the book has received. See: (Chambers 2018)

[51] He claims, in his examination of different schemes of epistocratic power, that he will avoid the "big pretty pig" problem of endorsing epistocracy simply because democracy is undesirable. However, despite the fact that he purports to devote a chapter to examining epistocracy in practice, he simply describes a range of possible epistocratic institutions without exposing them to anything like the scrutiny that he believes democracy deserves.

[52] By offering up a critique of democracy on entirely instrumentalist grounds, it is baffling that Brennan only grudgingly concedes that democracies perform much better, on average, along these lines than autocratic regimes. Indeed, this is dismissed out of hand because, even when a democracy succeeds according to the benchmarks proposed by Brennan it is unjust because individual voters make decisions incompetently. However, the relative awfulness of regimes that claim epistocratic qualifications to rule—such as the Jim Crow South—is seen as immaterial to its merits. See, on this point: (Stone 2019, 91)

to power. Of course, Brennan rejects such comparisons: Epistocracy, and the right to a competent government that grounds its claim to legitimacy, is meant to preserve an expansive set of individual rights while simultaneously guaranteeing a government that rules in the interest of the common good. However, while these extreme examples are not, on Brennan's terms, epistocracies they underscore a deep-seated tension at the heart of Brennan's argument.

Brennan's arguments are meant to preserve the *liberal* components of liberal democracy, and indeed his public efforts to advance the cause of libertarianism in America help to situate his concerns in *Against Democracy*. Brennan does not, as some other critics of democracy today do, see the sorts of bad behavior, or "teamism," he describes as a constitutive fact of human nature. People are capable of being Vulcans, and, the argument runs, it is only democracy that causes them to behave as Hobbits or Hooligans. The liberal concern for the inviolability of individual liberty and rights can, Brennan argues, be shorn from its historical associations with democracy and be better supported by the benighted rule of some educated, or perhaps enlightened, elite. Even in principle it is hard to see how an epistocratic state could possibly manage to combine an impartial, Vulcan-esque, concern for the well-being of its citizens with an unshakeable commitment to individual rights. While Brennan repeatedly disclaims any association between epistocracy and Plato's rule by philosopher kings, usually by emphasizing that he is not advocating for authoritarianism, the connections are impossible for him to escape. As with Plato, Brennan wishes to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, knowledge of the good and true in politics and the vulgar workings of conventional politics. Likewise, with enough procedural restrictions, Brennan hopes that a class of individuals will be empowered to pursue that truth without needing to kowtow to the irrationalities and deformities of public opinion. However, as with Plato's ideal state, the cost of all this is to create an extraordinarily illiberal politics: Once the epistocracy gets going, however we choose to constitute it, it's not clear why it should be expected to be bounded by the demands of individual rights.

Consider, for a moment, a problem like climate change. As far as social problems go it is unusual, as we have seen, because there is virtually no disagreement among scientific experts about its causes, and very little about how greenhouse-gases could be most efficaciously reduced, namely through a drastic system of taxation in developed countries, and a decidedly abrupt economic transition away from such the further production of them. Even if this would be a particularly easy decision for an epistocratic state to make, given how clear the scientific evidence is for what must be done, it would represent an enormous intrusion into the individual rights and well-being of everyone from the wealthy and powerful beneficiaries of the economic status-quo to the working poor who stand to suffer the most from the market dislocations. Brennan at times accepts this, writing that "the fact that something is controversial doesn't mean that there's no truth to the matter. Nor does it mean that we don't know what the truth is" (Brennan 2016, 223). The problem is that unless the right to competent government ultimately rests on some further moral principle, such as utilitarianism or Brennan's own preferred libertarianism, it does not seem the demands of competence and liberal individualism can coexist. Likewise, problems whose solutions are more ambiguous and ethically uncertain are even harder cases for epistocracy: abortion, how to distribute the scarce stock of transplantable organs, and how transgender folks ought to be treated under the law. The solutions to any of these topics will invariably involve making moral judgements that will not be universally accepted. Absent a process of democratic deliberation, it is hard to see why the "losers" ought to accept the workings of a "competent" government whose workings they may not be able to meaningfully influence.

Brennan's argument, for all of the realism it claims for itself, and its defense of epistocracy in supposedly instrumental terms, is little more than an entirely different kind of political moralism. This is partially a matter, as we have already seen, of failing to consider governments in historical terms and instead likening them to an experiment whose parameters the individual readers are at

liberty to alter. There is no sense of how these epistocratic reforms might be brought into being, and for all the disdain Brennan evinces for Habermas's famous description of the "unforced force of a superior argument," Brennan's own arguments for epistocracy have little more going for them beyond what he sees as their superior rationality. This is also evident in the very way that Brennan describes the purposes of government, as he takes it for granted that we ought to prefer the government that makes us, as citizens, better and, that conflict and disagreement in politics are pathological and ought to be minimized. These sorts of assumptions can only be sustained with a wildly optimistic view of the origins and purposes of government one that is again eerily Platonic. When Brennan writes in *Against Democracy* that there are certain things that states or rulers cannot legitimately do, the Williamsian question which follows is simple: Says who?[53] No amount of hard-heartedness on Brennan's part about the foibles of democracy, or what he sees as the moral necessity of disproportionately disadvantaging anyone who is not a white, affluent, and well-educated man, can conceal the fact that this moral view of politics is mostly an exercise in a kind of utopian wish fulfillment.[54] There is, as Williams' discussion of the liberalism of fear reminds us, reason to be suspicious that, if it came into being, rule by elites, even if selected by epistocratic means, would entail ghastly consequences for the least well-off, and it would be a truly unprecedented historical achievement if such a regime ended up governing in a way that could be described as competent on Brennan's terms.

[53] The same view of justifiable restrictions on state conduct is the theme of the book Brennan wrote after *Against Democracy*. The latter book *When All Else Fails* is a remarkable book—chronicling the forms of resistance to state power that, in Brennan's eyes and according to his libertarian political principles, are justified and under what circumstances. Here again, I would suggest, we return to Williams' question.
[54] It is hard, in view of Brennan's well publicized political commitments, not to see it as an exercise in partisan wish fulfillment as well. One of the ironies of the book is that at several junctures Brennan describes the American Democratic party as desperately dependent on the votes of the less educated, while the Republican party is the party of those with more civic awareness. This relationship did not survive the year Brennan's book was written, and indeed education is now a very reliable predictor of vote choice in America, just in the opposite direction.

To reiterate, Brennan wholeheartedly believes that human beings can be Vulcans, and that Vulcans ought to rule. However, as mentioned above, both contend that part of the problem of the incompatibility between democracy and human nature comes from the influence that identity plays in shaping our thinking. Democracy pushes us to join a side, to be on a partisan, ethnic, or religious team when we join the political fray. It compels us to create and consume conspiracy theories and misinformation to support the irrational things that supporting our side requires us to believe. It is, in large part, the desire to see our team that keeps us, collectively, from exercising the kind of impartial rationality that we would need to govern competently as a democratic body. Brennan insists, for example, that the problem is that democracy inflames this unjustifiable predisposition and keeps us from realizing our Vulcanic potential and sees democracy as unworkable given the outsized importance this non-rational conceptualization of identity plays in shaping our reason. The improper "fit" between what democracy requires of us and what the nature of human identity allows us to be is responsible for the various forms of civic incompetence we see today. The solution, of course, is to discard democratic self-government as a kind of benighted but antiquated relic of our bygone past. Whether that means restricting the franchise of epistocratic grounds—whether that means requiring voters to pass civic literacy exams, inserting some kind of epistocratic veto into the political process, or giving more votes to the educated and competent—the problem's created by our teaminess and propensity to believe and act on irrational nonsense can only be solved by taking action to limit the scope and powers of democratic government.

On Williams' terms, the political upshot of this argument is likely to fail the standards posed by understanding liberal democracy along the lines proposed in Chapter 3: Whatever its other advantages epistocracy is both likely to undermine the political power of most citizens and thus leave them in the unaccountable power of one group of elites or another. On historical grounds alone, as we have seen, there is little reason to suspect that these alternatives to democracy would do

better judged against Williams' own instrumental measure of liberal democracy's strengths. However reasonable a ground for rejecting the political conclusions of these criticisms this reply might be, it still leaves it entirely unclear whether or not Williams' own account of liberal democracy can account for, or offer a response to, the specific criticisms raised by both of these democratic sceptics. Williams' own discussion of identity and moral psychology in contemporary democratic societies, however, is sensitive to the kinds of criticisms that these authors raise. At the same time, Williams offers a way of understanding the pathologies of modern democratic societies that does not lead to the conclusion that liberal democracy is a fundamentally or fatally flawed system. In particular, Williams offers an account of ethical and political deliberation, in early papers, *Shame and Necessity,* and *Truth and Truthfulness* in which the presence of others, and of group attachments, is both a necessary feature for reaching anything like meaningful conclusions about what one ought to do or how one ought to live, in this way he undermines Brennan's account of reason. However, he also offers an account of political identity that emphasizes the positive and constructive role that others can play in combatting the worst excesses of citizen incompetence. Indeed, Williams' book *Truth and Truthfulness* provides a revealing set of insights into some of the anxieties that motivate Brennan, but ultimately affirms the importance of liberal democracy, when properly understood, as a system for responding to the worst impulses of its citizens. Williams' account, as we will see, does not locate the sources of these pathologies in democracy itself, but instead argues that it is the broader social landscape, and the degree to which it supports epistemic best practices and the social conditions necessary to foment interpersonal trust. It is these conditions, not democracy itself, that determines whether or not our identities undermine our capacity for exercising democratic authority.

II – Practical Necessity and Shame: Williams' Moral Psychology

It should be no surprise that Williams' work offers a range of insights on the topic of identity. As mentioned above, Williams' career began with a series of well-regarded papers on personal identity, and his later responses to critics testify to his enduring commitment to his early positions.[55] Here, however, I focus on a different facet of Williams' discussion of identity, namely I am interested in the different components of what one might call, and some have called (Lear 2004), Williams' account of moral psychology. I argue in this section that Williams' account of identity and its connections to moral and political decision-making offers a different way of conceptualizing this relationship, one that avoids the anti-democratic conclusions of many contemporary political psychologists. Williams' argument, at its core, accepts the irreducibility of other people, of group attachments, in the moral and political reasoning of individuals. He likewise acknowledges the reality of many of the same pathologies that concern commentators like Brennan. However, while he provides a sophisticated account of these perils his work suggests that these problems are the byproduct of structural conditions that are not intrinsic to liberal democracy itself. In other words, the dangers of "wishful thinking" and political myth, the terms Williams gives to the direst threats he describes, while ever-present, are particularly pressing today because of the problems at the heart of the most common ways we consume political information and discuss politics, and because of sharp declines in social trust. Indeed, I will argue that Williams' discussion suggests that liberal democracy, when properly supported by these structural factors, contains deliberative elements that ameliorate rather than exacerbate these contemporary problems.

I begin my discussion, first, by examining Williams' account of the moral emotion of shame and its role in his account of ethical reasoning. Williams holds that at a very fundamental level the expectations of others exert a wide-ranging influence on the character of our internal deliberations.

[55] Williams' review of Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations* and Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* both contain very direct rebuttals of criticisms they make in those books of his position. See (B. Williams 2014i, 2014l)

Following this, I turn to Williams' complex and multi-faceted account of sincerity, authenticity, and the relationship between identity and politics. In a later chapter of *Truth and Truthfulness* Williams takes up these chapters in a way that is characteristically William-sian: He draws on Diderot and Rousseau, literature and social psychology, and political and personal decision-making to weave an intricate web-like argument about the irreducible role that identity plays in shaping the content and quality of our reasoning. I conclude with a discussion of the further implications of this argument, namely how, in its acceptance of the foundational nature of wishful thinking in human thought, it rejects the basic thrust of the contemporary critics of democracy.

In an early essay, one collected in the second volume of Williams' philosophical papers *Moral Luck*, Williams outlines the later architecture of his discussion of shame. The paper, "Practical Necessity," examines a component of ethical reasoning which, Williams claims, plays a key role in the ethical framework of both the "Kantian moral agent" and the "Sophoclean hero." In both cases, these agents are governed, Williams writes, by the concept of "practical necessity," or certain actions they feel they *must* perform or they necessarily *cannot* perform. Williams' discussion here is mostly concerned with the conceptual structure of such necessities, as he insists, for example, that an agent who faces a practical necessity, or has what Williams calls an "ethical incapacity" ought to be understood as something which is unthinkable to the agent, a course of action they could not do intentionally, even if it is "literally," within their power to do.[56] This is, in a way, an extension of his more famous examination of internal and external reasons: While an outside observer might think that a certain course of action is, on some formal level, a possibility for a particular agent, Williams insists that, as a matter of internal deliberation, such options might be unimaginable—not just in the sense that an agent feels they have overwhelming reasons not to take a certain course of action, but

[56] This is indeed the way that Williams settles on describing the nature of these incapacities: They are things that the agent cannot do but unintentionally.

more concretely because their motivational set is such that they cannot even imagine pursuing that path. Williams notes, in the relatively short paper, that the structure of such practical necessities could be, seen as reflections of some further fact about an agent's character, but offers only hints about how the two might be related. However, even in this early discussion, Williams is clear that such necessities are connected with the agent's sense of self. As he writes:

> Conclusions of practical necessity, seriously arrived at in serious matters are indeed the paradigm of what one takes responsibility for. That is connected with the fact that they constitute, to a greater or lesser degree, discoveries about oneself. . . The recognition of practical necessity must involve an understanding at once of one's own powers and incapacities, and of what the world permits, and the recognition of a limit that is neither simply external to the self, not yet a product of the will, is what can lend a special authority or dignity to such decisions[.] (B. Williams 1981c, 130-131)

There are many themes here that Williams' later discussions of shame and political deliberation expand upon. The demands of one's character, Williams argues here, impose limits that are both a byproduct of choice but also somehow outside of the complete control of the agent. While one identifies with the choice imposed upon oneself, it would seem this choice is not selected through a process of unconstrained reasoning. In particular, these cases of practical necessity involve a kind of special revelation about oneself: these extreme cases help one to better understand who one is and what one's core commitments are. However, while Williams insists that this sort of necessity needs to be better understood, he also seemingly concedes that these are liminal cases. The themes of this early discussion, though, manifest themselves much more clearly in his later work—and play an important part in structuring his fuller account of identity.

In *Shame and Necessity* Williams returns to many of the major themes of "Practical Necessity," and develops a richer theory of ethical reasoning from them. Recall that Williams' book is meant to rebuke the "progressivist" picture of the pre-Platonic Greek worldview: Namely the idea that this period of Greek antiquity represents a period of utter ethical primitivism which we have, thankfully,

outgrown. At one crucial juncture Williams examines, as the title suggests, the role of "shame" as an ethical emotion. Most discussions of the Ancient Greeks, Williams observes, argue they lived in a "shame culture," in which the idea of internal ethical deliberation was practically non-existent. In the plays of the tragedians, the argument runs, agents were forced by extrinsic pressures, the demands of social expectations, the literal intervention of the gods, or unpredictable mystical forces, to behave a certain way and had no inner ethical life of their own. It is only with the work of Plato and eventually later moral theorists – the progressivist narrative continues - that the idea of a moral life freed from these influences comes into being. As Williams writes, in outlining the progressivist critique of figures like Ajax or Agamemnon, figures who insist they *must* make a certain choice:

> This desire [expressed by figures like Ajax or Agamemnon] provides a psychological pressure that the agents wrongly take for an absolute demand. What that desire may be depends on the case. It may be fear of the gods, or an unreflective disposition to fit in with the demands of public opinion or, at the Achillean limit, simply the project of massive self-assertion. But whatever the desire may be, the Kantian continues, the hidden structure of the "must" comes out the same. So long as it has not yet reached the unique categorical demand of morality itself, 'I must do this' can never mean more than 'this course of action is necessary if I am to have what I want or to avoid what I fear.' (B. Williams 1993, 76)

A simple desire to "avoid what you fear" and "pursue what you want," cannot be the basis of anything like a system of ethics. Thus, Williams writes, the modern criticism of this picture holds that outside of Antigone and/or Socrates ("meritorious exceptions in whom some moral illumination filtered through,") the Greeks prior to Plato come across to us as "young children in a Piagetian tale of moral development" (Ibid 77). The characterless moral self, is one shaped by the demands of reason and that utilize the more "transparent" moral emotion of guilt, a self that is, on this argument, superior to the primitive (and inherently conservative) Greek picture. Williams sets out to draw an equally sharp contrast between the modern framework and the one possessed by the ancient Greeks. However, his picture is meant to emphasize the virtues of the Greek account against its modern alternative.

Whereas the earlier account of agency, the one found in "Practical Necessity," made the claim that the demands of practical necessity represented a bridge between Kantian ethics and the behavior of the tragic Greek hero, in *Shame and Necessity* he makes it clear that the two are incompatible, and that the workings of practical necessity within the architecture of the moral emotion of shame are at odds with the workings of the Kantian moral project. His discussion of shame works in two directions: First, it offers a descriptive account of shame. Here his intention is to outline how, against the "progressivist" picture, the emotion of shame did provide a suitable basis for ethical reflection, and to assert that the traditional picture of the Ancient Greek "shame culture," is misconceived. However, Williams' argument also moves simultaneously in a prescriptive direction, as he contrasts the workings of shame against the modern emotion of guilt and argues that shame contains underappreciated virtues as an ethical emotion. In this subsection I will consider each of these directions in turn.

Williams' discussion of shame begins by arguing that many modern conceptions of shame, that it is simply about losing face in the eyes of others and that it is fundamentally egoistic, are "incorrect." If there is any truth to these criticisms it is "only at the end of a very long line, at a level where the issues involved are much more interesting and problematic than these handy dismissals would suggest" (Ibid 78). As Williams writes, the elementary feature of shame is "that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition" (Ibid). While it is often traditionally associated with nakedness, in the ancient Greek world shame covered a much wider variety of phenomena. The motivation to avoid feeling ashamed also, naturally, extends to "what people will say about one's actions" (Ibid 79) and shame has connections with fear, namely the fear of being spoken badly of. Shame, in addition, carries a social connotation, as the archaic Greeks used the word *nemesis* to describe the indignant reaction that one could have to one's own shameful actions or those of another. As Williams writes: "People have at once a sense of their own honour and a

respect for other people's honour; they can feel indignation or other forms of anger when honour is violated, in their own case or someone else's. These are shared sentiments with similar objects, and they serve to bind people together in a community of feeling" (Ibid 80). At this very basic level, shame is itself a byproduct of one's relations to others and their appraisals of what one has done.

Of course, at this basic level it is not clear how this understanding of shame offers anything to assuage the progressivist critics' claim that shame is just the pressure of public opinion in a different form. Some might mistakenly believe that shame "supposedly pins the individual's sense of what should be done merely on to expectations of what others will think of him or her," and that "Homeric shame involves merely adjustment to the prejudices of the community" (Ibid 81) Williams argues that this understanding of shame rests on two mistakes, one silly and one more interesting. The "silly" mistake is "to suppose that the reactions of shame depend on being found out, that the feeling behind every decision or thought that is governed by shame is literally and immediately the fear of being seen" (Ibid). This is a silly mistake, Williams proposes, because the workings of shame are, to a large extent, internalized. Many of the "operations" of social shame work through the "imagined gaze of an imagined other" (Ibid 82), who scrutinizes actions that are shameful to do, even if we are not caught doing them. This begs the question of what reactions or responses exactly this internalized or imagined is meant to provide; what sort of perspective does it provide? This leads Williams to his discussion of the more interesting objection. While one can feel shame at the reactions of a specific social group, Williams writes that the archaic Greek picture is more complex than that. An individual agent does not simply "internalize an other who is a representative of the neighbours" (Ibid 83), instead an agent is motivated to act a certain way because they share the attitudes in question. As a result, the internalized other that is so crucial to the workings of shame "need not be a particular individual or, again, merely the representative of some socially identified

group. He[57] is conceived as one whose reactions I would respect; equally he is conceived as someone who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed to him" (Ibid 84). Understood in this way, the internalized other carries with it real ethical weight. Indeed, because the internalized other is an amalgamation of both the imagined expectations of actual others, but also contains one's own perspective, this account of shame better captures "much of the substance of actual ethical life. As Williams writes, "[the other] is indeed abstracted and generalized and idealized, but he is potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, and of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me" (Ibid). Here Williams returns the reader to the language of practical necessity and the example of Ajax. Ajax, faced with the humiliation of having been tricked into slaughtering the Greek expedition's sheep when he thought he was earning his final triumph over Odysseus, announces that he must kill himself to the audience. When Ajax says that he *must* go, Williams writes, he is expressing a self-appraisal formed out of a wide range of different ethical materials, but all of which point in the same direction. He could not respect a person who behaved the way he did, nor could his father and his warrior peers who form an important part of his internalized other, and thus he cannot continue to exist in the world under the cloud of shame at what he has done. The workings of this internalized other are, necessarily, more complicated than the progressivist picture allows, and they importantly are a mixture of both the agent's own perspective and the views of certain important others. This fact,

[57] Williams stresses that his use of the male pronoun "carries no implications of gender," though this might not comfort a reader today. *Shame and Necessity* was written during a period in which Williams was, by his own admission, becoming increasingly interested in questions of gender, and worried about the potential implicit sexism in his own past work. Martha Nussbaum writes elsewhere that Williams was, "as close to being a feminist as a man of his generation could be," which is a strikingly ambiguous remark given a) the time in which Williams was active, and b) the fact that Nussbaum offers this assessment as context for the somewhat complicated sexual tension she argues lurked in the background of their decades-long friendship. Only a true biography, which this dissertation is not and could not be, can shed more revealing light on these sorts of questions.

and Williams' additional examples, are meant to speak to the fact that shame is a more complicated emotion, one with a stronger claim to act as a critical component of contemporary systems of ethics.

This leads into the second major theme of Williams' discussion, the relationship between shame and guilt and the virtues of shame in particular. The contrast between guilt and shame, Williams suggests, is a nuanced one. First, while the basic experience of shame is "connected with sight and being seen," guilt is "rooted in hearing, the sound in oneself of the voice of judgement" (Ibid 89). While shame is connected with the desire to not be seen, to hide or "sink through the floor," guilt is "dominated by the thought that even if I disappeared, it would come with me" (Ibid). However, the contrasts run deeper than even this. Guilt, Williams argues, is exclusively concerned with "acts or omissions." In other words, I feel guilty over what I have done or not done. Shame on the other hand, runs deeper than this. Shame can be elicited by acts or omissions, but "it need not be: it may be some failing or defect" (Ibid 90). Williams draws out this contrast by providing the example of someone who, in a fit of pique, plans to send a particularly mean-spirited letter to someone else. The sender, upon finding out that the letter has been returned to them unseen by its intended recipient, because of some mailing error, would likely not feel guilt about having sent it in the first place, since it was never seen and therefore could not have caused any harm, but would likely be ashamed of themselves all the same. Shame, because it reaches further than guilt to who one is, can also be "expressed in attempts to reconstruct or improve oneself" (Ibid). The contrast also extends to the content of the actions these emotions apply to. Guilt is "closely related to conceptions of morality," and Williams believes this is why modern "moralists" prefer guilt over shame. Shame, by contrast is "neutral" on the distinction between moral and non-moral qualities, because "we, like the Greeks, can be mortified or disgraced by a failure in prowess or cunning as by a failure of generosity or loyalty." Shame, as a result, is for Williams a more fruitful basis for a system of ethics. As he writes: "Shame looks to what I am. It can be occasioned by many things—

actions. . . or thoughts or desires or the reactions of others. Even where it is certainly concerned with an action, it may be a matter of discovery to the agent. . . what the source of the shame is, whether it is found in the intention, the action, or an outcome" (Ibid 93). Shame, by virtue of having a wider range of concerns can also help to make better sense of the operations of guilt. Whereas guilt "seems a more transparent moral emotion than shame," this is only because guilt is

> more isolated than shame is from other elements of one's self-image, the rest of one's desires and needs, and because it leaves out a lot even of one's ethical consciousness. It can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help to understand one's relationship to those happenings, or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only shame can do that, because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others. (Ibid 94)

Williams argues that guilt is also intimately connected with a picture of moral identity in which the true moral self is "characterless." As he writes, "I am provided by reason. . . with a knowledge of the moral law, and I need only the will to obey it. The structures most typical of shame then fall away: what I am, so far as it affects the moral, is already given, and there is only the matter of discerning among temptations and distractions what I ought to do." Such a picture "leaves only a limited positive role to other people in one's moral life. Their reactions should not influence one's moral conclusions, except by assisting reason or illumination" (Ibid 95). On this picture of moral autonomy, these others and certainly the weight of internalized social expectations are supposed to play no role in shaping what one does, lest, in Williams' words, "morality is thought to have skidded into. . . heteronomy" (Ibid). On this familiar picture, unless the individual forswears the sorts of influences that are central, in their internalized form, to the operations of shame, then their choices are not truly their own. As we might expect, Williams believes that this offers a stilted picture of ethical life, a weakness that shame does not share.

In discussing Williams' account of shame at this great length, my ambition is not to valorize shame against guilt or explore more fully what a rehabilitated ethics of shame, drawn from Williams' discussion might look like: That would be an altogether different and equally worthy project. Instead, I want to highlight two features of this discussion that are relevant, first, to the dissertation as a whole, and second to the central preoccupation of this chapter. At the broader level of the dissertation, there is a very straightforward connection between Williams' discussion of shame, and the method of political theorizing I have identified in Williams' work. Notice that, for example, just as the aim of "scepticism without reductionism" is to begin the process of social and political critique from within a particular form of life, to utilize what is "ethical bedrock" to protect certain Enlightenment values like freedom, social justice, and truthfulness, Williams' account of shame operates in similar fashion. Shame, as an emotion of moral deliberation, stems from the attachments and values that matter most to the individual. The process Williams describes in developing his account of shame is one in which ethical deliberation is grounded, concretely, on the role that these factors play in shaping our reasoning. Just as the sorts of problems philosophy ought to tackle should, ideally, be those of genuine social importance, Williams' discussion of shame lays a great deal of emphasis on constitutive ties and the seemingly irresistible influence that a socially derived sense of identity plays in shaping our choices. However, it is this interconnection between the social and the individual that is crucial to my argument in this chapter.

Turning back to that more specific argument, I want to emphasize that Williams' discussion of shame, and its relationship with guilt, is built on a model of identity that presumes that human reasoning about matters of ethical consequence is not a solitary process. There is something unnatural or perverse, in Williams' eyes, about the ambition to build an account of moral reasoning on a self that is, at least importantly, characterless, where the influence of others is seen as inappropriate. Instead, as Williams' account of the relationship between the two concludes, as a

matter of fact, the selves we employ when we make decisions on matters of ethical and, as we will soon see, political significance are importantly shaped by our relationship to others. These ties are so fundamental to how we navigate these choices that, like Ajax, they place demands of practical and inescapable necessity upon us. The weight of shame limits the kinds of choices that are open to us. Likewise, for Williams, the desire to stand outside the influence of others—both the actual guidance of those we admire or respect, or the internalized and idealized expectations we draw from them—is antithetical to the nature of ethical reasoning. The particular virtue of shame is that it draws our attention to the reactions of others, but it is also crucially connected to how we see ourselves. My shame stems from my failure to be the person I aspire to be, this self that is the focus of my aspirations is, fundamentally, a byproduct of the influence of relevant others but it is also conclusively *mine*. The project of trying to disentangle where the influence of others stops and where my own independent moral reasoning begins is ultimately foolhardy given the foundational role that these internalized appraisals play in shaping who I think I am. Shame on Williams' account is not inherently conservative, either, though. While it is true that I cannot transcend the weight of identity—in the way that attempts to construct a characterless moral self urge me to—shame is an emotion that can be deployed in the interests of reforming and remaking myself. I might discover that my actions are out of accordance with my sense of who I want to be. I might feel, for example, that I have been living a lie, and wish to strip away the attachments that fail to live up to the demands that my internalized other imposes upon me. These considerations bring us to Williams' fuller discussion of identity and its connection to social life, to which we now turn.

III – Identity, Truthfulness, and Democratic Life

The source of Williams' discussion, Chapter 8 of *Truth and Truthfulness*[58], is a perfect encapsulation of what makes reading Williams' work both so rewarding and so difficult. It calls to mind, in its own way, each of the difficulties Fricker describes in the first chapter of this dissertation; it is at once both wide-ranging and conversational, tightly focused and yet suggestive. The book as a whole is, as I mentioned above, an examination of what Williams calls "the virtues of truthfulness." These two virtues, accuracy and sincerity, are concerned with discovering the truth and telling it, respectively. Williams' discussion, concerned as it is with the status of these virtues in contemporary liberal democracies, touches on the question of what is needed to sustain these virtues, and how accuracy and sincerity can be promoted at a social level. As the chapters unfold, Williams examines not just the virtues in themselves but also the relationship of these virtues to other relevant topics. Chapter 8 is best understood in the context of that larger discussion. It is, on its face, an examination of the relationship between the virtue of sincerity and its connection to authenticity. It begins with a comparison of the work of Rousseau and Diderot. Each author offers, Williams argues, a different conception of the relationship between sincerity and authenticity, and ultimately as a result, a different account of the politics of sincerity.

Williams argues that Rousseau's work offers a very straightforward explanation of this relationship: If the individual is totally sincere, if they are able to see past the distorting influences and corruptions that life in society afflicts us with, then they will be able to recognize an authentic self that is completely virtuous. Williams links this idea to a range of Rousseau's different writings, most notably his autobiographical *Confessions.* Rousseau insists throughout that book that, in spite of his various betrayals and misdeeds, he is fundamentally a virtuous person. In particular, he presents his bad behavior as "transitory," somehow distinct from his "real character," or "true self," which is

[58] As with several of the later chapters of *Truth and Truthfulness,* Chapter 8 began as a separate article, "The Politics of Trust" published several years earlier. See:

ultimately virtuous. As Williams writes, "The actions in which [Rousseau] harms others turn out to be mere episodes, not expressions of a settled disposition. Moreover, what produces them is weakness, not an active desire to harm. Both these devices help to move these actions away from his real self, for which he expresses considerable moral esteem" (B. Williams 2002a, 179). As Rousseau presents his own story, it is the presence of others that is the ultimate cause of his vices. Since, as his work makes clear, sincerity is his primary ethical watchword, it is ultimately the failings of others, or their malicious designs, which cause him to fall short of the kind of radical transparency he endorses.

This self-obliging understanding of sincerity has severe implications both for Rousseau's purposes in the *Confessions*, but also for his social and political thought, Williams argues. Rousseau's efforts at autobiography vindicate, at least in part, Hume's observation that while Rousseau intends "seriously to draw his own picture in its true colors," there is nobody who "knows himself less" (Ibid). However, there are deeper problems for the account of society. He draws up his second *Discourse* and *The Social Contract*. Williams catalogues these difficulties by noting that if we take the lesson Rousseau took from his experience at face value, then we will be left to conclude that the "sincere man of sensibility ends up alienated from society altogether, where 'society' seems to mean, simply, everyone else." The problem is, of course, that Rousseau believes that sincerity is to be the most important human virtue, and so it is incumbent on him to explain, if human beings are to share any kind of life together, what is wrong with society as it stands. This, Williams argues, is the diagnosis that Rousseau provides in the *Discourse on the Origins and Basis of Inequality*, and Rousseau's solution to make society safe for sincerity comes in *The Social Contract.* As Williams writes of the latter work:

> Rousseau tries to find forms of political organization, suitable to different places and people, that will allow the expression of a general will that is necessarily virtuous and

> transcends personal self-interest, and nevertheless allows each individual to be free. Such a polity implies that the real self that will be sincerely revealed under its influence, will be virtuous. Freedom will consist in living in accordance with one's real self, so that laws that elicit that real self, allow virtue to express itself and not be suppressed by the distortions of a corrupt environment, will, in the famous phrase, 'force one to be free (Ibid, 181).

This, to return to the theme of Williams' discussion in chapter 8, is the basis of Rousseau's account of authenticity: If I can see past the perverting influence of a society defined by dishonesty, competition, and inequality, I will find a real self that combines these citizenly virtues along with a sense of honor and compassion. However, Williams quickly contrasts this understanding of the self, and the relationship between sincerity and authenticity, against an entirely different model drawn from Diderot.

Specifically, Williams' discussion of Diderot's account of the self is drawn from the latter's story *Rameau's Nephew*. The conversation that the story recounts is between a narrator like figure Moi and another character Lui, who is meant to be Jean-Francois Rameau. The reader is made to understand that Lui survives by flattering the rich—a process that requires him to act as a social chameleon—and that he undergoes wild swings of mood as the conversation progresses. However, as Lui notes at one point, he is not inconsistent:

> Devil take me if I know at the end what I am. In general, I have a mind as round as a ball and a character as straight as a willow: never false if I have the slightest interest in being true, never true if I have the slightest interest in being false. . . I have never reflected in my life, before I say something, or while I am saying it, or after I have said it (Ibid, 188).

As Williams observes, Lui is emblematic of a line of thinking in Diderot's work where the self is "something constantly shifting and reacting and altering; as a swarm of bees; as a clavichord or harp or other instrument, with the wind or some such force playing on it" (Ibid 190). Lui's behavior shifts to meet the needs of his audience, of what they require him to be, and his character is meant to suggest that "feelings, needs, passions, identifications, actually come and go: in some people less

than in others, and in most people less than in him" (Ibid). One of the messages of the conversation, Williams is quick to point out here as elsewhere that the story is open to a range of different interpretations, is that "it is a universal truth, not just a special feature of modernity that human beings have an inconstant mental constitution that needs to be steadied by society and interaction with other people" (B. Williams 2002a, 191). Modernity, because of the damage it has done to older legitimating myths, might make this process of steadying particularly difficult, but there is, unlike in the picture proposed by Rousseau, on Diderot's account no single pure self for sincere self-reflection to locate. Lui is sincerely ephemeral, and it is only in his connections to others that he is steadied, that his commitments become firmer. For Williams it is this model of the self that can make better sense of questions of identity and authenticity, and Diderot's discussion provides him with the foundation for his subsequent discussion of the topic of identity.

Williams contends that Diderot's depiction of Lui's internal inconstancy offers a range of advantages when it comes to understanding not just sincerity but the entire mental structure of belief and deliberation. First, it helps to account for the fact that many kinds of belief are less stable than discussions in philosophy often make them seem. Sincere declaration of a belief is not the same thing as an unwavering commitment to it, and the figure of Lui helps to demonstrate this. Some beliefs, namely "memories of past experiences" or "knowledge of standing states of the world," must be, by nature, more stable and less affected by "the weather of the mind," Williams writes, or one would not describe them as beliefs at all (Ibid). However, for a much wider set of phenomena that falls under the heading of belief Williams argues that Diderot's picture more accurately captures the way that human beings often waver. Most of the time, Williams writes, our "narrative understandings of the past. . . estimates of other people, or evaluative outlooks," are not "unchanging dispositional state[s], steadily ready to be activated in declaration or action," instead such beliefs are more amorphous and more clearly subject to change (Ibid). Diderot's picture of the

mind emphasizes this element of variability, but it also shows how it is our interaction with others that helps to "steady" us and provide the mechanisms through which we form our beliefs. As in the case of Lui, it is the presence of others that pushes us to form a stable sense of self. We are all engaged in "a practice which socializes people into having such beliefs," in which "the basic mechanism depends on the fact that there are others who need to rely on our dispositions because we, up to a point, want to rely on theirs. We learn to present ourselves to others, and consequently to ourselves, as people who have moderately steady outlooks or beliefs" (Ibid, 192). Unlike the Rousseauian picture of the mind, in which individuals have a transparent self-understanding, Williams here claims that Diderot demonstrates how it is that "we need each other in order to be anybody" (Ibid 200).

Second, *Rameau's Nephew* also offers a clearer sense of the way that "wishful thinking" influences internal deliberation, both for good and for ill. Williams notes that one of the most influential pictures of internal deliberation is the one offered by Plato in *The Republic*, in which rationality and irrationality clash over control of an individual like, in Williams' words, "a quarrelsome council" (Ibid 194). This image, however, Williams writes, is deeply confused, in part because it imagines these competing impulses as "several different and equally organized voices" inside the agent, which only begs the question of how these mini-agents' behavior is to be explained (Ibid 195). Instead, Williams argues that Diderot's description of Lui offers a more realistic account: The agent is "awash with many images, many excitements, merging fears and fantasies that dissolve into one another," and this model leads to an entirely different set of social and political consequences. Namely, as Williams argues, in this more complicated picture of the infrastructure of the mind, there is room for desire, the "standing commitments" against which an agent judges all courses of action, to influence the way that an agent assess the truth of some factual proposition. However, even more nebulous hopes and fears can influence the process. While the commitments

and desires of an agent at least have some factual content to them, they are shaped by what the agent believes to be true about the world, and there is room for "mere wishes," which are based solely on what one would like to be true, to play a role in shaping these deliberations. As part of deciding what to believe or what to do, the desirability of a certain state of affairs obtaining can, when joined to more fleeting affective states, begin to count as proof that the state of affairs is possible or even likely. Williams' general argument is that there are few clear boundaries between the cognitive mechanisms for formulating beliefs about the world from those that shape our desires and wishes. As Williams writes, "All practical thinking is full of wishes, in the most general sense of the term in which wishes can occur on the route both to belief and to desire, there is no mystery about the fact that. . . an agent may easily find himself committed to their content in the wrong mode" (Ibid 198). Thus, to imagine the divisions between desire and belief, rationality and irrationality, as somehow given in advance is a mistake for Williams. These dichotomies cause us to "overlook subtle problems within the economy of desire itself, notably the fact that to distinguish between a desire and a mere wish is an achievement, and, to a significant degree, a cognitive achievement" (Ibid). On Williams' account, wishful thinking is an irreducible component of our mental infrastructure, but it is the role that others play that determines the social consequences of this propensity.

As we have seen above, the prevailing assumption among critics of democracy is that the influence of others—either through group ties or commitments to one's "team"—undermines the capacity for clear-headed rational thought. Individuals rationalize and invent elaborate partisan fantasies precisely because their allegiance to their side demands that they do so. Williams' account is different, or at least it is not committed to the same grim view of the relationship between political reasoning and attachments to others. Others can, given the right circumstances, help to suppress rather than stoke the dangers posed by wishful thinking. In particular, Williams points out "the very obvious truth" that others can help us resist the temptations of wishful thinking. Namely, Williams

emphasizes that by deliberating with others, I come to find that "your wishes are not mine—possibly not in their content, certainly not in their effects," which can help us to "sustain each other's sense of reality, both in stopping wishes' becoming beliefs when they should not, and also in helping some wishes rather than others to become desires" (Ibid 198). As with Williams' discussion of shame, we find that wishful thinking can play a constructive role, as when our wishes cohere around a desire to remake ourselves, to bring about some positive change, or to encourage the beliefs needed to sustain some common life together. However, of course, Williams acknowledges the darker side of this same process, when, "in helping you to decide, I may reinforce your fantasy, and we may conspire in projecting our wishes into a deceptive social hologram" (Ibid). If we accept the picture of the individual offered by Diderot, however, there is no way to avoid these risks. Different forms of social organization may help create a self that is steadier, less idiosyncratic, and do so in a way that "will serve the purposes of co-operation and trust," but there is little we can do to shake the need for others to help us determine what we stand for, or as Williams writes in an earlier version of the same chapter, to determine who we are at our "very essence" (B. Williams 1998).

This is, for Williams, an especially pressing problem because the circumstances of modernity pose "two problems that are particularly pressing in their combination" (Ibid 200). Since the advent of the Enlightenment, Williams argues, liberal societies have sought to find "a basis for shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive. . . nor dependent on mythical legitimation" (Ibid). The second, personal problem involves the need individuals continue to feel to stabilize their individual self "into a form that will indeed fit these political and social ideas, but which can at the same time create a life that presents itself to a reflective individual as one worth living. . . by reinventing in a more reflective and demystified world assurances that we taken in an earlier time (or so we imagine) as matters of necessity" (B. Williams 2002a, 201). This is the basis of the modern

search for authenticity, and in particular for a social identity that one can reflectively endorse as, again, reflecting what who we essentially are. However, in the search for an identity that can be mine, the tension between these problems becomes particularly acute. Namely, there is a real question of what sort of identity might be sufficient to fulfill the demands of stability: The attachment cannot be purely voluntary—if I could dispose of my identity at will, as someone picks up or puts down a hobby, then it clearly cannot carry the kind of psychological weight it needs to exercise to stabilize my sense of who I am. It also cannot be a purely factual recognition. While, as a matter of fact, ethnic identity is one of the more widely shared and politically important forms identity can take, that does not mean it exercises some illimitable influence over the perspective of an individual. Williams invokes the example of Coleman Silk, the main protagonist of Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, as an example. In the novel Silk comes to reject his identity as a Black man. After recognizing the particular burdens that this identity places on him he, quite simply, creates a new identity and abandons his old life for one where he is freer to discover who he is and what he wants. The example of Silk is meant to prove that the discovery of identity must be something different than factual discovery: It needs to be a particular kind of recognition and acknowledgement, something that—much like the workings of practical necessity and shame—emerges from deeply inside the individual agent but yet also is joined to something that is outside them and beyond their will alone to shape. Here Williams again returns to the contract between Diderot and Rousseau: The search for an authentic life cannot be a matter of individual self-discovery. Instead, the kind of identity that can meet the demands of modernity has to be largely shaped by one's interactions with others. As Williams writes,

> In the social and political case, where the presence of other people is vital, sincerity helps to construct or create truth. Drawn to bind myself to the others' shared values, to make my beliefs and feelings steadier (to make them, at the limit, for the first time into beliefs), I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them, or perhaps I become my

> interpretation of their interpretation of what I have sincerely declared to them. The sense that I am contributing to this, that it is a project, fills out the idea that acknowledgement is more than mere factual discovery, while at the same time the sense that there is discovery involved is related to the need to resist fantasy in making sense of my beliefs and allegiances in this way. (Ibid, 204)

This is, in many ways, the culmination of most all of what Williams wrote about the topic of identity. Here it is even clearer than in his earlier discussions of shame and practical necessity that it is the existence of others who provide me with my ethical bearings, and it is only through my interactions with them that I can form a "steady" identity, one that is both uniquely mine but also to a large extent shared with others. We can read in these lines the same spirit that animated Williams' earlier discussion of the internalized other whose reactions formed the cornerstones of my ethical consciousness. In both cases, the basis of my identity begins in my interactions with others—it is their presence that helps me to resist fantasy and determine who I am.

How though does this relate back to the broader themes of this chapter and the dissertation as a whole? How do these considerations respond to the critics of democracy who argue that human beings are too biased and partial to govern themselves? It does so in at least two ways. First, it suggests that as a factual matter, we cannot separate the process of individual reasoning from its roots in a life shared with others. This is, on the one hand, a rebuke to Brennan. Brennan's understanding of reason, is one in which only reasons for action chosen impartially, from a process of reasoning which is at a deep level, characterless, are acceptable. The picture Brennan draws is one in which the operations of desire, especially those I share with others, are corrosive to the process of internal deliberation. However, his picture owes much to the Platonic model that Williams criticizes here. He grounds his defense of the rule of the knowers on the argument that hooligans are too biased, too willing to allow their commitment to "their side," overcome their ability to reason dispassionately and abstractly. The fact that they cannot cut themselves off from the influence of others in forming their opinions is taken, ipso facto, as proof of their incompetence. Williams'

discussion of Diderot's Lui is meant to show that the latter is an entirely false picture of the nature of reasoning about anything, but about politics in particular. Vulcans, the perfectly rational humans who are uniquely suited to rule, for example, are portrayed as entirely free of any "cognitive bias" which might distort their reasoning; they are deliberately "dispassionate" about politics because "they actively try to avoid being biased and irrational" (Brennan 2016, 37). The problems with the rest of us, Brennan makes clear, is that we are partial and that, evolutionarily, we "are biased to form groups, and then identify ourselves strongly with that group," in a way that inhibits the quality of our reasoning, in a way that creates our partiality and hence leaves us incapable of processing information in an entirely Vulcan-esque manner. Williams' account of moral psychology shows why this notion of reasoning, and the problems of partiality are so stilted and unnatural. There is something deeply inhuman about the Vulcans that Brennan describes, and this is at least in part because—from their solitary point of view—the very connections that animate all forms of political life must seem entirely meaningless. Williams' contention is that, at a very fundamental level, the character of our reasoning is always partial, always driven by our relationship to others.

However, the argument against these anti-democratic thinkers extends beyond this disagreement about the nature of reason. On the one hand, Williams' discussion of the risks of wishful thinking undermines the basic causal story that Brennan tells about democracy and human nature. On Brennan's account, democratic self-government exacerbates certain features of human behavior in a way that leads people to behave in the various wretched ways documented above. However, by arguing that the risks of wishful thinking and widespread self-deception are nearly universal, Williams articulates a different set of causes for the sorts of pathological behavior these other thinkers lament, and argues that democracy plays a different, constructive role in challenging at least some of the threats they describe. For Williams, deliberation and identity only devolve into the pathological when a broader range of problems beset a particular society. Namely, what we saw

Williams describe as "the politics of myth," in chapter two can only take root in a society in which the virtues of accuracy and sincerity have been left neglected. Accuracy, basically, is derived from the desire to overcome self-deception and wishful thought and is nurtured, Williams writes, by the shared esteem of "getting it right." Likewise, sincerity is a function, entirely of social trust. For Williams it is the way that these virtues are supported by social life as a whole that will determine whether or not citizens fall prey to misinformation, for example. Citizens will only feel the need to deal sincerely with those they trust, and unless the desire to "get it right," is widely shared they will be unlikely to doggedly pursue the truth. In a way this returns us to Williams' discussion of identity: If the conditions under which I form my identity, and the trusted others I shape it with, help me to esteem these virtues of truth, then I will esteem them. However, as Williams notes, it is not always the case that "the political, social, and institutional expressions of [one's] identity operate in good faith" (Ibid 205). However, these considerations suggest, as Williams notes, that it is the wider range of social practices and institutions that determine the degree to which truthfulness remains an esteemed social value, and the politics of identity avoid their darker and more deceitful outcomes. We need to look beyond the form of government alone, in other words, to understand whether or not the broader social conditions are conducive to generating these conditions.

Williams, as we have seen in chapter two, offers a fairly bleak assessment of these conditions at the time he was writing *Truth and Truthfulness*. The media ecosystem of the early 21st century, especially the Internet and the ideal of an unregulated marketplace of ideas that it was founded upon, was the principal object of his suspicion. As we saw in that chapter, his central objection was that it created a distorted and unreal picture of political reality. There is little reason to revise his estimate considerably upwards, at least as it concerns the power of the Internet to help disseminate truthful information. However, the problem is considerably worse when it concerns the question of trust. As we have also seen, in the absence of social trust Williams worries not only that sincerity will

fail, but that the processes of interpersonal deliberation, which are the cornerstones of forming a worthwhile shared sense of identity, will in turn lead to the creation of a "deceptive social hologram." Williams did not live long enough, for example, to have seen the rise of social media, but it seemingly confirms some of his worst fears about the relationship that exists among sincere deliberation, trust, and identity. Social media has grown in prominence both as a source of political news and also as a forum for political discussion as well (Matsa 2021). It is notoriously ill-suited for both tasks. The historically permissive approach to content moderation exercised by most social media sites has enabled misinformation to flourish, but at a deeper and more troubling level the very architecture of social media helps to foster a form of identity that is deeply antithetical to the aims of create a politics of trust. In particular, as Settle notes in her study of Facebook, the very design of Facebook's news-feed, and the limited range of "reactions" that its interface allows, contributes to ideological polarization (Settle 2018). Namely, users feel encouraged to "perform" for their peers, demonstrating their partisan bona fides to the people within their social network by adopting political positions that correspond to what they think someone on their side ought to believe—even when this no longer reflects their own view of an issue (Settle 2018). These problems are not limited to Facebook alone. As one author, who uses Williams to help diagnose and understand the various challenges that misinformation does (and does not) pose to democratic deliberation, the proliferation of partisan misinformation helps to skew the process of public opinion formation and thus, ultimately, undermine the epistemic "truth tracking" functions of liberal democracies.

As Jia Tollentino argues in her essay "Putting the 'I' in Internet," the governing impulses of social media and the contemporary Internet have distinctively harmful political and social effects, ones that directly contribute to the decline of trustful deliberation. For Tollentino, drawing on the work of Erving Goffman, the individual social media user is encouraged to act a part while they are online. Users, in a way that recalls Williams' discussion, act in the way they believe their audience

wants them to. Namely, they are encouraged, because of the nature of the online news cycle, to weigh in on the issues of the day as a form of self-promotion, to develop a form of identity which places an outsized emphasis on ideological consistency, and to performatively subsume their interests in the name of better fitting into the group they most identify with. These demands are encouraged by the architecture of these digital spaces. The hashtag, the algorithms that YouTube uses to serve up increasingly more extreme content to its users, and the general shield that Internet anonymity offers people all, in their own ways, shape the nature and possibilities of political discussion online. As Tollentino writes:

> The idea was that social media would give us a fine-tuned sort of control over what we looked at. What resulted was a situation where we—first as individuals, and then inevitably as a collective—are essentially unable to exercise control at all. Facebook's goal of showing people only what they were interested in seeing results, within a decade, in the effective end of shared civic reality. And this choice, combined with the company's financial incentive to continually trigger heightened emotional responses in its users, ultimately solidified the current norm in news media consumption: today we mostly consume news that corresponds with our ideological alignment, which has been fine-tuned to make us feel self-righteous and mad. (Tollentino 2019, 30)

These psychological pressures, and the constant engagement that social media seeks to generate, create, in Tollentino's eyes, a wildly distorted reality online, one which undermines some of the most key human experiences of self-hood. "The Internet," she writes, "is governed by incentives that make it impossible to be a full person while interacting with it. In the future, we will inevitably be cheapened by it. Less and less of us will be left, not just as individuals, but also as community members, as a collective of people facing various catastrophes" (Tollentino 2019, 32). By pressuring individuals to abandon any sense of broader connection, beyond the narrow groups they most closely identify with online, the Internet, Tollentino argues, destroys the ability of these citizens to engage with those this disagree with. However, by pressuring us to avoid inconsistency at all costs, and by promoting the kind of self-righteous engagement Tollentino describes, the Internet

undermines a more basic human impulse: the ability to change one's mind. The model of political engagement the Internet, or at least a digital public sphere in which social media plays an outsized role, engenders is one that rejects "culpability, inconsistency, and insignificance," which subsumes our own individual experiences and differences in the name of fitting us into a politically undifferentiated whole (Tollentino 2019, 33). To return to Williams' worries, the form of identity that the Internet fosters, in other words, is not one conducive to a trustful politics. Instead, it suppresses idiosyncrasy and, by allowing us to avoid engaging with those whom we disagree with, very naturally contributes to the dangers of wishful thinking. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a clearer example of these dangers than the pronounced recent growth of online misinformation.

Given the very nature of social media's business model, to monetize user attention by showing individuals what they want to see, it is little wonder that a new form of conspiracism has taken root over the last decade. As Muirhead and Rosenblum note in their study of contemporary conspiratorial thinking, conspiracy theories—with their elaborate causal mechanisms and efforts to provide evidence—have been a central feature of American politics since the time of the Revolutionary War (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020). However, what Muirhead and Rosenblum term "conspiracism," is a distinctively new form of paranoid reasoning, predicated not on explaining events but rather on delegitimizing the very systems of explanation and epistemic authority which make any kind of shared social reality possible. Adherents of QAnon and the "Stop the Steal" movement, on this telling, are not drawn to their respective (and deeply interrelated) movements because they offer anything like a coherent explanation of events. Rather, the appeal of such movements is that they seize on revealing coincidences, gaps in the official explanation, or just mere innuendo to create a fantasy-world out of whole cloth. The creation of this alternate reality is fueled by the desire to undermine all forms of expertise that challenge one's preferred conclusions. Conspiracism of this sort is founded on a radical lack of trust: One distrusts the experts, distrusts

the other side for seemingly being brainwashed into believing the official story, and distrusts any cross-cutting information. It seems only natural that this practice rose to prominence at the same time that social media began to expand its reach. Both the structure of social media, and the dark reactionary fantasies it has made possible, represent a desire to opt-out of a world inhabited by people different than the user. In their own way, they each undermine the kind of social trust needed to sustain sincerity as a social practice, and they offer citizens the opportunity to form their own bespoke deceptive social hologram.

What Williams' discussion of identity makes clear is that, more than anything else, it is these broader structural conditions that determine whether or not the demands that a particular identity places on us will serve democratic ends or undermine them. The partiality inherent to any identity will only lead to rampant ignorance when the epistemic safeguards preventing its spread are few and far between, and a concern for what I believe to be the interests of my group will only become anti-democratic when I cease to regard my political opponents as fellow citizens. While the shortcomings of the Internet as a medium for political engagement are the most salient contemporary example of how this process can make itself manifest, at least in the United States it is only the latest step of a much longer historical process. In the American context, the liberalization of American communications law, namely the repeal of the older "Fairness Doctrine," to facilitate the creation of cable television, marks a clear turning point away from a public sphere governed by truthfulness and trust, to one where the worst extremes of social media seem like nothing more than the apotheosis of an unregulated marketplace of ideas. If the conditions of a particular society encourage individual citizens to view each other with suspicion and distrust, and to consume misinformation, then its little wonder that they will behave antagonistically towards one another and wallow in embarrassing ignorance. However, as Williams notes, there is no reason why this has to be the only possibility for liberal democratic societies. There are ample ways that these systems can be reformed, whether this

entails platform changes to correct misinformation, promote cross-cutting dialogue, or a broader swath of regulatory or anti-trust efforts. To blame democracy for contemporary citizen behavior is too neat a conclusion.

As Williams' work attests to, there is little reason to assume that liberal democracy is at all dependent on the notion of citizen behavior that Brennan claims it must be. The picture of the solitary reasoner—scrupulously rejecting the siren call of irrationality and the ties of community—does much to influence the way Brennan paints his portraits of democracy's failings.[59] There's no reason to assume that democratic life requires that kind of model: We do not reason alone, instead our discussions of what to do are group discussions, a conclusion that Williams offers elsewhere in his work, writing that if we abandon this old Platonic account of reason "we may be able to see more clearly why even individual reasons call for discussion with other people; why also, in hoping that public political discussion should be moderately rational and should address the reasons of individuals and groups, we are not committed to the nonsense of supposing that it could be transcendentally airlifted out of the world of persuasion and power" (B. Williams 2006e, 117-118). What persuades a particular person or group of people, what "makes sense" to them as Williams was to write elsewhere, will not always comport with the picture of individual reason that Brennan lauds and Achen and Bartels sneer at, but there is no reason why this should be a damning objection to democracy as a whole. If, instead, we accept the primacy of group ties in conditioning the use of reason, we will be led, perhaps, to reject some of the more optimistic interpretations offered by liberal democracy's defenders. It may be that the Mill-ian picture that Brennan parodies at the outset

[59] In spite of its other strengths, it also does much to influence another treatment of the problem of mass delusion in democratic societies in another well-regarded recent work by Jason Stanley. In Stanley's treatment of the problem of propaganda, the latter is treated as a drug of irrationality, which supplants the cold exercise of reason with prejudice which has, in contrast to reason, an almost narcotic character. This stark dividing line could have just as easily been drawn from Plato. See: (Stanley 2015).

of *Against Democracy,* in which democracy ennobles the soul and strengthens the faculty of judgement and character of the citizens who live under it, is built on a faulty conception of human nature, however its less clear that this undermines democratic government as a set of institutional practices.

Indeed, Williams' discussion of identity also contains in it one additional objection to the picture painted by these anti-democratic theorists. For Williams, the deliberative components of democratic self-government are, if anything, a bulwark against the dangers posed by wishful thinking. As Williams notes in the final chapter of *Truth and Truthfulness,* all societies, at their heart, require different social groups to form and articulate different political narratives. Depending, as we have seen, on the broader architecture governing how politically relevant information is produced and discussed, these narratives will tend to be more or less truthful. While democratic societies are dependent on these broader social conditions, as we have seen, Williams believes that they place certain salutary restrictions on the sorts of narratives that groups will offer. Namely, because these are democratic societies, different political groups must offer interpretations that will appeal to the broadest swath of potential voters. Likewise, these narratives will face scrutiny from opponents, and be assessed alongside alternative explanations of where we, as a society, have come from, and where we might go. Our peculiar contemporary circumstances notwithstanding, democratic society must entail a healthy debate between different sides: A competition for hearts and minds that involves engaging with the other side. Liberal societies are, as we have seen, founded on a suspicion of the old legitimating narratives of the past, and this is another check on the kinds of narratives that groups will be able to successfully tell. Taken together with the reflections above, it is clear enough that this model flows from Williams' account of personal and group identity. When the conditions under which I interact with others in politics are truthful and promote a sense of interpersonal trust, and different political groups are all engaged in telling truthful stories about who a particular "we" is as a society, stories that ring true to the citizens they hope to persuade, then the partiality inherent to

identity will not engender an anti-democratic politics. At the individual level I will be able to embrace Diderot-like change and idiosyncrasy, while my connection to others, especially those I trust and esteem, keeps me relatively "steady." At a social level, the different narratives offered by deliberating groups work in the same way that the swirling sea of competing desires, commitments, and beliefs do for the individual. At the individual level, Williams notes, "wishful thinking," is aptly named because it turns out that all thinking is suffused with wishes, especially the wish to more perfectly realize my sense of who I am.

At a political level, if I can see myself as part of one civic body, and if the conditions attending upon our deliberations encourage us to work together, then I will be alike my fellow citizens in wishing to reshape the conditions of my society to live up to something we can all recognize as authentically ours. If we hearken back to Williams' reflections on shame, and the fear of somehow not living up to the standards I hold myself to, then the social and political analogy for all this is near to hand: The competing anxieties and hopes of different groups meld together in the public sphere, offering different interpretations of what we might become. Democratic politics offers its citizens a venue to remake their shared life as a political community when they come to find they no longer live up to those ideals and values they uphold as ethical bedrock. Just as the shamed individual can come to reimagine his or her life faced with the shame of failing to live up to deeply internalized standards, individual communities or a society as a whole can remake itself through the agency afforded it through the democratic process. To stay with the considerations that are integral to this chapter, the power and institutional capacity exists to reform the deficit of social trust, especially online; it remains for the citizenry of the United States, and other liberal regimes, to exercise these powers to remake this facet of the public sphere. As Williams notes there is no reason to assume this process will work out well in the end, but to abandon the project involves

giving up more than just a form of government. It entails rejecting the possibility of constructive political change.

However, as we have seen, contemporary liberal democratic citizens do not live under the kinds of circumstances that can easily bring this form of political identity into being. Instead, the popularity of books like Brennan's testifies to a broader problem of democratic disillusionment at an individual level. What does scepticism without reductionism have to tell us about how to challenge this worrying trend, and what resources would Williams recommend marshalling to face these threats? In the two chapters that follow I examine Williams' discussion of tragedy, and how tragic fiction might be employed as a means of embedded social criticism. While Williams' account of tragedy and its relationship to philosophy has been criticized as hopelessly conservative by some thinkers, it contains a distinctively critical bite. Namely, it is meant to offer a different modality of social criticism separate from the one offered by conventional philosophy. I argue that this style of critical tragic fiction offers a unique medium for staunching these anti-democratic trends in the chapter that follows, before linking Williams' reflections on tragedy to the writings of a particular tragic author, Herman Melville. Melville's fiction illustrates the potential of this kind of tragic critique to speak to issues of critical importance to democratic citizens today.

Chapter V - Two Perspectives on Tragedy: Williams and Nussbaum and the Uses of Literature

In this chapter I propose to reexamine the years long debate between Williams and Martha Nussbaum on ethical and political thought and its relationship to tragedy.[60] Nussbaum, who was Williams' student at Oxford, has written an assortment of critical pieces directed at Williams, often coalescing around a handful of interrelated critiques of Williams' understanding of both philosophy and tragedy. The general thrust of Nussbaum's arguments holds that Williams' wholesale rejection of systematic ethical theory, and his belief that tragedy ought to be utilized as a counterweight to the more optimistic pretensions of moral philosophy, ultimately undermine his stated commitment to Enlightenment ideals. To Nussbaum, Williams' rejection of moral theory diminishes the possibility of lodging radical critiques of existing political and social deformities, and his view of tragedy must invariably leave any who accept it to wearily resign themselves to the world's innumerable injustices. Intriguingly, and unlike Williams' more dismissive or reductive critics, Nussbaum's various engagements with Williams' work often underscore her immense respect for his philosophy (and for him as an individual).[61] Her 2003 intellectual obituary of Williams conveys, among many other

[60] Owing to constraints of space, my discussion here cannot give adequate expression to the entire scope of their philosophic disagreements. In my estimation, and in spite of the tremendous degree of respect Nussbaum and Williams regard each other with, there are at least two interrelated philosophic controversies in which the they tussle. The first concerns the role of moral theory within philosophy, both the desirability of developing such theory and the viability of Nussbaum's preferred neo-Aristotelian approach to systematic moral theory. (See Nussbaum 1995; Williams 1995; Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum 2000) The second, which is the subject of this chapter, concerns
the relationship between literature and tragedy, on the one hand, and philosophy and politics on the other. The former debate, as we will see, manifests itself repeatedly in the proceedings of the latter. However, it is impossible to give an adequate account of the nuances of this larger controversy here.
[61] See Louden (1996) and Kutz (2009) for examples of each of these other critical postures

themes, a sense of genuine indignation at the trajectory of much of Williams' late career work.[62] Nussbaum's perspicuous and critical engagement with Williams thus offers the most well-developed response to many of the themes that define any account of his political theory; any attempt to reconstruct his thought must, thus, engage with Nussbaum.

The disagreement between Williams and Nussbaum offers much else besides. First, for the purposes of this dissertation it also offers me an opportunity to revisit the importance of tragedy and imaginative literature within Williams' humanistic philosophy. More to the point, such a review also adds to my reconstruction of his political theory: Any account of Williams' political thought without a substantive discussion of his views of tragedy is ultimately incomplete. Second, and relatedly, Nussbaum's challenges provide an occasion for delving deeper into Williams' work on pre-Socratic Greek tragedy, and exploring what Williams sees as its ramifications for the modern world. As I will show, Williams believes that tragedy, especially the work of the pre-Homeric Greeks, offers both a distinctive set of philosophical insights, while also offering resources to better understand the social and political conditions of modernity. In *Shame and Necessity* Williams contends that archaic Greek tragedy emerges from a worldview and set of philosophical sensibilities which are both free of the distortions he identifies in much subsequent moral philosophy. These pre-Platonic Greeks did not attempt to explain away the world's horrors through redemptive philosophical narratives; Thucydides and Sophocles, Williams contends, both reject the belief that there is a purposive structure to the constitution of the universe or the structure of human reason that vindicate or validate our philosophical aspirations. However, Williams also readily conceded that some of the other historical and cultural particularities of this ancient worldview make it hard to transplant its

[62] The same could be said of the 2001 preface to the second edition of her *Fragility of Goodness,* a book in which Williams merits an effusive acknowledgement, from which some of the obituary's central criticisms were drawn, as well as a 2009 essay which expands upon some parts of the latter while reproducing many of its principal arguments.

account of tragedy—given the importance of "gods, daimons, pollutions, blood-guilt, sacrifices, fertility festivals, and slavery," within it—to the post-modern world. (B. Williams 1993, 2) Despite his recognition that large "structural substitutions" would be needed to reanimate this archaic worldview, at the time of his death Williams had not shown how this process might be accomplished. While I find that many of Nussbaum's criticisms miss the mark, at least as attempts to engage with Williams' work, they do helpfully bring to the fore the real disconnect in Williams work among his discussion of tragedy, with its manifest political dimension, and his broader body of political thought. Here again, as throughout this dissertation, the approach of "scepticism without reductionism" can help to bridge this gap. This chapter will thus attempt to demonstrate how Williams' account of tragedy "hangs together" with the rest of his political thought and can yield an account of tragedy as a complement to, and distinctive form of, political theory.

Before I turn to the source of Nussbaum and Williams' conflict, I will first highlight the role played by tragedy and literature more broadly in Williams' thought, culminating in his defense of the tragic worldview outlined in *Shame and Necessity* and another late-career article "*The Women of Trachis*: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics." While Williams is hardly alone in considering the relationship between ancient Greek tragedy and either political thought (Euben 1990; Honig 2013) or moral philosophy more broadly (Cavell 1976; Critchley 2019), his engagement offers strong foundations for a realist account of the tragic in politics. Having laid out Williams' position, I reconstruct the basis of Nussbaum's criticisms of Williams' views on tragedy. Even within the body of what Williams wrote about tragedy, he provides adequate resources to rebut or reply to many of Nussbaum's most pressing objections. However, her critiques do help to reveal some of the limitations or areas where Williams' account is thin enough to require the sort of reconstruction that this dissertation has attempted to provide to Williams' political thought more broadly. In the process of defending Williams, I articulate a realist form of tragic social critique, consistent with the "scepticism without

reductionism," that I believe can be found in the work of Herman Melville. This model of "tragedy-as-critique" will be discussed in the following chapter.

I – Williams and Tragedy: *Shame and Necessity* and the supernatural.

It is practically impossible to understand the work of Bernard Williams without understanding the foundational role that literature and tragedy play within it. In the opening pages of his first book, *Morality,* Williams asks the reader to consider whether "the reality of complex moral situations can be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature," and in a way this question hangs over much of what he wrote subsequently. (B. Williams 1972a, xi) Imaginative literature and tragedy figure in Williams' philosophy in at least two distinctive ways. First, Williams routinely draws on literary examples in an effort to more effectively articulate his own conclusions or else problematize what he sees as the reigning philosophical consensus, especially on the topic of moral decision making. For example, in an early paper, "Ethical Consistency," Williams draws upon the example of Agamemnon at Aulis to highlight what he sees as the weaknesses of conventional accounts of moral conflict. Agamemnon must choose to either sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, or allow his military expedition to Troy to fail, and Williams takes this example to underscore the point that genuine ethical conflict may not be solvable without remainder. Agents faced with such an impossible choice—between murdering one's child and forsaking one's responsibilities as a leader—might justifiably feel that both choices are, in some ineliminable sense, correct, and that they, as an agent, have "not done the better thing because there was no better thing to be done" (B. Williams 1973b). Likewise, in "Moral Luck," Williams turns to the example of Anna Karenina to argue, against the claim that what is morally valuable must be immune to considerations of luck, that certain constitutive goals or projects of individuals can be radically dependent on contingency and chance (B. Williams 1981b). In these examples, what Williams seeks from literature is something that

he once described as "the kind of immediacy or concreteness or untidiness or imaginative echoes of those ideas by which people really do live their lives," which he claims the traditional way of doing moral philosophy simply ignores. (Davies 1996, 15) In Williams' view, moral philosophy's concern with the systematic and the universalizable often came at the cost of a kind of excessive abstractness or formality, which did a poor job of making sense of the process of making ethically significant decisions. Literary examples offer, by contrast, a depth of characterization and a clearer sense of how an individual is likely to look upon their own ethical reality, that Williams believes offers firmer foundations for philosophical reflection.[63]

However, there is a second, though related, sense in which tragedy and literature figure across Williams' work and one that is perhaps even more critical to understanding the role that tragedy came to play in William's thought. Tragic literature, Williams argues, offers an intellectual counterweight to the worst excesses of moral philosophy as a whole; such literature undermines the ambition of systematic moral philosophy to "make the world safe for well-disposed people" (B. Williams 1996f). This deeper interest in tragedy, as an alternative to the trajectory of contemporary moral philosophy, can be traced back to the closing pages of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, which we have encountered earlier in this study. In that work, as we have seen, Williams strikes a hopeful note, as he surveys what he believes to be the ruins of moral and ethical thought. As he argues, the future of moral philosophy lies with overcoming the ambition to create a comprehensive but ultimately abstract and unreal, moral or ethical theory. "It is not a paradox," Williams writes, "that in these very new circumstances very old philosophies may have more to offer than moderately new ones, and a historical story could be told to show why this is so. It would involve the coming and departure of Christianity (which helps to explain why the ancient world is nearer than it may seem)

[63] For a critical, if slightly reductive, account of Williams' use of fictional examples and their relationship to his evolving views on the importance of "character" in his work see (Mulhall 2007).

and the failures of the Enlightenment (which make its characteristic philosophies so unhelpful)" (B. Williams 1985a, 198). In his determination to find a body of thought that avoided the failings of both this over-optimistic Enlightenment era style of philosophical theory and steered clear of the unstable foundations of the Christian moral consciousness, Williams looks to ancient Greek tragedy for a way of making sense of the "new circumstances" of the modern world. Thus, in the book that followed *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *Shame and Necessity,* Williams defends the views of the pre-Socratic Greeks while attempting to piece together a strikingly modern account of their worldview.

Williams' project in *Shame and Necessity* is centered on rebutting what he terms the "progressivist" picture of our political and social relationship to the pre-Socratic Greeks. As we saw, the progressivist picture, associated with the classicist A.H. Adkins, holds that "the Greeks had primitive ideas of action, responsibility, ethical modernity, and justice, which in the course of history have been replaced by a more complex and refined set of conceptions" (B. Williams 1993, 5). Thus Homeric Greek tragedy is, on this view, taken to be the byproduct of a culture in which slavery was widely practiced, and where women were disenfranchised and generally regarded as sub-human. The plays themselves are assumed to lack the critical concept of the will or moral autonomy and include far too many primitive and fantastical components—with their protagonists often caught up in the obscure workings of temperamental gods and goddesses or plagued by historically remote ancestral curses—to offer insight into our own political and moral situation. However, Williams sets out to prove that while the moral concepts of the archaic Greeks were indeed starkly different from many that are central to modern moral theory, that does not necessarily mean that our concepts are necessarily more transparent or rational, and indeed we have encountered his discussion of the advantages of shame, as opposed to guilt, as an ethical emotion.

More central to our purposes, Williams highlights how the structure of these tragedies

themselves, and the sensibilities of their playwrights, can offer what he sees as a clearer headed and realistic view of our own modern condition. In Williams' view, the fantastical elements of Greek tragedy do not need to be understood as examples of barbarous superstition. Instead, both the tragedians such as Aeschylus and Sophocles,[64] and other figures like Thucydides, share a similar sense of the limitations of human purposes which the plays of the former explore in a way that modern moral philosophy was unwilling to. This may seem to be a surprising claim at first glance. Many treatments of the pre-Platonic Greek period draw a contrast between the mystical elements of ancient tragedy, on the one hand, and what is often seen as Thucydides' proto-positivism (Cornford 1969). However, both Thucydides and Sophocles, in different ways, affirm the role of chance and necessity in the human world that, on Williams' account, makes them worth considering together as an alternative to what he saw as the wreckage of moral theory. In particular, Williams finds in Sophocles' work a concern for a certain kind of "long running necessity" where the latter's characters often find themselves confronted and constrained by forces whose origins stretch back generations. Contrary to the customary view of Greek tragedy in which, as in Homer, Greek gods and goddesses simply give agents a "reason [for action] they did not have before," Sophocles creates intricate historical narratives in which the intentions of the gods are just one part of a larger set of pressures upon the victims of tragedy. They often are left with only one real choice as Agamemnon had at Aulis. The forces that constrain them, these broader historical processes, Williams refers to as "supernatural necessities."

The idea of any sort of "supernatural" force may seem difficult to reconcile with a world that

[64] It is worth noting that Williams often discusses the work of Sophocles and Aeschylus somewhat interchangeably, and often simply refers to the virtues of Greek tragedies by referencing Sophocles in particular. He does draw some distinctions between Sophocles and Euripides which will encounter below. In general, unless discussing the plays of Aeschylus specifically, I will follow Williams in simply referring to Sophocles as the embodiment of the worldview I am describing here.

is, as Weber says, "disenchanted." However, Williams's specific interpretation of the supernatural elements in Sophocles' thought opens up the possibility of finding more modern analogies. As he writes, "The interaction of character or individual project with forces, structures, or circumstances that can destroy them can retain its significance without the presence of gods or oracles" (B. Williams 1993, 166). Sometimes, Williams argues, these forces that work to undermine human aspirations can be understood "in terms of conflicting human purposes," though in other cases they are "not fully comprehensible and not under [human] control" (Ibid). Williams straightforwardly claims that these "supernatural necessities" are not supernatural by virtue of their being the byproduct of processes that lie entirely outside human agency. However, he argues that the Sophoclean or Thucydidean view can, when adapted to the circumstances of modernity, help to underscore how historical and political forces often manifest themselves as a kind of "hostile plan" (Ibid, 150), one in which individual agents struggle against without ever necessarily understanding the full extent of the historical forces working against them.

Take, for example, the description of American involvement in Vietnam offered in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest.* Halberstam's account, aims to portray the war as a tragic event, one in which a group of self-assured, often vain, but always "hard hearted" realists relied on technical solutions; more airpower and increasingly conspicuous displays of ruthlessness, in their ultimately losing battle against "historical forces."[65] The result was, of course, an unmitigated disaster. Up to a point the conflict's origins can be explained in terms of conflicting human purposes: President Kennedy's desire to be his own Secretary of State, while nonetheless accepting the hardscrabble conventional wisdom of the Washington establishment; a better-than-expected-

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[65] The phrase recurs throughout Halberstam's account of the war, but this sentiment is perhaps expressed best in the revised preface to the book. Halberstam writes of the war that "The truth was that history—and in Indochina we were on the wrong side of it—was a hard taskmaster and from the early to middle sixties, when we were making those fateful decisions, we had almost no choices left" (Halberstam 1992, xvi).

outcome in Laos which prompted the "whiz kids," who dominated the administration, to complacently assume that Vietnam would be easy to "fix"; the embarrassing ignorance of the entire United States government regarding the actual situation within Vietnam before the conflict escalated; and the fateful decision of Joseph McCarthy to pursue a virulent program of anticommunism, which along with the "fall" of China fundamentally warped the Democratic party and American foreign policy.[66] However, some moments in the historical record are beyond the control of any single individual, yet nonetheless help generate a historical momentum that future generations must face, and which often leave particular figures in the story with one real choice.[67] In the Vietnam case, the death of Franklin Roosevelt stands out. He had been the only figure in his administration to take an anticolonial stand on Vietnam, declining numerous French requests for assistance in reclaiming their colony. It is possible that more than a million Vietnamese and tens of thousands of American soldiers would not have died if Roosevelt had lived. As Halberstam is keen to emphasize, there were also numerous points where Kennedy or Johnson might have acted otherwise, where individual volition might have deescalated the conflict or avoided its worst ravages. Though it borders on indecency to speculate about choices not taken or the possibilities not realized, tragedies—both on and off the stage—prompt or even demand just that impulse. However, Halberstam's portrayal of the Vietnam War as almost inevitable and, at several moments a matter of individual choice, is the perfect embodiment of the tragic perspective—complete with its modern

[66] On the point about institutional ignorance, one is struck not only by the various blunders of the State Department, but also by the exchange Halberstam provides between Stanley Karnow and Robert Kennedy in 1961. Kennedy, feeling bruised after his brother's meeting with Khrushchev and the failure of the Bay of Pigs, dismissed Karnow's concern about Vietnam in this way: "Vietnam, Vietnam. . . We have thirty Vietnams a day here" (Ibid, 77).

[67] How can it be that Halberstam emphasizes both the inevitability of the Vietnam War and also the seeming importance of individuals? In a way, this question invites a return to Williams's philosophy. The problem, Williams insists, with our notions of coercion and determinism in debates about free will is that they rely on a notion of voluntariness that ignores how the concept of the voluntary is useful "for the purposes of justice, but essentially superficial." A number of individuals were directly responsible for the decision being reached, while, owing to a number of much longer-term historical developments there was very little room for Kennedy, and the sorts of people he empowered to do or act otherwise than they did.

forms of necessity—that Williams seeks to bring to life. What makes these kinds of supernatural forces so vexing and so important is that they are entirely of our own making.

Both Sophocles and Thucydides see human purposes as often caught up in the workings of these supernatural necessities, and this serves as the foundation of what Williams sees as their deep-seated affinity. However, their work also shares a set of ontological sensibilities that will be familiar to us from earlier in this dissertation. "Each of them," Williams writes, "represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations" (B. Williams 1993, 163). This, in a sense, returns us to Williams' disdain for moral theory. Within the context of his discussion in *Shame and Necessity*, Williams argues that philosophers as diverse as Kant and Hegel shared the critical presumption that "in one way or another. . . the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that can make sense of human life and aspirations" (Ibid). According to Williams, the philosophical search for this pattern—whether it engendered an attitude of historical detachment and pessimism about the practical value of philosophy to *change* the world characteristic of Hegel's work, or an affirmation of the intrinsic value of reason (and a concomitant demand to reject that which was not freely chosen) which is a distinguishing factor of Kant's outlook— revealed a conception of moral philosophy that aspires to provide us with a set of reassurances about our ethical and human condition. Even if neither thinker guarantees human beings happiness, they nonetheless assure their adherents that human history could simultaneously be understood to provide some comfort and solace, insulating certain values or ways of life from the arbitrary workings of chance. In contrast to this reassuring but highly questionable outlook, Williams claims that "the important question [is]. . . whether or not a given writer or philosophy believes that, beyond some things that human beings have themselves shaped, there is anything at all that is intrinsically shaped to human interests" (Ibid).

Sophocles and Thucydides alike give a negative answer to this question and resist the idea that human beings can guarantee their actions, values, or ways of life a kind of permanence or stability against the operations of these supernatural forces which are so indifferent to them. They can help us to realize that "social reality can act to crush a worthwhile, significant, character or project without displaying either the lively individual purposes of a pagan god or the world-historical significance of a Judaic, a Christian, or a Marxist teleology" (Ibid, 165).

This belief, that there is no large-scale Hegelian or Kantian system of moral thought to be deduced from the structure of human experience, and no pessimistic or redemptive teleological process to be uncovered in the fabric of human history, Williams takes to be something of a truism for those of us living in the modern world. He writes in another crucial passage:

> We are in a condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and Hegelian legacies. We have an ambivalent sense of what human beings have achieved, and have hopes for how they might live (in particular, in the form of a still powerful ideal that they should live without lies). We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, and that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities. We have to acknowledge the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value, including this reflective sense itself, and recognise that there is no redemptive Hegelian history or universal Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show that it will come out well enough in the end (Ibid, 166).

There is plenty to delve into here, and I will return to many of its themes later in this chapter. For now, the key idea I want to extract from this passage has to do with the central themes of this dissertation, and the deeply political nature of Williams' broader philosophical project. One of the central purposes of *Shame and Necessity,* as we have seen, involves attempting to identify the kinds of "very old" philosophies which might provide stronger foundations than moral theory for the all-important political and social facets of the Enlightenment. As we saw above, Williams' concern is to preserve the values of freedom, social justice, and the importance of a public culture of truthfulness he feels we still retain a certain degree of confidence in. However, if these values are defended by

appeal to some of the more over-optimistic theoretical byproducts of the Enlightenment, which Williams associates here with "Christianity and its Kantian and Hegelian legacies," then we risk undermining these desirable values as these our faith in these more optimistic foundations wanes. The problem of our modern ambivalence demands a more truthful solution.

Williams here is engaging in a line of argument that runs in parallel with his critique of moralist accounts of liberalism. Such defenses fundamentally misunderstand the historical nature of the development of liberalism. These accounts understate the remarkable nature of the achievement involved—there was nothing guaranteed about the rise of liberalism—and also directs attention away from the dangers posed by these "supernatural" necessities that Williams believes the tragedians were more acutely aware of. We are living in Weber's disenchanted world and, as Williams says, we need to have a clear sense of the sorts of obstacles that stand in the way of maintaining the values that make democratic self-government possible. Many of these threats, in both their operations and their internal structure, resemble the workings of the supernatural in both Sophocles and Thucydides: Consider, for example, the role played by economic globalization, the interconnectedness of societies, and extraordinary technological sophistication in our politics. All of these forces shape what we, as citizens of modern liberal democracies, consider possible in our politics and there is increasingly less optimism that their political and social impact is or has been an unmixed blessing. However, these sedimented historical formations work in much the same way as they did in the work of Sophocles and Thucydides: We can respond to them foolishly or nobly, we can act with the discernment of the Thucydidean Pericles or the tragic recognition of Agamemnon in the face of their pressures, but we can never conclude that things will work right out in the end. If, as Williams suggests, we are indeed ambivalent about our history and inclined to doubt the validity of the more metaphysically ambitious accounts of the enduring strength of our values, then the pessimistic ontology of the archaic Greeks, adapted to the conditions of modernity, can serve us

well in trying to make sense of our condition in more concretely historical terms.

II – Williams on Tragedy: Reflective Horrors and *The Women of Trachis*

The lengthy passage from *Shame and Necessity* quoted above contains another feature, one which helps form the basis of Williams' second central study of tragedy, his essay on Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. Specifically, as we saw, Williams writes that: "We have to acknowledge the hideous costs of many human achievements that we value, including this reflective sense itself," before concluding that we cannot be sure that there is any "redemptive Hegelian history or universal Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show that it will come out well enough in the end" (Ibid). On the one hand, Williams' point here is broadly consistent with the themes we have encountered above: He is arguing that these "hideous costs," and the general weight of suffering involved in the historical achievements of the Enlightenment, are one central part of the ambivalence we feel about redemptive historical stories or optimistic Enlightenment philosophy. If we are asked to consider the development of democratic self-government as a teleological process, we will invariably, perhaps even instinctively, point to its historical associations with chattel slavery and imperialism and ask whether any such narrative can make sense of these connections.

In a sense, though, this somewhat oblique reference to "hideous costs" makes reference to a philosophical concern that was to consume Williams' attention in much of his later work. The concern is basically this: How can we live with a truthful understanding of our own history, one that reveals the human costs of what we consider our values and greatest achievements? If the tragic worldview tells us that there are no legitimating stories, if Minerva's owl is as likely to take flight as John Cleese's Norwegian Blue, and if our values are not being "cheered on by the universe,"[68] then

[68] Williams uses this specific phrase in one of the last public lectures he gave before his death. In particular the remark is used to characterize the self-congratulatory nature of utilitarian thought, which is quick to

how do we come to terms with how deeply implicated we are in the promulgation of injustice and undeserved suffering? This was, he thought, a question that those living in the aftermath of the Enlightenment had to face squarely, because of how that movement had so thoroughly undermined the "old metaphysical picture of the world," and made truthfulness such a central demand of politics and social life more broadly. Williams is, as we have seen, committed to the idea that liberalism and Enlightenment values can endure their associations with these kinds of horrors. He also concedes, however, that it is entirely possible to imagine conditions in which citizens of liberal democracies would choose to return to living under widespread illusions and political superstition rather than face the demands of historical truthfulness.[69] This sort of backsliding, while not inevitable, presents a very clear risk to Williams since he concludes that there are "very compelling true accounts of the world that could lead anyone to despair who does not hate humanity," accounts which could, paradoxically, generate a certain degree of pressure to abandon truthfulness altogether (B. Williams 2002a, 268) .[70] Thus these reflections on the "hideous costs" of human achievements are no small feature of Williams' philosophy and political thought. They represent the second category of horror that he believes tragedy can help us reckon with. While *Shame and Necessity* focuses on the role of "supernatural" horrors, his second principle on the philosophical value of tragedy concerns itself more directly with these reflective horrors. It is to this essay, "Women of the *Trachis*: Fictions,

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characterize itself as a distinctively impartial and self-contained moral theory of the sort that Williams believes we have reason to be sceptical of. See: (B. Williams 2006a, 144).

[69] See for example (B. Williams 1985a, 163-164; 2002a, 262-265).

[70] Williams is explicit throughout his different discussions of this kind of anti-truthful backsliding that it is practically impossible to consciously abandon truthfulness at a social level, that a society cannot self-consciously decide to give up on self-conscious reflection. However, in his later work, and especially in *Truth and Truthfulness* he explicitly advances the idea that "people will make sense of the world in terms that help them to survive in it," and that the question in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and in the wake of the threats we have encountered above the primary question has become "how truthful those terms can be." (B. Williams 2002a, 268) As we have seen above Williams also contends that the threats of political mythmaking and widespread self-deception are particularly acute for us today, and that there are, therefore, reasons to doubt the stability of social truthfulness.

Pessimism, Ethics," published three years after *Shame and Necessity*, that I now turn.

"Trachis" sees Williams begin by claiming that moral philosophy is "deeply attached to giving good news" (B. Williams 2005m, 49). He substantiates this claim by considering a number of different philosophers, Leibniz, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kant among them, who are, he argues in different ways, in the business of providing just such news. Williams' general line of argument is that, in spite of their other differences, each offers a different method of explaining away the "hideous costs" of much of human history or human achievements or ignoring the role of necessity and chance in human life. In doing so, he argues that each is committed to "lying or forgetting about" what he calls "the horrors" of the human condition. For example, Hegel's account of the horrors is one of retrospective justification: It links the value of a particular historical development, say the advent of political freedom which particularly interests Hegel, to the suffering involved in its historical realization and claims the value of the former outweighs the totality of the latter.[1] Nietzsche rejects what Williams calls the "Hegelian or Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis." Indeed, as Williams points out, Nietzsche hopes that anyone willing to endure "the greatest weight" of eternal recurrence will be willing to face the role these horrors play in shaping one's values, and embrace a kind of reaffirmed love of what fate has made one. (Nietzsche 1974, 1989) It is unclear though, as Williams points out, what such a thought experiment is meant to achieve. In practice this affirmation of the value of the horrors seems, as a way of facing them, effectively costless. As Williams asks, "Can the 'greatest weight' weigh anything, when it consists in willing an entirely contrary to fact recurrence? Can it be more than a Styrofoam rock on the film set of cosmic heroism" (B. Williams 2005m, 53)? Naturally, Kant rejects the grammar of this kind of justificatory question, but here Williams revisits his preferred line of attack on Kantianism as a whole: "The situation of the rational agent intending to change the world concerns [Kantianism], and the plain fact that everything an agent cares about typically comes from, and can be ruined by, uncontrollable necessity and chance is

no part of their concerns" (Ibid, 54). In this way we can see how Williams melds the two kinds of horrors together in "*Trachis*," in developing the argument that moral philosophy has failed to adequately address them. Some moral philosophers neglect the role of "supernatural necessities" others fail to give adequate expression to the hideous costs of even valued human achievements. In both cases, as Williams claims, moral philosophy is committed to giving a kind of good news. In each of these cases, the good news that moral philosophy delivers concerns the idea that there is some way of understanding our ethical condition that can explain away the significance of "the horrors." This downplaying of the horrors can assume a number of different forms, but it ultimately amounts to much the same claim we encountered above: Even when moral philosophy is not committed to claiming that everything will turn out alright, its characteristic modern forms have tried to offer an account of "the universe or history or the structure of human reason [that] can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that can make sense of human life and aspirations" (B. Williams 1993, 165).[71]

However, Williams' essay does not simply repackage his objections to the trajectory of modern moral philosophy from his earlier work. He goes on to explain how a certain genre of tragedy can act as a counterweight to this style of philosophical optimism. He describes two "kinds of fiction" that might be able to "significantly help moral philosophy" (B. Williams 2005m, 55). The first is what he describes as "dense fiction," or the sort of fiction associated with "the realistic novel." Dense fiction, because of its "depth of characterization and social background," is able to

[71] In other words, it's true as Louden says in his critique of Williams' essay on the *Trachis* (Louden 1996) that consequentialists and deontologists are capable of acknowledging the presence of suffering in the world. However, to claim that this is an objection to Williams' position simply misunderstands Williams' argument. The point is that at a deeper level, the project of developing a currency of universal moral value, is also a project of providing assurances to those who choose to structure their ethical lives around this currency. It presupposes that the moral values one commits oneself to, be it deontology or consequentialism, are important in some basic sense; important beyond whatever social esteem they attract in a specific time and place. Important, as Williams says, from the point of view of the universe. For the idea of this kind of universal importance, specifically in the context of consequentialism, see (B. Williams 1996c).

give "substance to the moral situation and brings it nearer to everyday experience" (Ibid). However, in spite of these virtues, there are at least two things wrong with dense fiction as a counterweight to philosophical optimism. First, some of the conventions of the novel, most notably the sense of "something hidden and waiting to be interpreted," and the requirements of "narrative closure," give these fictions a structure that Williams argues reality simply lacks, "unless, as often happens, reality itself is interpreted in terms of such deceptions" (Ibid). In this way, dense fictions can actually encourage the search for the kind of ethical or moral closure in reality that, as we have seen, Williams thinks is not there to be found. The reader's perspective on the narrative affords them a kind of clarity about the events of the novel that, Williams argues, reinforces rather than undermines some of the bad philosophical habits we have encountered above. In addition, the second principal problem with dense fictions has to do with how they deal with necessity and chance. While they often have such forces at their heart, Williams argues dense fictions engage with supernatural necessities in a way that "runs the danger of coming too close to the territory that such notions equally supply to comedy and farce" (Ibid, 56). Here, as with the point above, the problem has to do with the conventions of the novel itself, especially schematic or contrived fiction.

Williams' reservations about dense fiction can be brought out by taking a relatively recent example: Ian McEwan's *Solar*.[72] McEwan's novel is, on the one hand, a masterpiece of the kind of dense fiction that Williams describes: It contains a level of biographical characterization and realistic detail—in this case concerning the findings of physics and climate science—that is typical of much of McEwan's work. It also embodies some of what Williams sees as the shortcomings of such

[72] See (McEwan 2010) Williams' preferred example is Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, and though he does not elaborate on how he sees these problems manifesting themselves in that work I find that what Williams describes as "its climatic disaster" to be schematic and contrived in the same way much of the action of *Solar* is: The reader feels they are witnessing and impending disaster in a way that upsets any substantive connection between the action within the novel and the conditions of reality outside it.

fiction. At the novel's most critical juncture Michael Beard, the story's unrelieved awful protagonist, witnesses his graduate student trip and fall to his death. The death of the student, who has been carrying on an affair with Beard's deeply unhappy wife, allows Beard to escape his marriage, steal the pathbreaking work of the dead student, and allows Beard to frame another of his wife's lovers for the death all in a single stroke. As a consequence of that moment, Beard is lofted to the heights of scientific celebrity in the field of renewable energy. However, the novel's conclusion finds Beard brought to his knees by his dishonesty. Both his plagiarism and his efforts to frame the falsely imprisoned lover are ultimately his undoing. *Solar* is not simply a morality tale: It poses interesting questions about how far the ethical failings of those who contribute to scientific progress and human well-being ought to figure in any estimation of them. However, in Beard's case there is something about it that encourages a sense of Aristotelian or Chekhovian conventionality: Every gun that is on stage in the first act has been fired by the third, and we can still recognize the echoes of the first shot when the final one goes off.[73] When Beard sets about framing another for his student's murder, he finds that the moment he dons a pair of latex gloves he feels "a remarkable sense of security," overtake him. The reader knows, however, that this safety is ultimately an illusion, that this decision—and Beard's general depravity—have doomed him to the ignoble end that he comes to. This is why Williams is ultimately suspicious of this kind of dense fiction: It too often reinforces a conception of reality that is unhelpfully unlike the one Williams argues we occupy.

There is, however, a second form of fiction that Williams believes has something to offer moral philosophy. Specifically, Williams also discusses what he terms "stark" fiction. These fictions can be distinguished from their dense counterparts in that the former's "style and structure avoid the

[73] The ending is, in a sense, perfectly Aristotelian. Not only is the bad individual left abased, but the route through which he is humbled involves several ironic inversions—Beard's cutting-edge solar array is broken apart with the same instrument he used to frame his wife's falsely imprisoned lover.

anecdotal and the incidental," in the way that it portrays the "workings of chance and necessity" (B. Williams 2005m, 56). Stark fictions are also distinguished by their narrative elegance, as opposed to the conventions of dense fiction. Williams' discussion of *The Women of Trachis,* for example, praises the play for its "display of undeserved and uncompensated suffering," which is "so entirely unrelieved," but also for "the extreme starkness of its outcome and the simplicity of the effect" (Ibid). If dense fictions run the risk of making the workings of chance seem somewhat obscene and absurd, stark fictions, because of their relative narrative simplicity, can display the horrors in a more vivid way. In *The Women of Trachis,* for example, the efforts of Deianeira to end her husband Heracles' infidelity ultimately lead to the brutal deaths of both characters, and the play concludes with their son Hyllus trying desperately to make sense of the situation. In examining Hyllus' closing words, Williams identifies a few of the themes of stark fiction as a genre. For example, he turns to Hyllus's final words, "There is nothing here that is not Zeus," and finds in them a remark that is neither "comforting [nor] explanatory: It registers only inexplicable necessity, necessity which may indeed be ascribed to the activities of gods, but if so, to gods who do not explain themselves or take any notice of the suffering they bring about" (Ibid, 58) In addition, Williams argues that the contempt with which Hyllus views the gods—expressed best when the latter says that the events are "pitiable for us," and "shameful for them"—that this reaction demonstrates that "there is nothing [the gods] could say to excuse it. . . They cannot even give the answer that Job received, an answer which offers no justification but which should at least silence the demand for one" (Ibid). This marks another key distinction between stark and dense fiction. While the latter may encourage a sense of narrative finality, where we can stand back on what we have witnessed in the events of the novel and decide "what it all means," stark fiction in the manner of Sophocles defeats this exact impulse. It can show us the motivations of the agents involved in bringing about the climax of the play, and it can, per our earlier discussion, do so in a way that merges historical forces with

individual agency. In the case of the *Trachis'* it is the inter-merging of Deianeria's, Heracles's, and the long-dead centaur Nessus's motivations that brings about the catastrophes that are at the heart of the play. This simplicity and the narrative indeterminacy of stark fictions bring the horrors to life in a form we can recognize from the vantage point of Williams' disenchanted world. This is why such fictions are, in Williams' eyes a "necessary supplement and a suitable limitation to the tireless aim of moral philosophy to make the world safe for well-disposed people" (Ibid, 59). They provide, in other words, a fictionalized alternative to philosophy's brand of good news.

Williams is quick to make two additional points about such tragedies, though. First, stark fictions are not, he argues, cut from the same philosophical cloth or offer only one kind of challenge to philosophy as a discipline. "One of several disservices that Aristotle rendered to the understanding of Greek tragedy," Williams writes, "was that of generating the idea that there is one specific effect that makes tragedy ethically significant. Even among the surviving plays of Sophocles, to say nothing of other writers, each deals with the ethical—and reproves the limitations of our ethical ideas—in significantly different ways" (Ibid, 56). Thus, while some tragedies might be particularly well-suited to offering a portrait of unmerited suffering, as the *Trachis* is, others might conceivably challenge different facets of our moral consciousness. I will pursue this suggestion—at least in part—later on in this chapter and throughout the next by attempting to articulate some of the more explicitly political dimensions that such tragedy might bring to our attention. However, Williams' second point about the nature of stark fictions is especially important for the rest of our discussion. He writes that it is essential that reading or watching these tragedies involves a certain sense of "pleasure" and "that something is achieved by such a play and that it does not serve simply as an unwelcome reminder of cosmic awfulness" (Ibid, 58). The most important contribution of stark fiction lies "in the fact that it lays its fictional horrors before us in a way that elicits attitudes we cannot take towards real horrors. With real horrors, we are sometimes practically engaged with

them; sometimes, we have some particular reason to be upset by them; most of the time we are necessarily, and. . . healthily inattentive to them" (Ibid, 59). Stark fictions, then, must be able to spark a kind of reflective engagement in their audience. However, as with so many of Williams' most suggestive remarks, the deceptive simplicity of this formulation calls for greater elaboration.

Williams' purpose in these passages is to explain why the genre of stark fiction is suited for the task of countering philosophical optimism, but he is also crucially laying out what stark fiction cannot do if it is to succeed in this role. It cannot, for example, simply present the real horrors to us in the way that the daily news does. The relationship between fictional horrors and actual horrors cannot be one of sociological description, given Williams' insistence that if fiction is to be stark it cannot necessarily be terribly dense. However, the horrors need to be given artistic expression for an entirely separate reason: A plain account of the horrors of the human condition—both our vulnerability and the human costs of our achievements—would, Williams suggests, unhelpfully subvert our ordinary disregard for them. To return to our discussion above, Williams believes that we need stark fictions as a way to consider the horrors without being overwhelmed by a sense of all-consuming ambivalence or misanthropic self-loathing. We need it to be able to think about these horrors "honestly without being crushed by them," in other words (Ibid, 57). We need to inhabit the perspective of the tragic hero, knowing full well it is not our own, if we our own if we are to face the horrors that are our own with any sense of honesty. As we have seen before, Williams believes that philosophy's real value lies in its ability to spur shared social reflection among individual citizens; it works from the ground up offering these individuals a mode of assessing the forms of life that necessarily predate the process of philosophical enquiry and give meaning to it. One of the critical considerations of such a philosophy was that this process of reflection needs to be driven by a style of philosophical argument that is genuinely imaginative, a body of argument that others embedded within the same social fabric can recognize as addressing problems of real importance. In a way,

stark fiction seems to operate along the same lines, or at least it continues this process on topics that philosophy often has avoided addressing.[74] Stark fiction requires a similar kind of imaginativeness, since it must be artistically successful to be any use at all; we have to be able to assume the perspective of those caught in the tragedy. When it is imaginative it offers the promise of enabling each of us as individuals to reflect upon our connections to the horrors. If we can feel the pain of these characters, understand their suffering without suffering ourselves, then we can better glimpse how we are situated within the world. However, by directing our attention to those forces we have no control over—the limitations of our projects in an indifferent if not hostile world, and the bloody historical record we are powerless to alter—stark fiction does not demand that we lose heart in those "things that human beings have themselves shaped," the values and practices that are threatened by our modern scepticism and ambivalence. It is not meant, as Williams writes, to be merely a reminder of "cosmic awfulness," or otherwise act as a fictionalized inducement to believe those accounts that encourage us to hate humanity. Instead, it is another way to test our confidence in those values and practices and ask ourselves whether or not we can remain committed to them.

Taken together, Williams' views on tragedy offer a series of interrelated arguments about its

[74] In this way, I find that Williams' position on the relationship between philosophy and literature is very much akin to Cora Diamond's. Diamond (2006) has argued, for example, that there is a kind of difficulty to reality that often threatens to "unhinge" or "shoulder us out" of our thinking. There are, for example, certain situations whose sheer horribleness or transcendent beauty cannot be adequately explained through the rationalistic conventions characteristic of philosophy, and for these situations a certain kind of imaginative literature is able to convey the thoughts and feelings we experience when trying to think about these. Her discussion owes much to Stanley Cavell's famous investigation of this same relationship. Cavell sees in the sceptical demands of much modern philosophy a propensity towards "avoidance" and "deflection" of the very human demands community and fellowship (Cavell 1982). His belief is that these shortcomings might be, in part ameliorated if philosophy could embrace literature in a way it has not since Plato. It is also telling, at least to my mind, that his central work, *The Claim of Reason,* ends with the question, "can philosophy become literature and still know itself?" which is a question that hangs over Williams' work as well. See, for Williams' views on Cavell's work, which are generally colored by Williams ambiguous relationship towards Wittgenstein, see (B. Williams 2006f). For Cavell's views on Williams, both in terms of Williams' character as a friend but also in terms of his extreme philosophic disdain towards Heidegger, another of Cavell's influences, see (Cavell 2010)

value to philosophical inquiry. First, tragic fiction in general, and the work of the archaic Greek tragedians in particular, offer an entirely non-moral and, to Williams' mind, appropriately realistic social ontology. This tragic worldview emphasizes both the indifference of the world towards human purposes, but also the importance of broader historical or social forces in human affairs that transcend the control of individual agents while often proving ruinous to these agents' aims. In this sense it forces us to think about the value of human achievements in entirely historical terms. However, Williams also believes that tragedy offers more to philosophy than just a set of fictional analogies to the facts of the human condition. Tragedy offers a counterweight to the in-grown tendency of philosophy to offer "good news" whenever possible. In doing so, Williams sees in tragedy a helpful propensity to foreground our modern awareness that all human achievements are implicated in histories of suffering and injustice. As we have seen, it also provides a way for its audience to understand both these "reflective horrors" and the importance of "the supernatural" in a way that is not meant to leave them in despair. Nussbaum, as we will see, strikes a very different balance between tragedy and philosophy, but also identifies in Williams' work a kind of threat to their shared political principles. Ultimately, as we will see, some of Nussbaum's criticisms are predicated on simple misinterpretations, but others do register in a way that suggests how Williams' account of tragedy might be recast to serve the aims he clearly felt it ought to advance.

III – The Bad News About Bad News: Nussbaum Against Williams

Nussbaum's critical engagement with Williams is marked by several characteristics that rarely feature in philosophical dustups of this sort. First, Nussbaum does not, at least at one level, disagree with Williams about the importance of tragedy and imaginative literature as resources for moral philosophers. She has long insisted that philosophers (Nussbaum 1983) and political theorists (Nussbaum 1995b) alike can benefit from deeper engagements with fiction, specifically Greek

tragedy (Nussbaum 2001). Second, Nussbaum routinely contends that she and Williams share a set of common liberal political principles, ones that she believes Williams' philosophy is intended to defend and support. Her intellectual obituary of Williams portrays him as a friend of the Enlightenment and liberal politics, if not a slightly misguided one. However, these shared commitments only provide a deeper intensity to Nussbaum's frustrations with Williams. Indeed, the word "frustrated" most accurately describes the authorial tone she assumes when writing about Williams. It is precisely because they share a common range of interests and purposes that she has proven to be such a thoroughgoing critic of Williams; her indignation stems from a belief that Williams' approach to tragedy and his dismissal of systematic moral thought represents something of a betrayal of their common purposes. Nussbaum's primary critique of Williams is that his account of tragedy promotes an attitude of world-weary resignation at the injustices of the world. As I will outline below, Nussbaum believes that imaginative and tragic fiction, if they are to play a constructive role as supplements to philosophical reflection in public culture, must be joined in an "alliance" with systematic, universalizable, moral theory. Thus, her criticism of Williams' views on tragedy is bound up with a critique of Williams' views on moral theory.[75] Nussbaum's judgement on Williams' work and legacy has unfolded and developed across multiple articles and book chapters, all of which share a great deal of connective tissue. Thus, I will attempt to reconstruct the basic thrust of her arguments overall without necessarily addressing them in the chronological order in which they appeared.

To Nussbaum's mind, Williams' views on tragedy are a byproduct of his late career "anti-Enlightenment" and Nietzschean engagement with the archaic Greeks. Thus, in the narrative that

[75] Most notably his rejection of her preferred neo-Aristotelian and neo-Kantian approach to theory. The points of difference between the two on this particular theory, and specifically on the feasibility and desirability of developing a contemporary Aristotelian theory of ethics, see (Nussbaum 1995a) and (B. Williams 1995d)

Nussbaum provides the "constructive political side of [Williams'] work, was gradually displaced, and eventually abandoned by the time of "*Women of the Trachis"* (Nussbaum 2009, 214). It is this essay in particular that Nussbaum devotes the bulk of her criticism towards. According to Nussbaum, the central argument Williams makes is that "moral philosophy deludes us by making the world seem 'safe for well-disposed people,'" while "tragedies pull off the mask of safety, and allow us to see what sort of world it really is in which we must spend our brief time" (Ibid, 218). For Nussbaum, this connection undermines what she sees as the practical political and moral benefits of tragedies, while also offering a confused picture of the proper human responses to the world's various horrors. As Nussbaum argues, there are in principle two different kinds of horrors, which Williams does not adequately distinguish between, each of which calls for a significantly different human response. First, "products of chance and/or necessity. The condition of mortality and subjection to pain, as well as the (related) operations of the whole host of natural disasters" (Ibid). These horrors command Williams' attention, Nussbaum believes, at the cost of his practically ignoring the importance of human-caused horrors as the primary cause of human misery. "When one thinks about human suffering," Nussbaum writes, "one sees that quite a lot of it is inflicted by human beings, sometimes acting accidentally or ignorantly. . . but all too often acting culpably, maliciously, or collaboratively, or negligently" (Ibid). She contends that because Williams is so fixated on chance and necessity, he does not realize that very little human suffering in the modern world is a result of pure unmitigated misfortune. "The line between one sort of 'horror' and the other is a very hard one to draw. Most of the actual 'horrors' people experience have elements of both chance/necessity and human bad behavior in their causal history" (Ibid). As she notes, even the death toll of natural disasters is largely a function of human factors: In the developing world an earthquake is experienced quite differently than it is in California, given the negligent building standards in the former and the morally unjustifiable inequalities of wealth between the two. Therefore, even when

we consider the most uncontrollable disasters, we can often identify areas where the moral failings of individual human beings contributed to the severity of a disaster's consequences. Moral philosophy ought to, Nussbaum argues, play a constructive role in criticizing the bad behavior of specific human beings and articulating systems of theory which demonstrate how things could have been otherwise. By contrast, Williams' insistence that we read tragedy to refocus our attention on the role of chance and contingency in human life can only lead an agent to resign themselves to inhabiting a hopelessly unjust world. As Nussbaum writes, "If the Williamsian agent does not adopt detachment and resignation as a response, what other attitude remains open to him. . . Like Sisyphus pushing his boulder, the agent may remain active, but bereft of any hope of ever achieving his goal" (Ibid, 219). This despairing attitude, Nussbaum suggests, was something Williams himself adopted later in life and bled through into his later philosophical work.

By contrast, Nussbaum highlights two interrelated features of Greek tragedies that she feels Williams' readings often understate or overlook: First, such tragedies often contain a redemptive moral component. Nussbaum argues, employing a number of different examples, that these tragedies were written to affirm the basic significance of particular human virtues that she believes transcend the inscrutable workings of chance. For example, of the Trachiniai, Williams' central example, Nussbaum writes the following:

> Williams sees in these lines a truthful recognition of the inevitable limitations of human projects. Hyllus recognizes and accepts that the universe is fundamentally unjust and arbitrary, and that there is nothing to be done about that. Thus the 'stark fiction' confronts us squarely with 'the horrors' and immunizes us against the philosophers' 'good news.' But . . .Williams' reading ignores the extent to which human moral judgement is prized and asserted, even in the face of disaster: the pity and fellow-feeling of the human community is prized, even in the face of disaster: the pity and fellow-feeling of the human community have a nobility that, in Aristotle's words, 'shines through' despite the horror, contrasting favorably with the indifference of the gods (Ibid, 229).

This means, centrally, that Williams misunderstands the purpose of tragedy. If Nussbaum is correct, then the starkness of the Trachiniai actually reinforces rather than undermines the basic lesson of the comprehensive moral theory he objects to. Certain values, either identifiable through the use of reason or nestled into the very fabric of what it means to be human, endure in the face of tragedy, and tragedy is best used to demonstrate this invulnerability. In the Trachiniai the value in question is the fellow-feeling of humanity, which the "thoughtless indifference of the gods" is powerless to harm. Nussbaum extends this analysis to a number of different Greek tragedies, but also to Mahasweta Devi's short story "Giribala," which Nussbaum chooses as a less historically remote example from those that Williams discusses—one which she feels brings out the importance of tragedy playing an affirming, supportive role for certain values. In the story a young Indian women named Giri chooses to walk away from a lifetime of abuse and objectification. Giri, after years of being treated like property by her parents and having lived through the torment of seeing two of her children sold off like goods by her ne'er-do-well husband, decides to simply leave, fleeing with her remaining children, threatening to kill herself should anyone come looking for her, and ultimately regaining her dignity and agency. The fact that she retains this dignity is the important point for Nussbaum. It is something that an unjust patriarchal legal system and abusive husband could never take from her nor more than the ravages of chance in the *Trachis* can take away the sense of human community that Nussbaum believes Hyllus celebrates in its closing passages. The same process seems to be at work in Nussbaum's criticism of Williams: The Trachianni and other tragedies do not threaten to undermine moral theory. They stabilize it by showing the invulnerability of certain virtues even in a world riven by misfortune.

This view is consistent with Nussbaum's broader position on the relationship between fiction and moral theory, and before moving onto Nussbaum's second principal criticism of Williams' views on tragedy I will briefly outline that position: Fiction, for Nussbaum, provides a

vivid form of argumentation that registers with its readers in a way that abstract theory alone cannot. It can give expression to the core values our theories uphold, and to the ability of these theories to help us make sense of situations that we are faced with; it can help us test the principles of our theories against the socially realistic situations fiction can bring to the page. For example, Nussbaum points to the Henry James novels *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors* as examples of fiction that demonstrate the importance of certain aspects of Aristotle's ethical theory, while also vindicating Aristotle's theory against its theoretical rivals. James' novel can both give dramatic expression to the merits of Aristotle's theory while showing how "Any other type of theory, to hold its claim on us, will have to show that it can accommodate these insights, or show that they are not after all, important insights" (Nussbaum 2000b, 14). In this way, Nussbaum believes that moral theory and literature can work together, in what she describes as an alliance.

Tragedy slots into this broader argument in much the same way that James' fiction does: It shows us how enduring our values are, and demonstrates their inherent nobility in even the most trying of circumstances; Giri chooses to walk away from her old life and its miseries whatever the costs, and in this moment we ought to recognize how universal and enduring the claims of human dignity are. This story also asks us to consider how we can change our institutions and practices to better exemplify these values. In Giri's case, for example, her story is meant to spark the question of how her circumstances could have been improved by refashioning politics and local practice in India to better embody the values of female dignity, Nussbaum argues. The values embodied in this fiction need to reflect those that we can locate within systems of moral theory.

Literature cannot be trusted on its own, without the guidance of moral theory, to offer much in the way of moral edification or philosophical self-scrutiny. As Nussbaum goes on to describe: "[Moral] theory forces us to hold onto something and go to bat for it; simply reading James gives us

the general impression that our public life might possibly be lacking something." (Nussbaum 2000a, 27) Theory has a kind of explicitness that makes it far more amenable to political change: It has the potential to "organize and transform perceptions on a large scale," (Nussbaum 1997, 529) and as a "strategic" matter, and its explicitness makes it more palatable to those who need to hear it: "An elegant reading of *The Golden Bowl* won't go down well at the World Bank, without some theoretical commentary telling us why we need it" (Nussbaum 2000b, 28). In addition, without the hierarchical ordering of our values that theory provides, one that can be in principle universalized, Nussbaum is convinced that we will be forced to fall back on a kind of unreflective tyranny of ordinary practice, which she associates with a vulgar Wittgensteinianism. In her words: "Ordinary 'thinking' is a tissue of half-baked theories, whether they come from convention or from religion or from pseudo-science. We need to make the counter-theory explicit if we are to show up the inadequacy inherent in these crude and reductive theories" (Ibid). Without an explicit body of theory, explaining what is good and what is wrong within a specific work of literature, we potentially risk being led astray by "the parochial cultural form of the novel," to care only about those characters that are like us, and to fail to escape our own narrow self-regard. To return to Nussbaum's preferred analogy: If the relationship between moral theory and fiction is an alliance, fiction clearly occupies the role of a client state.

Circling back, the second feature of tragedy that Nussbaum emphasizes has to do with their public and political purposes. The experience of Greek tragedy was, Nussbaum rightly points out, founded on a set of shared civic aims: Tragedies were performed in a public space where "each spectator looks across the staged action to the faces of his or her fellow citizens, as the assembled group, imagining, thinking, and feeling together" (Nussbaum 1995a). For Nussbaum this deep-seated sense of publicness means that tragedies were meant to prompt political self-reflection, and to hold the powerful and unjust to account within Athenian society. She draws a poignant example

from *The Trojan Women* of Euripides. In that play, the women of the recently defeated Troy lament the misfortune that has befallen both them and their city; they learn of the grim fates that await each of them and reflect on the brutality and injustice with which the conquering Greeks treat them. The play was first performed, Nussbaum observes, the same year that the Athenians crushed the city state of Melos during the Peloponnesian War, killing off its male inhabitants and enslaving its women and children. This fact ought to, she urges, make us consider Euripides' intentions in writing the play for "a city that held its empire as a 'tyranny' and killed countless innocent people. For that audience, tragedy did not bring the good news of resignation; it brought the bad news of self-examination and change" (Nussbaum 2009, 232). These plays were meant, then, to spark individual and collective deliberation about political and moral values and the self-image of Athenians as a whole. Elsewhere Nussbaum argues that these public performances also served as a site of moral socialization: The plays offered a way for Athenians to convey the values of their society, specifically those moral attributes they believed were necessary for one to be truly human. These themes of political and social self-reflection Nussbaum takes to be deeply antithetical to Williams' reading of tragedy. Where Williams sees tragedy as a counter to philosophical do-goodery, Nussbaum believes that tragedy is meant to prompt moral action. Williams' beliefs amount to a kind of philosophical fatalism which Nussbaum argues is deeply antithetical to the practical and critical character of tragedy. Williams dwells on the workings of necessity and chance in human life, while Nussbaum sees these plays as challenging us to ask which injustices and misfortunes are truly necessary and which are a byproduct of human agency. Most centrally, for Nussbaum, tragedy and fiction more broadly are useful within moral philosophy as supplements to an established and systematic moral theory, but of far less value on their own. Williams' account of tragedy as not just independent of moral philosophy, but also a distinct challenge to its modern preoccupation with theory building, then, stands in stark contrast to the basic premises of Nussbaum's approach.

IV – Nussbaum and Williams: Necessity, Resignation, and Politics

How pressing are these objections to Williams' general views on tragedy and the relationship between tragedy and political thought in my account of his politics? I would contend that Nussbaum's criticisms are a mixed bag. Some are founded on fairly straightforward misreadings or at least decidedly uncharitable readings of Williams' work. Others underscore the philosophical chasm that exists between the two without, I think, necessarily challenging the assumptions underlying Williams' views. Most intriguingly, others, as I will argue near the end of this chapter, suggest fruitful ways in which more explicit connections might be drawn between Williams' broader political aims and his account of tragedy.

Turning first to the uncharitable readings: There is, for a start, simply no reason to assume that Williams' account of the horrors is intended to disproportionately emphasize the importance of natural disasters or other *entirely* non-human forces in the conduct of human life. As we have seen above, Williams draws a set of explicit distinctions between "things that human beings have shaped" and what lies beyond them. Since he believes that tragedy more accurately displays the conditions under which modern human beings act—or at least do so once adequate analogies have been drawn between the tragedies and our own circumstances—he does not believe that only the forces which lie beyond human control are interesting or worth discussing. He discusses these forces too, but it is clear that it is these long-run historical "supernatural" forces that particularly interest him, and these are clearly shaped by human beings. In this way, Williams adheres very closely to the distinctions that Cavell draws in his own discussion of the topic of tragedy: The realm of the tragic is fundamentally intertwined with the possibility of agency and action. Tragedy's emphasis on human action differentiates tragedy from melodrama "in which what you fail to see is simply something out of sight; or to a scene of natural catastrophe—in which what you fail to prevent is simply beyond

prediction or reach" (Cavell 1976, 288). Nussbaum's portrayal of Williams makes it seem like the latter was interested in what Cavell describes as melodrama or natural disaster. Williams is, however, fairly explicit that a concern for the role of the supernatural is fundamentally an interest in a model human agency constrained by the forces of "history, psychology, and sociology." These kinds of structural forces, the ones that laid the conditions for the tragedy of Vietnam, are a byproduct, as we have seen, of the interactions of individual wills and purposes, but also somehow apart or outside of the scope of individual agency to control. The conventional picture of moral philosophy, he believes, does not adequately account for the ways in which the identities and decision-making of agents are shaped by forces that lay beyond their power. As mentioned above, the particularly vexing problem with these kinds of supernatural forces is that they create the conditions for the kinds of political tragedy we encountered above, in part because they often constrain the kinds of options realistically open to agents. The point is that, to Williams' mind, the picture offered by tragedy is more truthful to the role of these forces and their historical character than that offered by much of moral philosophy. Nussbaum also completely omits any discussion of what I have described here as "reflective horrors" in her discussion of Williams' views. This is an especially pressing problem because it means, in a sense, she fails to come to grips with either of the types of horrors that motivate Williams' interest in tragedy.

Nussbaum also draws a set of political ramifications from Williams' views on tragedy which also do not straightforwardly follow. As we have seen, for Nussbaum, Williams' account of tragedy leaves no room for constructive political change and enjoins, without fully realizing it, a kind of weary detachment from a world that is entirely beyond the scope of human agency to control. As Nussbaum argues, the fact that we are powerless to effectively control anything would amount to a kind of reassuring "good news" of the sort that Williams criticizes moral philosophy for offering. Williams does suggest, in *Shame and Necessity,* that the view this fatalistic and detached view was

present in Greek tragedy, specifically in the work of Euripides, which, Williams argues, best exemplifies a blasé acceptance of the world's wretchedness. What distinguishes Euripides from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Thucydides is that the former took for granted that human beings were helpless in their struggle against the workings of chance. In contrast, Williams saw the others as offering a picture of these supernatural forces in which the latter were intelligible to those who possessed the relevant capacities for political judgement and foresight. As he writes, "For the Euripidean ironist of uncertainty. . . there is no game, not even a hidden one, and it is simply a banal truth that human affairs are likely to prove unpredictably ruinous. For the Thucydidean Pericles, however, it was possible at one moment to suggest that there is a game against circumstances, but it is one that we might be able to win, because it is stupidly played by the other side" (B. Williams 1993, 151). The only consistent attitude one could maintain in a Euripidean world is one of resignation. The Thucydidean view is ultimately the one that Williams celebrates in the closing pages of *Shame and Necessity,* while he is suspicious of the starkly conservative implications of Euripedes' account.

Thus, Williams does not see any inconsistency between affirming the importance of the supernatural forces that interest Thucydides and Sophocles while also accepting that agents can behave "nobly" and "sensibly" rather than "foolishly" in their efforts to bring about some sort of constructive change. The Thucydidean "game" can be played ruinously or it can be played well. Sometimes an agent can act with enough prudence to stay abreast of the forces of necessity and there are moments where even adequate foresight cannot save one from disaster. *The History of the Peloponnesian War* is filled with figures like this: Some, like Themistocles, Pericles, or Diodotus[76], are

[76] According to Bruell Diodotus is likely to be an entirely artful construct of Thucydides—his name translates as "gift of heaven"—meant to represent the perspective of Periclean statesmanship in the Mytilenean debate long after Pericles' death. See (Bruell 1974)

figures gifted with a preternatural talent for political judgement and action, others like Alcibiades or Nicias possess good judgement at times and disastrously poor judgement at others. While Thucydides' work focuses on the intrigues of war and statesmanship at a time when the population of Greece was less than that of a mid-sized American city, there are ready analogies to the modern world, both within the scope of domestic and international politics, to make much the same point. As we saw at the outset of this study, Williams does not believe that when we deny the claims of systematic moral theory, or deny that history tells a purposive story, we must discount the possibility of hope, of a kind of political change that "we could recognize as a form of progress." The key point for Williams is that the tragedians, and Thucydides, are more acutely aware of the stakes of the game and the kinds of forces that Pericles or modern agents are up against. They recognize, as we saw above, that these "supernatural" forces can work to crush a worthwhile social project in a way that bears analogy to our own contemporary circumstances. In affirming this, Williams intends to reject both Euripidean fatalism and moralizing good news alike.

When one moves beyond these distortions, the gap between the two contracts in some ways and yet remains as wide as ever in others. On the one hand, both see tragedy as a helpful complement to philosophy, but the specifics of this relationship vary in each author's work. For Nussbaum literature offers vivid *exempla* of the conclusions given by a broader body of moral theory. As we have seen, Nussbaum argues that the tragic depiction of the "horrors" offers the opportunity for moral reflection, specifically on the endurance of certain universal values in the face of our human frailty and opens the gap for thinking about how we might better instantiate these values within the fabric of our social world. There are, as we have also seen, certain values that "shine through" in these situations and whose importance in effect outweighs the awfulness of the horrors. The good agent may be destroyed by circumstances beyond their control, but their values lay beyond the reach of contingency; tragedy exists to enshrine the morally upright choices of tragic figures and

criticize the failings of those like Agamemnon who behave badly (Nussbaum 2001). There is a practical political dimension to tragedy in that it can motivate us to reflect on what can be changed, and what is truly necessary and—in conjunction with a sufficiently well-developed moral theory—it can prompt some degree of constructive change.

Williams, naturally, does not share Nussbaum's confidence that anything like a comprehensive moral theory, one that could situate our particular set of values and concerns within a framework that would set them beyond contingency, is likely to be articulated.[77] There is also a deep divide in how they approach the role of the horrors: Williams believes that supernatural necessities constantly threaten to undermine our worthwhile social projects, and that we must also, as the modern inheritors of his preferred Enlightenment values, take stock of just how much suffering we are implicated in. The shine of our values cannot necessarily excuse all that was involved in attaining them, and we cannot be sure that they will endure the ravages of history's "hostile plan." Williams is insistent that if we are going to remain confident in our values, and remain willing to defend them at a time when faith in them seems to be waning, we will need to face their costs—both historical and contemporary—with a kind of reflective honesty. Tragedy affords us a way of facing these costs that does not discount their importance. Moral philosophy, on the other hand, is too quick to either explain away these costs or to reinterpret our values in a way that disconnects them from history and circumstance altogether. This is why Williams believes that a deeper engagement with tragedy can lead to a fuller and richer model of philosophy. Nussbaum

[77] It is worth pointing out that Williams does not deny that this such a theory is, in principle, *possible*. The fact that he does not outright repudiate the Aristotelian effort to identify a system of ethics that reconciles an adequately robust scientific understanding of human needs and capacities with an objective account of ethical goods has led to an enormous degree of confusion by commentators, Nussbaum among them, who have taken Williams to be far more sympathetic to this project than he actually is. For clarification of Williams' attitude towards the possibility of objectivity in ethics, and his differences with J.L. Mackie (on the one hand) and Aristotle (on the other) in this regard, see (B. Williams 1996b) and (B. Williams 1996d).

believes that without the solidity of a certain kind of moral theory the imaginative power of literature is as likely to corrupt as it is to improve the character of an individual. Without an eye towards the timeless and the universal, literature cannot help but promote a kind of ethical parochialism antithetical to the aims philosophy ought to serve. For Williams, the process of philosophical reflection—as we saw at the outset of this study—is one that is by its nature inherently parochial, and which desperately requires the virtue of a kind of socially embedded imaginativeness. If we are going to make any headway in understanding our own values, we need to look at ourselves in terms drawn from our own forms of life, terms as we have seen that "make sense" to a particular us, and leave the timeless and the universal aside. In this way I find that Williams' account of tragedy affords it a kind of philosophical autonomy that Nussbaum's does not: Tragedy is valuable in part because it registers with a historically particular *us*. The plays of Archaic Greek tragedians can, for example, resonate with those of us in the modern world because they show us a world whose circumstances bear analogy to our own disenchanted and ambivalent present. Our reactions to its particular features do not need to be mediated by the conclusions of philosophical theory in order for these plays to have some ethical value to us: The imaginative engagement they facilitate, and the way they help us to navigate our historical ambivalence, is valuable in its own right.

Nussbaum also believes that Williams' alternative to moral theory is inadequate to the demands of modern political life: Without good theory there will be only bad theory. Without the resources of moralism, the values of the Enlightenment are likely to be undermined by the forces of convention, religion, and pseudoscience. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, Williams' political thought offers a non-moralized attempt to answer this question and to provide a politics that can defend the values of freedom, social justice, and political truthfulness, against a wide range of contemporary threats. However, it might seem less apparent how the issues raised in this chapter could connect back to that broader project. In other words, what do Williams' reflections on tragedy

tell us about how it can serve these broader political purposes? It is perfectly clear on Nussbaum's account, for example, how tragedy can act as a forum for political deliberation and socialization. As we have seen, Nussbaum believes that tragedies serve both of these purposes. The ideal tragedy, Nussbaum suggests, is one in which the viewer is led to appreciate the commands and precepts of moral theory through a process of argumentative soft-pedaling. Greek tragedy, with its very public nature, was meant to promote a kind of process of shared reflection. However, the publicity of these tragedies provides, in itself, a kind of evidence for Nussbaum's own preferred Aristotelian conception of human nature and moral worldview. The viewer because they "care about this civic festival and respond to the events staged before [them]," also responds to what they see, "as a political/social creature and thus affirming the importance of the political in their own life" (Nussbaum 1995a, 98). If they accept the importance of the political in this way, they have no choice but to accept the moral claims advanced by the tragedies. They "cannot withdraw [their] consent from its conclusion, without withdrawing from the entire form of life that, as a procedure, it embodies" (Ibid). Here again we see the characteristics of Nussbaum's account: Moral theory provides tragedy with the ethical structure that the latter needs to be a useful form of political reflection, and here the responses of the audience to tragedy demonstrate the value of the theory. Can Williams, with his insistence that stark fiction can be largely free-standing of philosophy, offer any alternative to the constructive political role that Nussbaum outlines?

On the one hand, this seems to me to be the most pressing objection to his account of tragedy, and one that does underscore a real omission within his discussion of it. As we saw above, Nussbaum sees in Williams' late career interest in tragedy a rejection of the "constructive political dimension" of his earlier work, and I hope to have shown here that this is not exactly right. There is no necessary tension between his interest in tragedy and the broader political purposes his philosophy is intended to advance. To the contrary, given his admiration for tragedy and imaginative

literature as distinctive forms of philosophical inquiry a sufficiently stark fiction can, I argue, serve as a form of realist social critique. The problem is that Williams' work is, in this area, necessarily and deliberately ambiguous. Williams' discussion is, as we have seen, predicated on the idea that the ontology of tragedy, and fiction's engagement with "reflective horrors," can offer more truthful foundations for the values of the Enlightenment. However, even if the work of Sophocles and Aeschylus offers modern liberal citizens one way of processing their historical and moral ambivalence, it does not do so in a way that leaves much room for actually understanding the particular values that matter to them and to Williams. Tragedy for Williams, as seen above, ought to offer a way of "reflecting upon the horrors" without being crushed by them, but the horrors that gnaw at most of us today do not resemble the workings of the *Oresteia*. Williams understands this and he believes that there are a number of "structural substitutions" that need to be worked out in order to develop any adequate account of how the elements of Homeric Greek tragedy might find expression in our own modern circumstances. However, Williams only infrequently expands upon this suggestive remark throughout his work.[78] This, in a way, gets to the heart of the problem. If we are to reconcile Williams' discussion of tragedy with the broader body of his political thought, which I have sought to reconstruct throughout this dissertation, we need to identify what kind of stark fiction could more closely serve the aims that animate Williams' broader philosophical project. In other words, how might stark fiction retain the virtues of tragedy that Williams has outlined here, while also prompting the kind of social reflection that Williams thought a more robustly humanistic philosophy might? How can tragedy be joined to the purposes of realistic social critique? Drawing

[78] In addition to some equally suggestive remarks at the close of *Shame and Necessity*, Williams' discussion of the Greek institution of slavery is the only example known to me where Williams attempts to provide such substitutions. See (B. Williams 1993, Chapter 5) and (B. Williams 2006b).

on the discussion of this chapter and those that have preceded it, I intend to close this chapter by articulating a handful of criteria for what kind of tragedy could potentially fulfill this role.

As a form of stark fiction, a tragedy of this sort would need to display the workings of chance and necessity and do so in a way that approximates the way that these forces work in human affairs. In doing so, it would need to avoid the shortcomings of "dense fiction," and not resort to using overly contrived and almost farcical depictions of the role of the horrors in human life. It should show, though, how the workings of historical necessity come to manifest themselves in the decision-making of tragic figures like Agamemnon at Aulis. Such tragedy needs to be "simple" or elegant in its effect, bringing the horrors to the reader's attention in a way that does not make them seem "incidental or anecdotal" and that avoids proffering, through narrative closure, the kind of ethical significance that Williams believes reality lacks. Ideally, such fiction would avoid both the temptation to show humanity living happily ever after, or depicting a world in which they must toil away in Euripidean misery. It would need to bring what Williams saw as the ethical condition of humankind to life: It should express the contingent nature of human values and demonstrate their basic fragility. If it is to have a constructive political dimension, it should also be able to spark reflection not just on the existence of the horrors but the role they play in shaping our politics, and how the historicized forces of necessity and chance affect everything that we care about. It should, ideally, pose questions about our complicity in injustice, it should demand of us how far what we assume to be necessary truly is. Of course, such tragedy should turn our attention to the costs of practices and prejudices we might endorse but which are inconsistent with what else we value. In order to spark this reflection, it may not need to emerge from the exact social and historical conditions we live in—a literary work can certainly elicit imaginative reflection from people in a particular social situation without being *of* that situation—or need to be written by an author who had our conditions specifically in mind. However, it needs to have some direct bearing on political

or social problems that we can recognize as ours.

A form of stark and imaginative literature, one which combined these characteristics, can help to create a very different understanding of the relationship between literature, politics, and political thought than the one Nussbaum provides. Rather than assuming that moral theory is needed to correct the deficiencies of literature, stark fiction can, on this understanding, provide vivid examples of what moral philosophy traditionally excludes such as the role of supernatural necessities in human life. It can show us how our lives are tied up in processes that go well beyond the control of any one individual, and how we are often at the mercy of forces that are indifferent to our hopes or aspirations. Instead of promoting indifference, a rigorously critical and socially embedded form of tragic fiction can foster indignation, asking us how far we allow our values to be compromised through our other practices. The particularism and narrowness of fiction, which Nussbaum worries will compress the universal scope of moral thought, is on this understanding a virtue of critical literature. We need stark fictions that appeal to a definable us, ones that speak imaginatively to our values and the threats they face. What's more, we can hope that this fiction can show us, in a way that philosophy is often incapable of doing, "what we have got," (B. Williams 2005i) and what the human costs would be of giving it up. Stark fiction of this sort embodies the virtues of Williams' realist political theory but preserves the independence of literature and tragedy as forms of humanistic knowledge whose value cannot ultimately be reduced to the status of a philosophical bit player.

In the next chapter I argue that these criteria can be found in the work of Herman Melville. Melville's tragedies embody the virtues of realist stark fiction, and his later work is intended as a defense of certain key democratic values that are of special significance both to Williams and to those of us who live in modern liberal societies. Melville's work is bleak, and the starkness with

which it depicts the horrors of the human condition can safely rival the work of Sophocles or Thucydides. Melville intends for this starkness, and his depiction of the instability of democratic values in a world indifferent to their continued existence, to prompt a shared process of social reflection among his antebellum audience, one that is similar to what Williams hopes philosophy can provide at its best. For all of these reasons, I will argue that it serves as one of the clearest examples of how tragedy can act as a form of social critique, consistent with the aims of Williams' broader philosophical project.

Chapter VI - Melville and Williams: Tragedy as a Form of Political Critique

This chapter explores the role that Herman Melville's fiction can play as an embedded political critique, one that is consistent with the ambitions and aims of Williams' political thought. In this way, I intend for this chapter to act as an extension of the previous one: I argue that Melville's work adheres to the criteria I outlined in the conclusion of chapter six. Melville's later "metaphysical" fiction is stark in its design, and its protagonists regularly confront the sorts of "supernatural" forces that we discussed in the previous chapter. Melville is captivated by role of what Williams called the "supernatural," including those forces both within and beyond the scope of individual control. These forces manifest themselves in the thinking of his characters, and the weight of circumstance that often locks them into a cycle of tragedy. Melville's work is founded upon a style of Enlightenment humanism, one that shares much with Williams' liberal democratic values, but Melville defends these values in entirely non-moralistic terms. Nonetheless, Melville—even in his darkest authorial moods—also resists the temptation to portray human beings as powerless to bring about constructive political change. For his American audience these improvements invariably involve more consistently living up to their democratic principles, and trying to better understand how their actions implicate them in the promotion of human misery. Melville, in this way, resembles a political realist of the same style as Williams and, as I will argue, the primary political purposes of his fiction often involve provoking the sort of imaginative reflection that Williams believes tragedy ought to promote.

Melville is, in many ways, a familiar figure for political theorists and philosophers alike. The editors of two recent volumes have insisted, respectively, that Melville be read as a radical critic of "the material and spiritual forms of domination that mark American history and mar its democratic

futures" (Frank 2013, 7) and also that the significance his work is better understood and appreciated if it is viewed through "the lens of philosophy and its wide-ranging forms of inquiry" (McCall and Nurmi 2017). [79] Several classic studies of Melville's work such as those of C.L.R. James, John Schaar and Michael Rogin have also attempted to draw out the wide-ranging political implications of his work (Schaar 1979; James 1985; Rogin 1983). Beyond these more comprehensive treatments, political philosophers have repeatedly engaged with Melville's short fiction. For example, thinkers in this tradition have used the novella *Billy Budd* to explore the universalizability of moral judgements in politics (Winch 1965; Kolenda 1975; Mendus 2006) or the relationship between "natural" and "political" justice in the context of the formation of government (Arendt 2006). Melville's *Benito Cereno,* which I discuss in greater detail below, has likewise attracted an immense secondary literature largely centered on the novella's unique treatment of race in antebellum America, a treatment which is woven into the very fabric of the story's narrative devices (Emery 1983; Haegert 1993; Balfour 2013; T.B. Strong 2013). Indeed, Melville's writing, generally, has been the subject of ample critical scrutiny with an eye to identifying the depths and nuances of its political themes. Reading Melville, one recognizes that he has something deeply important to say to us as political theorists. The problem, however, is, first, to ascertain what it is, and second, to reconcile his concerns with ours in a way that neither distorts his meaning, nor obscures problems that he was most interested in addressing in his fiction.

This problem does not admit of easy solution. Melville's style of writing—with its dense allegories and waggish jokes—along his wide-ranging interests and complex storylines often make it difficult to identify both his normative political commitments and broader political outlook. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that it is often easier to identify the political events that Melville

[79] A similar edited volume also takes up Melville's eclectic use of the works of different philosophers, see (Arsić and Evans 2017)

was responding to than it is to identify the exact position he took on them. While it's true that Melville was a regular critic of American expansionism and those who believed it was America's destiny to spread democracy across the face of the Earth, he also remained committed to the principles of democratic self-government. Melville portrays Babo, the leader of the slave insurrection in *Benito Cereno* in such a manner that C.L.R. James was led to conclude that Babo was "the most heroic character in Melville's fiction" (James 1985, 119). However, it's not clear that Melville intends for the reader to endorse or approve of Babo's gruesome methods—which intentionally resemble the methods of the slave holders themselves. These inconsistencies or, as Melville might have said, ambiguities have led to highly unrealistic interpretations of Melville's political thought: that Melville's Billy Budd is meant to be an allegory for the inevitable triumph of democracy over autocracy (Browne 1963) or that Melville's work as a whole offers a proto-pragmatist model for revolutionary anarchist politics (Jonik 2013). It has also led critics to consign Melville's political theory to overly general political categories that do little more than state the obvious—or, in their questionable emphasis on a single theme in Melville's work, raise some obvious concerns.[80] Such readings often refer to Melville as a critic or a radical without explaining how these labels add to our understanding of his work.[81] There is another tradition that holds that Melville was largely ambivalent in his views about politics, gleefully undermining, in several books, the assumptions of abolitionists and slave-holders alike without taking a stand on these issues himself. For example, Grandin argues, on the

[80] For example, Melville is labeled, in a textbook written by two prominent political theorists, as an exemplar of the ideology of "cultural conservatism," on the grounds that *The Confidence Man* scornfully criticizes many liberal schemes that aimed at social improvement. This characterization fails, for a start, to capture that *The Confidence Man* was dedicated to "the victims of the auto-de-fe." This theme manifests itself in the book which contains a very direct assault on the hypocrisy latent in much accept cultural practice and the conservative religious press in particular (which had repeatedly attacked Melville throughout his career). See Terrence Ball, Richard Dagger and Daniel I. O'Neil, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Pearson, 2013).
[81] This is one problem that runs across several of the essays collected in Jason Frank's *Political Companion to Melville*, and it is perhaps most noteworthy in his introductory essay, but also particularly in the contributions of Hecht and Jonik. See (Hecht 2013; Jonik 2013)

one hand, that some of the broader metaphysical themes of Melville's prose can help us make sense of the way that the history of slavery shapes the modern world. For example, Grandin praises the spirit of Ishmael's famous question "Who ain't a slave?" and the latter's famous discussion of "Fast and Loose Fish" in *Moby-Dick* as offering philosophical inroads to understand how the interlocked logics of white supremacy, global capitalism, and environmental degradation that define our modern existence likewise ensnared those living in the 19th century. On the other hand, Grandin concludes that Melville's own political commitments were either muddied or somewhat conservative in nature, leading the author to hold the belief that reconciliation between America's white population and its former slaves would be impossible (Grandin 2014). *Benito Cereno*, on Grandin's telling, is a powerful tale about the blindness of antebellum northerners but it is ultimately one that has a hopeless conclusion: the United States, according to Melville, was simply stuck, and both of the options open to America—abolish slavery or retain it—would lead to its eventual destruction.

I hope to show why this particular line of criticism is overstated at least in part, and I will do so in part by arguing that Williams and Melville share a common set of philosophical and political concerns. I must acknowledge, straightforwardly, that I am proposing to add yet another label to the already long list of labels. However, I argue that the label of realist, Williamsian realism in particular, has much more to offer than past appellations. It illuminates the continuity of Melville's core commitments. Taken seriously, it helps make sense of his own obsession with what he saw as the absence of any purposive metaphysical structure to the world, his interest in the blackness that besets human beings, while also connecting these concerns to his understanding of some of the dangerous defects in American political culture. However, I do not think, pace Grandin, that the tragic elements of *Benito Cereno*, and the sense of ambivalence that informs much of Melville's political thought, ought to be understood as inherently conservative or betraying a moderate's disdain for the dishonesty of "both sides." By joining my discussion of Williams' particular style of

political thought to this reinterpretation of Melville's realism, I will demonstrate what this style of tragedy can offer as a defense of liberal democratic norms and values, and how this tragedy-as-critique can be deployed in a time, like ours, of democratic decline.

As we will find, Melville's core commitments as a novelist of tragic fiction, and as a thinker deeply engaged with the politics of his era, run in parallel with those of Williams. Remember that Williams, in his discussion of the possibility of a radical Wittgensteinian form of social criticism, seeks to develop a method of critique that accepts that modern societies have an ethical life has "a genuinely historical and local structure, one that is peculiarly self-conscious about its own origins and potentialities," (B. Williams 2005b, 37) and that if we—as citizens within a specific society—view it in this way, "we will have less temptation to assume that it is a satisfactorily functioning whole, and we shall be more likely to recognize that some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts" (Ibid). As I will argue in the final section of this chapter, Melville's fiction not only meets the criteria I outlined at the conclusion of the last chapter, but it also offers the exact form of historically embedded social criticism that Williams salutes in these remarks.

For both Williams and Melville, the world, both the part of it that lay beyond human control and the part that is located firmly within it, does not have any purposeful metaphysical structure that humans could come to understand or reconcile themselves to. Moreover, for both authors, the fundamental inability of human beings to discern any deep meaning or purpose in the ontological structure of the world undercuts the pretensions of moral philosophy to provide definitive guidance regarding how we ought to live. Finally, our lives, both personal and political, are defined by the inescapability of tragedy. Through no fault of their own, "worthwhile social projects" could and often do come to ruin, and impersonal social forces bring misery upon blameless individuals. (B.

Williams 1993, 212) While neither Melville nor Williams believed that this chastened view of the powers of moral philosophy absolves human beings of the responsibility to improve their societies, this view does influence the manner and methods that they both thought were most appropriate for bringing about constructive political change. These limits are, in the main, the result of the historical legacies under which we live. However, Melville believed that a certain kind of imaginative fiction could awaken democratic citizens to both their own ethical and political blind spots—how their ideals were not all that they seemed—and also how complicit they were in the promotion of injustice. This is, as we have seen, an outlook I have attributed here to Williams and I hope that a discussion of Melville's fiction will show what it means for tragic fiction to play such a role.

This chapter proceeds in two sections. First, I connect the themes of Melville's work back to the criteria I elucidated in the previous chapter. Melville's novels, despite their occasionally fantastical design, often have the "stark" qualities that Williams salutes. Melville's fiction challenges the reader with its refusal to give its characters closure and certitude—as in *The Confidence Man* and *Moby Dick*—and its constant emphasis on what Melville called "the blackness" of the world, or the tragic dimension of the human condition. His characters are not flat embodiments of goodness or wickedness, but creations with vividly detailed beliefs and commitments. They are exactly the kinds of agents that Williams urges philosophers to engage with, and they often face the sorts of tragedies that philosophy as a whole needs to be more cognizant of. The suffering they endure is not, as a rule, handed down from heaven. It emerges through a number of choices they themselves have made, or it comes about as a result of the operations of others in society. In other words, not only can it be argued that Melville's fiction represents a more modern example of the sort of literature that Williams believed was so salutary for moral philosophy, but Melville shares with Williams a commitment to a certain model of human behavior and decision-making. Beyond Melville and Williams broadly share a set of sympathies centered around their commitment to a handful of

central Enlightenment values such as truthfulness, justice and the preservation of liberal political freedom. In the concluding section I explore how Melville deploys his fiction to serve these ends and how these shared political and philosophical sympathies manifest themselves within that fiction, specifically through the more dense novel *The Confidence Man* and the tragic novella *Benito Cereno*. Williams once remarked that there was "only a certain kind of literature," that could actually be philosophy, and ultimately my aim in this chapter is to prove that Melville's work fits within that category, and does so in a way that shows what Williamsian social criticism looks like when it assumes the guise of imaginative literature (B. Williams 2006f).

The discussion of Melville that I provide in this section will be built on an extensive survey of Melville's fiction and require a thorough investigation of Melville's broader philosophical and political sympathies, one that might seem excessive given that this chapter is an elaboration of Williams method and a means of highlighting what features a tragedy ought to have to serve Williamsian ends. This shift in focus, from Williams in particular, to Melville as a theoretical companion to Williams, is necessary for at least three reasons, all of which are central to the aims of the dissertation. First, as part of this chapter I hope to demonstrate the continuity that exists between Melville and Williams' philosophical and political outlooks. There is a truly striking set of affinities in the ambitions of Williams' "scepticism without reductionism" and Melville's efforts to create a democratic form of tragedy. In particular, Williams' approach to social criticism, as we saw in Chapter III and again in the previous chapter, rests on exploring the fear of his liberal audience at the prospect of losing "what they've got." This fear can be utilized, as we saw, to both protect against backsliding and democratic declension, but Williams also argues that it can be deployed as a means to compel democratic citizens to seek new rights and privileges. This is, I argue, the exact project that Melville is engaged in, and I document these connecting threads throughout the chapter. A more superficial treatment might convey the impression that Melville and Williams were both

mere pessimistic liberals, and while they are both pessimistic and liberal, I hope that a more nuanced account of Melville's work and its historical and political context can demonstrate how deep the connective threads mentioned above, previously unremarked upon by scholars interested in either Williams or Melville, run.

Second, and relatedly, a more comprehensive treatment of Melville provides helpful reflections on the possible forms that "scepticism without reductionism" might take today. As I discuss below, the issues that command Melville's attention, as possible threats to the democratic values he esteems, bear significant analogy to those that citizens of liberal democracy face today. As we have seen, Williams is concerned about the threat that the illiberal forces of political myth and mass self-deception pose for liberal democracy. By taking a long look at Melville's fictions, and the threats he identifies in antebellum American political culture, I find that Melville's list captures some of the principal enemies of liberal democracy in the United States today.[82] The role of race and misinformation in public life is very different today, of course, but Melville's fictional exploration of these topics does help to fill in the details of the argument I develop in this dissertation as a whole by drawing on Williams' work. Again, a shorter or more superficial treatment would fail to convey the same sorts of insights into the nature of these threats, their historical durability, and the way that they can be responded to imaginatively along the lines I propose here.

Third, finally, and in the interests of achieving the goal I outline at the end of the previous chapter, an extensive reckoning with Melville's work can, I hope, demonstrate that realist tragedy of this kind is not something unique to Melville alone. Even though Williams never takes up the project of identifying the kinds of "structural substitutions" he thinks are necessary for a modern tragedy to take the shape of something analogous to the work of Sophocles in its philosophical

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[82] This is, I freely concede, a chapter distinctively concerned with the American experience. Melville is a distinctively American writer and his concerns reflect that.

sensibilities, Melville's work provides an avenue for identifying the characteristics of such tragic fiction outside the ancient world. Melville's work, as I show, embodies the virtues that Williams ascribes to stark tragedies. However, it is not Melville's work alone that does this. There are many other authors, Cormac McCarthy, Octavia Butler, and Ta-Neishi Coates come to mind, whose work conveys the same metaphysical picture of the human condition and who portray human beings as striving to protect the values they hold dear in an indifferent universe. However, in the interests of providing an adequate foundation for exploring this broader genre, and eventually expanding its study beyond literature to other mediums which can prompt the same kind of reflection Williams thought tragedy was uniquely well suited to prompting, my examination of Melville cannot be skin deep: As we have seen there is plenty of tragic fiction that cannot be a stark, and plenty of dense fiction which fails to convey the same kind of reflective impact. I hope to show what makes Melville special, as a worthy successor to the style of tragedian Williams celebrates. In doing so I hope to show how this style of tragic fiction can, in turn, be utilized today especially in the work of contemporary authors.

I – Melville's Truthful Fiction for a Tragic World

In this section I outline the various points of commonality between Melville and Williams' central philosophical concerns. In so doing, I show that Melville and Williams share a number of central political commitments, and that Melville's fiction attempts to bring these commitments to life in a way that makes it a more modern example of literature with the virtues that Williams celebrates in Sophocles and Thucydides. In fact, in many ways Melville's work is better suited for the role of serving as a tragic spur for political reflection because of the modern nature of his central preoccupations.

Melville, for example, was a committed believer in the idea that the inception of democratic self-government inaugurated by the American Revolution represented a genuine form of historical progress. In *Mardi,* Melville's Swiftian tale of a voyage around a fictionalized Polynesian island-chain*,* a character expresses sentiments that come quite close to Melville's own: America, or within the fabric of the novel the island republic Vivensa, is a land which "seems more of good [sic] than elsewhere" (Melville 1982, 1167) Vivensa has enjoyed relative stability and its political culture and ideals are distinctively high-minded. Melville describes it as the primary piece of evidence adduced by people who believe in the possibility of democratic self-government to prove that their hopes are "not wild dreams" (Ibid). Melville also believed that the protections afforded to an individual's free expression also made a new kind of literature possible. Melville seemed to believe that Shakespeare, for example, had been forced to withhold his true reflections on the human condition because, as he wrote to Evert Duyckinck, "that muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethean day" had intercepted Shakespeare's "full articulations." For his part, Melville believed he and Hawthorne were uniquely situated to be more truthful than Shakespeare because, "the Declaration of Independence makes a difference" (Melville 1993, 122). This newly fashioned capacity for public truthfulness, Melville believed, could enable American authors to create a new republican literature, consecrated in the name of the "just Spirit of Equality" (Melville 2002b). Without the protections afforded by the advent of liberal democracy the author could not be entirely honest and, because this system of government made greater honesty possible, the author had an obligation to act on this freedom to express the truth. At the time when he was writing *Moby-Dick,* he confided in Hawthorne that he was a believer in a "ruthless democracy," which entailed, Melville continued, that he was a person who "boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington" (Ibid, 190). This belief in the fundamental dignity of and equality of all human beings was, Melville believed, likely to strike most Americans as entirely ludicrous. Americans of the mid-

nineteenth century were, Melville thought, incapable of recognizing their enormous historical good fortune—the fact that they lived under a system of government with such potentially noble ideals—and disinclined to live up to the promise of the values they claimed to esteem. Much of Melville's fiction is dedicated to compelling his antebellum audience to recognize the value of this historical inheritance and preventing them from undermining it with the behaviors that he believed most deeply harmed the signature virtues of democratic government—virtues he saw as historically relative.

This is not to say that Melville is a peddler of pious or self-serving patriotic dithyrambs. He is not the archetypal purveyor of Harry Frankfurt's political "bullshit." While Melville celebrates the democratic spirit of equality and the capacity for free-thought that the advent of democracy makes possible, his relationship to American politics and culture was far more ambivalent than those of some of his friends in the "Young America" literary movement, such as Evert Duyckinck. These more optimistic writers were desperate to create a literature that demonstrated the moral superiority of the American character and experience.[83] Melville for his part believed that the practice of democratic life in the United States often fell well short of its potential. He concluded that while America was uniquely situated to maintain a public culture of truthfulness and a politics that lived up

[83] Perry Miller documents the life and death of this 19th century movement in his *The Raven and the Whale*. Always eager to repudiate the "cult" of Melville, Miller does draw attention to how Melville's relationship to the young America movement was somewhat strained: Melville fervently believed that America would produce its own native literature that could supersede what that of the "old world," and here he found common cause with the proprietors of the Young American literary journals, Duyckinck and Cornelius Matthews, who likewise celebrated Melville's early literary successes and attempted to promote his later work even when it was clear that *Moby-Dick* and all the books that followed it were commercial and critical failures. However, Melville was unwilling to assent to the other commitments that participation in the movement entailed. Melville refused to criticize Emerson as a subversive writer contaminated by foreign influences, as the Young Americans had. Melville was also not cut out for the unreflective Democratic partisanship that the movement required: His efforts at political satire, a series of mock journalistic accounts of the life and times of Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor titled "The Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack," read much more like a disdainful account of the dishonesty of American journalism and politics at the time. Jason Frank in his editor's introduction to *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* takes up many of these same themes.

to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, Americans were decidedly hostile to truth and the protection and enlargement of democratic freedoms. In the same letter to Hawthorne mentioned above, Melville describes the challenges facing anyone who attempts to publicly express a commitment to the sort of "ruthless democracy" in these terms: "Try to get a living by the Truth – and go to the Soup Societies. . . It can hardly be doubted that all Reformers are bottomed upon the truth, more or less; and to the world at large are not reformers almost universally laughingstocks?" (Melville 1993, 190) Melville believed that it was only within the realm of fiction that someone could express "the Madness of the sane truth," and that fictional dissimulation was the only way to effectively reprove the kind of intellectual and ethical complacency that he felt so deeply undermined the conditions necessary for realizing the promise of democracy. Each of Melville's fictional works provides a different challenge to this complacency, and the concluding section of this chapter will explore how two such works, are meant to challenge the self-satisfaction of those who saw themselves as committed believers in democracy. As we will see momentarily, Melville's belief that fiction must be a vehicle for expressing a range of philosophical and political truths to readers who might otherwise reject them is one of the defining features of his fiction.

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Williams two of the most central virtues of Sophoclean tragedy are its realist ontology and its narrative starkness. Put more directly, the philosophical strengths of such fiction lie, at least in part, with its commitment to portraying a world in which our moral concerns find no purchase on the structure of reality, and where we must understand what goes on within that world in purely historical terms. Tragedies do so in a way that is elegant and does not provide a false sense of ethical certainty where none ought to exist. It is fitting then, that Melville writes in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that the role of the novelist is to give creative expression to the "blackness" of human life. In Melville's estimation, the world is defined by iniquities and injustices that are elided by "popular" fiction and respectable opinion.

Defined in this way, the world is best understood as a place of innate blackness (Melville 2006b, 428). Moreover, this blackness is irreconcilable with teleological theories of human progress or the optimistic faith of Panglossian philosophy. Instead, Melville remarked, "in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance" (Melville 2006b, 429). The true writer—figures like Hawthorne and Shakespeare—therefore needs to provide "occasional flashing-forth of the intuitive Truth. . . those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality" (Ibid). As Melville observes, Shakespeare is praised by his most perceptive readers, "the philosophers," for his uncanny ability to engage in a form of covert truth-telling: "Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear and Iago, [Shakespeare] craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his proper character to utter" (Ibid). Similarly, Melville's own tragedies are often centrally preoccupied with individuals who are forced to confront the stark manifestations of this blackness.[84] His characters encounter a world that lacks any stable metaphysical structure, where tragedy abounds and is often brought about by nothing more than the simple desire of individuals to try to live honest and reflective lives. Most importantly, however, Melville believed that an acknowledgement of this blackness carried with it an ethical directive, namely, a directive to embrace a more sober and realistic understanding of the contingencies and lessons of history, and, consequently, to distance oneself from the complacent and moralistic confidence that goodness and justice will prevail and things will inevitably turn out right in the end. Perhaps more than anything else, this is the central ethical message that Melville's fiction conveys to his American audience.

[84] Sometimes literally with darkness itself as in "The Piazza" where "Every night, when the curtain falls, truth comes in with the darkness." That is to say, the truth about the darkness in the world and the absence of true happiness. (Melville 1969b, 395).

Returning to the question of what precisely Melville meant by the "blackness" of the world, we can observe that Melville's fiction, like Williams' philosophy, rejects the notion that there is a meaningful structure to human experience that could provide the metaphysical comfort and confidence that, in the end, everything will make sense and be seen to have a purpose such that it could be said to all make sense in the end. Consider for example, Ishmael's much discussed ruminations on "the whiteness of the whale" in *Moby Dick*.[85] Moby Dick's white hue is especially terrifying because it lacks any color, and by analogy symbolizes the fundamentally meaningless and unexplainable sufferings of human beings in a world that seemed indifferent or openly hostile to their aspirations and needs. The whiteness, as Ishmael writes, "by its indefiniteness. . . shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" and is so omnipresent in our lives that those "who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes. . . gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him" (Melville 2002b, 165). This idea of the cosmic insignificance of human purposes is a recurring theme throughout the novel. As Herbert Walter observes, the novel's climax, which sees Ahab strike an entirely futile blow against Moby Dick, the *Pequod* sunk, and Ishmael dangling from a coffin unsure what it all meant, is likely intended to call to mind the perspective of Job before his meeting with God, that is, the outlook of a person who has witnessed tremendous tragedy and cannot hope to understand why (Herbert 1977).

Just as central to the story are the differences between those who confront the truth that unmerited suffering, often devoid of any clear explanation or purpose, is an all-too-familiar feature of human existence, and those who are compelled to explain it away or simply ignore it. In the first case, characters who are willing to face the "heartless voids and immensities" of the universe have to

[85] There are a number of discussions of this chapter of *Moby Dick*. One prominent thread of criticism has focused on the racial dimension of Ishmael's ruminations and also the allegorical significance of Moby Dick's hue in general. See (Morrison 2019; Blish 1997; Husni 1976)

live with the knowledge that their agency is constrained by forces beyond their control. As Ishmael says in *Moby Dick*: "Aye chance, free will, and necessity—-no means incompatible—all interweavingly working together. . . free will still free to ply her shuttle between the given threads. . . chance by turn rules. . . and has the last featuring blow in events" (Melville 2002b, 176). This case both recalls and reflects Williams' own account of agency and constraint. However, while Ishmael's character in *Moby-Dick* comes to accept the role of supernatural necessity and the tragic in shaping human affairs, others do not. Within the same novel the *Pequod* comes across another ship *The Bachelor*. The word "bachelor" carries a great deal of allegorical significance for Melville, as we will see later, and he generally uses it to denote someone who lives free and easy, indifferent to the existence of human suffering or other horrors in the world. When Ahab and his crew encounter *The Bachelor* and ask her crew if they have any news of Moby-Dick, her American captain responds by claiming that he does not believe the white-whale exists, and repeatedly exhorts Ahab to come aboard his ship and drink his sorrows away.

As Williams repeatedly emphasized, the horizon of possibilities of individual action is never unlimited but is instead circumscribed by chance and necessity. Similarly, in *Moby-Dick,* these characters suffer from Moby Dick's inscrutable and capricious behavior and are left shaken by it. Once one both witnesses and registers the horrors perpetuated by Moby Dick, or by analogy the universe, one can no longer embrace the complacent belief in cosmic fairness.

This theme, however, is not limited to *Moby-Dick* alone. In the autobiographical novel *Pierre*, the titular character undergoes a metamorphosis after learning that his seemingly unblemished life—replete with an almost aristocratic lineage that can be traced back to a Revolutionary War hero, a place within high society as a novelist with "exceedingly good taste who never allows himself to offend," and a history of devotion to American democracy and religious piety—is based on a lie

(Melville 1996). After learning that his heroic father had also fathered an illegitimate daughter and abandoned her to a life of loneliness and isolation, Pierre sets out to resist what he comes to see as the comforting illusions that sustained his old life. His intention is to preserve his integrity as an individual by facing this altogether more complicated world with a sense of reflectiveness and honesty. At one point in the story, after deciding that this sense of integrity will not allow him to continue to write popular, but ultimately dishonest fiction, he arrives at the realization that:

> "[W]edding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act. . . while the countless tribe of common novels laboriously spin vails of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last. . . the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; but in imperfect unanticipated and disappointing sequels. (Ibid, 141)

In this passage, Melville draws a distinction that is consistent with ones we encountered above, especially his analysis of the purpose and duty of the "true" author in "Hawthorne and His Mosses." First, there is a demarcation between common and profound works of fiction. The former is concerned with "complacently" clearing up artificial mysteries and intrigues; the latter is, by virtue of what I would claim is an implicit commitment to realism, incapable of arriving at conclusions that provide the reader with any kind of surety that human endeavors—fictional or actual—will invariably turn out right in the end. If one reads this passage alongside Melville's reflections in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," there is a clear set of parallels between Pierre's epiphany and the kind of authorial commitment to "the truth" that Melville admired in both Hawthorne and Shakespeare. As we have seen, Melville praises Shakespeare and Hawthorne for their flinty acceptance of a cosmic order that was inundated with "blackness." Superficial readers of either author, individuals who are content with "common novels" and "complacent" conclusions, celebrate Hawthorne as "a pleasant writer. . . from whom any deep and weighty thing would hardly be anticipated," and cannot see past the "Richard the Third humps and Macbeth daggers" of Shakespeare's work (Melville 2006b, 429).

The "profounder" moments in both author's works, according to Melville, occur when—under the guise of entertaining the reader—they give fictional form to the tragedy of the human condition and the inherent uncertainty of much of human life. When Macbeth—ostensibly lost to madness and facing the despair of defeat—declares that all of human life is merely "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," he is speaking the "madness of vital truth" according to Melville (Ibid) These grim reflections on human life represented the grounds of Melville's admiration of the two authors, and their ability to express these thoughts, in spite of the potential consequences of doing so, separated them from the rank-and-file writer.

In addition, the two positions—those of the popular and the profound writer—reflect very different ontological outlooks. The popular novelist, or at least his or her readers, are drawn towards a view of the world in which Minerva's owl takes wing at some point and helps the perplexed make sense of it all. This is exactly what "the profounder emanations of the human mind" dismiss. The move from a commonplace to a profound understanding of the world means accepting a universe in which human life regularly produces "imperfect unanticipated and disappointing sequels." To understand the world in all of its complexity requires a willingness to suspend the reassuring belief that its structure is both rational and orderly. As the story progresses, Melville clarifies further the stakes of these contrasts. It is not simply common novelists, but also the all-too-worldly peddlers of religious teleology—"the Kantists" or "transcendentals"—who "complacently" believe that there is some "talismanic secret" that can provide external or timeless support for their moral views.[86] All

[86] Melville often singles out philosophers, including Kant for scorn, but his primary target is typically the transcendentalists. In addition to trying to add a structure of meaning to the human condition that Melville believed it simply lacked, they were often guilty, as Melville saw it, of trying to explain away what Williams would have called "the horrors." This is true of *The Confidence Man,* where fictionalized versions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau engage in sophistry to deny the presence of evil in the world. It's also true of "Cock-a-Doodle-Doo," which finds Thoreau under attack for arguing that closeness with nature and simple pleasures could help one find peace, even in the face of tragedy.

these perspectives, Pierre discovers, are incapable of accounting for "the ambiguities" of life. Appealing to their preferred means of clearing up the confusion and discontent that human beings face, each ultimately claims, that "night was day, and pain only a tickle" (Melville 1996, 163). In other words, Melville attacks philosophical theory on the same grounds as Williams. For both thinkers the fatal flaw lies in the conviction that there is necessarily some deep truth or intelligible meaning to human experience and it's the task of philosophy to uncover it.

From one point of view, though, Melville's understanding of tragedy and Williams' own views seem to be at odds. Williams, as we have seen, thought that the starkness of Sophoclean tragedy was what made it particularly useful as an antidote for philosophy's chronic optimism. Melville, by contrast, seems to praise a style of tragedy predicated on dissimulation and constructing a separate truthful narrative beneath the surface of what appears on the printed page, truth telling can only be done through "short flashings forth," after all. Can this be reconciled with Williams' desire for tragic fiction to lay the cold bare truth in front of the reader? I argue that they are ultimately compatible. Part of Melville's own views come back to his sense of the political and social climate in which he wrote: His first book *Typee* was ferociously attacked by the American religious press, in particular for its juxtaposition of the peacefulness of life among the supposedly "uncivilized" Polynesian villagers and the vicious conduct of "civilized" missionaries towards them. One critic, in a ten-page review, concluded that Melville's book was an "undisguised attempt to decry the missionary work in its every feature. . . wherein the cause of *Missions* is assailed, with a pertinacity of misrepresentation and degree of *hatred*, which can only entitle the perpetrator to the just claim of traducer" (Parker 1996, 432). Ironically, the vitriol expressed here reflects something of the high point of Melville's relationship with the American literary and religious press (Miller 1997). Whereas Williams' envisioned tragedy as a form of philosophy for an era that lay beyond the influence of Christianity, Melville wrote in the age of Christendom and understood acutely the risks

that expressing his less palatable metaphysical opinions would entail.[87] Melville's efforts to shield his message in a layer of fictional obscurity does not undermine his belief that truthful literature must be committed to showing the limits of human purposes in an indifferent world, and, as we will see, giving literary expression to the forces that shaped what is possible within the boundaries of politics.

Melville most fully explores the political consequences of his pessimistic ontology in his novella *Benito Cereno*. In this story, an American ship's captain, Amaso Delano, stumbles upon a Spanish slave ship adrift at sea. Delano boards the ship, the *San Dominick,* to find its Spanish crew has been decimated, and that its slaves now roam the decks alongside the sailors. The *San Dominick's* captain, Don Benito appears hapless without his personal slave Babo. As Delano wanders the ship, he is routinely beset by doubts about what he witnesses around him, but his "undistrustful good-nature," and his certainty in the purity of his own intentions and moral purposes and his faith in the presence of a providential order always manage to mollify his concerns. It is not until the Spanish captain jumps into Delano's boat in desperation that Delano realizes the truth: the slaves have been in charge of the ship the entire time he was aboard, staging an elaborate masquerade to deceive him. Awakened to the reality of the situation, Delano leads an attack to subdue and subjugate the slaves. At the conclusion of the novella, Delano remains as optimistic as ever, certain in the inherent

[87] Melville's own religious beliefs are a matter of some disagreement. While Lawrence Thompson, for example, argues that Melville's entire corpus is simply one large-scale satire of Christianity (L. Thompson 1952), others like Hershel Parker (Parker 1963) or Gene Bluestein affirm that Calvinism plays a constitutive role in Melville's work. On this latter view, Melville's particularly mordant commentary on the hypocrisy of American Christian practice is meant to draw a distinction between the good, Christ-like, way of living a Christian life, and the disingenuous self-obliging way most believers actually live. To my mind, the most convincing possibility is that Melville was a sceptic who, given his well-documented admiration for the work of Pierre Bayle (Bell 1951) and his bruising engagements with the American religious press (Miller 1997), wrote with the characteristic caution and dissimulation necessary to keep his less palatable opinions concealed within the rich range of religious metaphor and imagery that he draws upon. It is worth pointing out that even in this single excerpt he is describing Hawthorne's reliance on the device of original sin, and that he writes, "something *like* Original Sin," for example. Answering these questions conclusively, however, would entail pursuing a much broader engagement with Melville's religious views, one that is well beyond the scope of this chapter.

goodness of the world and even more certain of his own goodness. At the novella's conclusion, Melville includes a telling exchange between the despondent Don Benito and Amaso Delano, who is determined to cheer him up:

> "'You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.'
>
> 'Because they have no memory,' he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human.' . . .
>
> 'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano. . . 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'
>
> 'The negro'" (Melville 2002a, 101).

The way that Melville constructs this scene speaks volumes about his understanding of the world. The final words spoken by Don Benito have been the subject of much critical scrutiny, but it is widely agreed that the answer, given in Spanish, is meant to signify not just the Spaniard's newfound understanding of the Blacks who temporary enslaved him, but also the presence of tragedy, or blackness in the world. Don Benito, like Pierre or Ishmael, now sees the truth of things, even if, like all of Melville's characters and Melville himself, this insight brings Don Benito little consolation. Second, Delano's reaction to the events aboard the *San Dominick* is to adopt a policy of historical amnesia. Rather than confronting the long history of chattel slavery and white supremacy in the making of the American republic, he looks to the calmness of the natural world, which his companion notes has "no memory," as a source of moral reassurance and distraction. Again, Don Benito arrives at much the same conclusion Melville had Ishmael reach in *Moby Dick*. The natural world can only serve to remind human beings of the cosmic insignificance of their aspirations and goals, it cannot, as Delano asserts, reassure them that they are saved from the evils that lurk within it.

Amaso Delano's blithe disregard of the moral and political horrors he encounters serves a notable contrast to the menacing atmosphere of *Benito Cereno,* with its stormy seas and impenetrable fog, as well as its ambiguous conclusion. While one of Melville's preferred dramatic motifs was to place an overwhelmingly sanguine character in circumstances that disabuse him of his optimism, there is an additional political dimension to Delano's cheery behavior. In particular, there is strong evidence that Melville based some of Delano's dialogue on the speeches of Senator Daniel Webster, with Rogin, Sundquist, and McCall all agreeing that Delano's sunny forecast is likely a fictional adaptation of the one that Webster gave after the Compromise of 1850 was finalized (Rogin 1983, 145; Sundquist 1993). This is significant because in 1850 Daniel Webster represents a very particular sort of Northern politician. He was the sort of idealist who believed, as Delano says, that slavery was an ugly institution, but was, fundamentally, someone else's concern. In fact, Webster also believed that the Constitution guaranteed the rights of slaveholders in states where it was already practiced. Indeed, he believed that a firm commitment to the Constitution, as well as respect for the rights of slave holders and northerners alike, would enable the democratic ideals underlying American politics to prevail.

In his infamous March 7th Speech, as part of the negotiations to secure a more robust system of fugitive slave retrieval, he begins with a call for consensus and reconciliation. Drawing on the metaphor of a ship at sea, Webster claims that the country was experiencing a fierce storm, with "The East, the North and the stormy South" all collectively throwing "the whole sea into commotion." He goes on to frame debates about the morality of slavery as simple matters of conscience on which reasonable people, in particular reasonable Christians, can disagree. The higher power of American ideals and America's innocence, Webster asserted, would preserve the Union. Consequently, he declares that the states of the union "live and stand under a government popular in its form, representative in its character, founded upon principles of equality," and that the United

States, "in all of its history. . . has been beneficent; it has trodden down no man's liberty" (Webster 1850). Webster closes his speech by beseeching his fellow senators to "come out into the light of day; let us enjoy the fresh air of Liberty and Union. . . let our comprehensions be as broad as the country we serve, our asperations as high as its certain destiny" (Ibid). Webster's America, because of the form of government it inherited, was guaranteed a place in the workings of providence. In his moralistic politics, the central issue was one of willpower—a question of whether or not Americans could remain steadfast in their commitment to justice. However, Webster's high minded rhetoric, regardless of its intentions, did little more than defend and legitimate the institution of chattel slavery.

Given the events that were to follow from the legislative compromise his speech helped to secure, it's easy to see Webster's rhetoric as simply delusional, especially given the racist political order that his speech aimed to defend. However, such interpretations run the risk of masking the nature and importance of Melville's criticism of Delano. Delano sincerely believes he is a true egalitarian, one who is proud of his commitment to "republican impartiality. . . which always seeks one level, serving the oldest white no better than the youngest black." Moreover he is convinced that his own history is as unblemished as America's, and continues to believe so even as he offers to buy the slave mastermind Babo from Don Benito (Melville 2002a, 51). Melville gives Delano's ship, *The Bachelor's Delight,* a title that carries a great deal of allegorical weight. "Bachelor," in Melville's lexicon, almost universally connotes individuals who are disconnected from the harder realities of the world or who are insensitive to the presence of evil within it. As I noted above, this is true of the American captain of *The Bachelor* in *Moby Dick*. It is also true of the bachelor scholars of London whose "paradise" Melville explored in the short story "Paradise of the Bachelors, Tartarus of the Maids." In that sketch, Melville describes the outlook of the "philosophic" bachelors in the following terms: "The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two legends seemed

preposterous to the bachelor imagination" (Melville 1969a, 209). Delano, with his inability to learn from his own experiences as well as his determination to believe there is something in the very fabric of the universe that will shelter him from suffering, is the perfect embodiment of this attitude. Webster, and those who shared his point of view, were similarly disposed to understand politics in triumphalist terms. From this point of view, if pain and trouble were not entirely absent from political life they would ultimately be overcome by the force of justice inherent in America's institutions. For Melville, as for Williams, this sort of optimistic moralism could only be sustained by a deep belief that the very nature of the universe ensured it. Melville's fiction and Williams' philosophical work aimed at nothing less than an evisceration of this complacent and destructive belief.

Both writers emphasized, and accused their moralistic contemporaries of excluding, the role of tragedy in politics. As I mentioned above, Williams sees the tragedians and Thucydides as providing the most realistic portrait of the human experience, especially of political life. The weight of history yields a world where, from one perspective, humans are left to struggle against an impersonal and characterless agent. Melville's fiction is centrally preoccupied with the role of tragedy in human affairs. This is particularly true of Melville's masterful short story *Billy Budd.* In this story, a young innocent sailor, Billy, strikes and kills a superior officer when the latter falsely accuses him of plotting a mutiny. Billy is ultimately condemned to be hanged by the commander of the ship, Captain Vere, who acknowledges that he is fundamentally innocent. Vere also believes that as a captain during a time of unrest in the navy, he is obliged to punish any violation of the laws of his ship.

Robert Cover argues that Vere might well have been modeled on Lemuel Shaw. Shaw, who was both Melville's father-in-law and the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, ruled in

several high profile cases that escaped slaves be returned to bondage (Cover 1975, Chap. 1). These rulings contrasted sharply with Shaw's vocal criticism of the institution of slavery. Shaw drew several rebukes including criticisms from leading abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Fredrick Douglass. Melville, however, seemed to appreciate what he saw as Shaw's intractable commitment to the political system he was a part of.[88] As Melville writes to those who might second guess Vere's decision: "It is easy for a non-combatant to reason about how it ought to have been fought. It is another thing personally and under fire to direct the fighting while involved in the obscuring smoke of it. . . Little ween the snug card-players in the cabin of the responsibilities of the sleepless man on the bridge" (Mevlille 2002, 156). Shaw lived in an era governed by legal formalism when the idea of natural law was in particularly low esteem. He also decided these cases during a period in which he believed that the Union was on the verge of collapse. He, like the sleepless man on the deck was in *Billy Budd*, might be complicit in perpetuating an injustice, but in many ways he embodies the characteristics of Sophocles' tragic characters: That is, he is put into a situation where there is only one real option open for someone of his background.[89] Between the Delanos and the Shaws of the

[88] Hershel Parker, in his magisterial biography of Melville, discusses the *Sims* and *Shadrach* cases at length. After the slave in the *Sims* case escaped from Shaw's courtroom with abolitionist help, the courtroom was arrayed with "a show of military force" that is reminiscent of the trial of Billy Budd (Parker 1996, 1005).

[89] It is not that Shaw was incapable of choosing otherwise in any formal sense: He could have chosen to stop being a judge, for example. In fact, if Cover's account of the accepted wisdom of American jurisprudence is accurate, that is exactly what he would have had to do if he wanted to release the slaves in the *Sims* and the *Shadrach* cases. This, however, would have made Shaw's action akin to those of the "smug card players" that Melville so thoroughly condemns. For a judge like Shaw, the most respected legal authority in the United States at the time even including the members of the Supreme Court, ordering the release of the *Sims* and *Shadrach* slaves in clear violation of the Constitution, on the basis of his political sympathies and legally dubious theories about natural right; would entail a rejection of many of the core commitments of his identity. As Williams observes in *Shame and Necessity*, a tragic view of the world often takes on a purposive character in part because the convergence of a number of forces—the Compromise of 1850, the impact in America of Bentham's approach to legal philosophy, the kinds of social expectations placed on American judges to be neutral interpreters of the law—that make the outcomes seem almost inevitable. This is why Melville goes to such great lengths to give Vere a similar set of expectations and demands upon his character: It conveys a sense of inevitability while retaining room for the might-have-been of agency on the part of the ill-fated character.

world, Melville presents a portrait of political possibility which compels its reader to recognize how "the supernatural" manifests itself in the thinking of individual agents.

This tragic dimension in Melville's writings is also evident in Melville's anti-utopian political views. When Melville incorporates political commentary into his fiction, it often takes a form similar to the beliefs put forward by Williams. This is especially true of the various political discussions in his book *Mardi*. *Mardi* is a distinctive book, since it owes an obvious debt to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. In the former book, an American sailor, accompanied by a group of philosophizing companions, pursues the Polynesian maiden Yillah across an archipelago of absurd societies, all filled with allegorical significance. One of these islands is called Vivenza, and his heroes' time on the island provides Melville with an opportunity to engage in some very transparent social criticism. In fact, the criticism occasionally borders on the shallow: the southern Vivenzians hold slaves and yet claim to be freedom loving. Their chief ideologue, Nulli, parrots the claims of John C. Calhoun, namely, the proposition that slaves are soulless creatures rather than men as well as the self-serving argument that it would debase non-slaves to perform the menial labor for which slaves are fit. Nulli even shares with Calhoun his "cadaverous, ghost-like" appearance (Melville 1982, 1189).

However, Melville provides the reader with some even more intriguing observations about American political culture in the 1840s. In one chapter, an anonymous pamphlet addressed to the Vivensians lays out three criticisms of what it identifies as their over-optimistic and ahistorical beliefs. First, Melville's fictional Americans are accused of seeing their present historical moment, one in which the revolutions of 1848 were still raging across Europe, as the end of history. "The grand error of your nation. . . seems this: The conceit that Mardi is now in the last scene of the last act of her drama; and that all preceding events were ordained to bring about. . . a universal and permanent Republic" (Ibid 1193). Melville's repudiation of the idea that the arc of world history

tends towards the spread of democratic self-government is consistent with Williams' criticism of the triumphalist character of many strands of modern liberal thought. Second, Melville admonishes Americans not to look askance upon non-democratic societies. The monarchies of Europe had enjoyed some success at securing social order for their citizens, especially compared with chaos within France during the Reign of Terror, and those living in democracies needed to do more to understand how monarchical societies looked to those living within them. "It is not the prime end, and chief blessing, to be politically free," Melville's pamphleteer writes, "Did you visit [a monarchy] you would not be marched straight into a dungeon. And though you would behold sundry sights displeasing, you would start to inhale such liberal breezes; and hear crowds boasting of their privileges; as you, of yours (Ibid, 1194). This can be read as a variation on Williams' point about the importance of the basic legitimation demand in politics. Melville's viewpoint is, of course, decidedly Eurocentric, and, unlike Williams, the most pronounced form of cultural difference he can envision is between monarchy and democracy. However, his objection to democratic grand-standing is meant to convey much the same message: There are regimes whose justification for ruling makes sense to those they rule, even if they are non-democratic. Third, Melville is committed to the proposition that democratic self-government is superior to any authoritarian alternative, but he, like Williams, believes that the primary goal of government is to minimize human suffering. The pamphlet's closing sections contain a rejection of violent revolutions as a means of social change: "To keep equal pace with the times, great reforms. . . be needed; nowhere are bloody revolutions required. Though it be the most certain of remedies, no prudent invalid opens his veins, to let out his disease with his life. And though all evils may be assuaged; all evils cannot be done away with. For evil is the chronic malady of the universe and checked in one place, breaks forth in another (Ibid 1195). This passage reveals Melville's own appreciation of the irreducibility of what Williams describes as tragedy in the human experience, foregrounding (also like Williams) this dimension of human experience in

the thinking questions of political transformation. Reform out of line with the underlying cultural values of a given society and, going further, revolution, both writers assert are limited in their ability to solve entrenched social problems, or to achieve a just social order, and a bloody revolution, an attempt to wipe the slate clean as Robespierre and others had attempted to do during the Reign of Terror—is likely to create needless suffering in pursuit of an impossible goal.

II – Melville's Fiction and the Aims of Scepticism Without Reductionism

Melville shares implicitly all of the central philosophical commitments that distinguish Williams' realism. He believes that human beings live in a world that is not receptive to their demands for moral or ethical certainty. He believes further that human experience is often characterized by tragedy. Individuals are not able to control fully their own fate, and only the intellectually dishonest—the common novelists, the philosophers, or the transcendentalists—pretend otherwise. This continuity in the thinking of Williams and Melville lays the groundwork for what I will now examine, namely, what one learns by reading Melville and Williams together as political realists.

In this concluding section, I return to the most central question of this chapter: What does Melville's fiction tell us about the political uses of realist stark fiction? There is, as we have seen, a striking degree of continuity between Melville's and Williams' views on human experience, the need for a sufficiently "realist" account of liberal democratic values, and the important role of the tragic in human affairs. This correspondence, by itself, does not show that Melville's work can serve as the kind of realist stark fiction that I described at the conclusion of the last chapter. However, I contend that Melville's fiction offers the range of virtues that I outline in the conclusion of the previous chapter. It often presents the workings of chance and necessity in a way that intelligibly reflects their constitutive role in human affairs, it shows, specifically, how historical forces can come to manifest themselves as a personal imperative for individual agents. It does all this with a specific set of

political purposes in mind. It is fiction that aims to prompt reflection upon what "we," as citizens of liberal democracies, "have and how it could go away." In doing so, it clearly aims to promote a certain kind of reflection among its audience, one prompted by the special virtues of imaginative literature, about how incongruent their behavior might be with the basic principles of democratic self-government. For Melville, as for Williams, the value of Enlightenment inspired democratic principles were often undermined by a range of what Arvin dubs, in his classic study of Melville's *Mardi,* "democratic inessentials." These "inessentials" encompass a wide range of practices and beliefs which, while not necessary features of democracy itself, often were associated with the antebellum democracy of Melville's era. These inessentials included everything from the tacit acceptance of the enormous inequalities in American economic life, a naive belief that American democracy was protected by a providential logic of inevitability, and the sanitization of arbitrary political power in pursuit of empire in the name of spreading democracy across the globe. Most crucially of all, Melville saw the perspective of northerners like Webster, who conceived of slavery as an issue that could be addressed through accommodation and conciliation as particularly antithetical to the very nature of liberal democracy. It perverted the very truthfulness that democracy made possible and needed to survive by casting slavery as a matter on which reasonable people could disagree, and by ignoring the grimmer implications of such accommodation by appealing to the boundless optimism of a providential future. Inequality and unfreedom in its most profound form could somehow be made consistent with the vision of government laid out in the Declaration of Independence that Melville venerated. Each of Melville's works of fiction, at least in part, offer challenges to these various inessentials and each of them attempt to subvert their audience's near-automatic conflation of these inessentials with democracy itself. At its best, Melville's fiction forces his readers to examine the line between the crucial and inessential features of democratic self-government, and it poses the question of what democratic life would be like when the real virtues of

democracy, such as its commitment to truthfulness, freedom, and political equality, have been undone and only the worst of its unnecessary vices are left behind.

However, not all of Melville's work realizes this ambition in quite the same way. In fact, some of his work hardly qualifies as tragic at all, and some of his fiction does not embody the virtue of "starkness" that we encountered in the previous chapter. Consider, for example, *The Confidence Man*. At its surface the novel tells the story of a shadowy individual, the titular confidence man, and his dealings with a number of different passengers aboard the steamboat *Fidele*. The themes of the story, the events of which take place on April Fool's Day, touch on questions of deception, metamorphosis, and the gap between appearance and reality. For example, the confidence man assumes a wide range of different forms and, in these different guises, seeks to solicit the confidence or support of different passengers in a range of schemes or projects almost all of them wildly outlandish or seemingly disreputable. At the same time there is a clear gap between the events of the book at its surface, and the degree of ironic detachment Melville retains from the thoughts and actions of the confidence man and the other characters. As many commentators have noted, the character of the confidence man shares a number of similarities to the "the original deceiver," the Satan of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Mchaney 1975; Urbanczyk 2003). Melville often has the devilish confidence man inveigh against "gloomy philosophers" or others like Tacitus, Thucydides, and Aeschylus whose work serves to undermine the kind of unreflective "confidence" that the deceiver favors. For example, at one point the confidence man, ostensibly explaining the woes of the company whose stock he is authorized to sell, laments the existence of certain "bears," who "whether in stocks, politics, bread-stuffs, morals, metaphysics, religion—be it what it may—trump up their black panics in the naturally quiet brightness" (Melville 2006a, 56). This returns us to Melville's earlier account of the muteness of nature, the lack of ethical closure to be found in a universe indifferent to the search for moralistic good news. Melville believes, as we have seen, that it

is the "complacent" authors who believe that the human condition offers such closure, and the "profounder" view that contests this possibility. In this instance the confidence man affirms that in everything from politics to religion human beings should simply accept things as they are without being disturbed by the histories of Tacitus or Thucydides or the plays of Aeschylus, all of whom he mentions as archetypal "bears." Without the sceptical doubts each of these authors press—about the failings of human nature in politics or the broader supernatural threats that beset human purposes—there is only confidence and a concomitant propensity to take other human beings or the causes they claim to support simply as they are. They must be taken at face value and, as the example of the confidence man reveals to the reader, both individuals and cherished values are not always what they appear to be on first glance. The confidence man is never who he appears to be, and the causes he supports are never what they seem on their face. In this way it offers an almost Williamsian portrait of self-deception: The confidence man's victim participates in their own bondage by believing what they wish to be true rather than looking at the world honestly.

The relationship between the need for truthfulness and political freedom is, I would argue, one of the often-overlooked themes of the book. The style of the book is convoluted, and much of what is key to interpreting it lies off the printed page, with Melville's deliberate choice of suggestive allusions to or language from other works. As Mark Anderson points out, *The Confidence Man's* excessively dense style seems designed to make the reader to feel utterly abandoned and confused (Anderson 2017). In this way it seeks to bring to life a world in which words no longer mean what they ought to: where the social benefits of private initiative and commerce have been displaced by stock-market speculation and get-rich-quick schemes, pseudoscience and dubious sure-cures are widely accepted, and where even the evil of slavery cannot be acknowledged for what it is.[90] The

[90] There are too many examples of each of these themes throughout the book for me to be able to chronicle them here exhaustively. One specific passage highlights the ironic way that is characteristic of Melville's

Americans who, throughout the book, willingly accept what the confidence man offers, and who trust that his perverted versions of charity, commerce, and philosophy bear more any kind of resemblance to the genuine articles, are in a sense within his power and under his manipulative thumb. They lack the "bearish" perspective of Tacitus and Aeschylus, in part because their public culture is degraded by two "inessentials" that Melville repeatedly returns to as baleful components of American life: A belief in the historical invulnerability and inevitability of democracy, and an excessively exaggerated sense of self regard. Individuals who hold onto these sentiments are deceived by the confidence man but, as Melville repeatedly points out, what they suffer from is largely a form of self-deception: They wish to believe that self-interest and an ingrained confidence that all is right will always steer them true, and that they live in a society which is still reasonably just. The plot of *The Confidence Man* finds these narrowly self-regarding individuals adrift and unable to understand the ulterior motives behind the appealing rhetoric of an infernal individual who exploits their gullibility. *The Confidence Man* was completed against the backdrop of Bleeding Kansas, at a time when Daniel Drew and Cornelius Vanderbilt were famous for their manipulations of the stock market whose impacts needed to be mitigated at great public expense. It was written in the aftermath of America's imperial landgrab from Mexico, as Parker points out (Parker 1996). This was a war that began when President James Polk ordered US troops to occupy Mexican territory, hoping to "manufacture a war." The war was ultimately sold to the American public as a just and patriotic war to avenge the atrocity of Mexico shedding of "American blood on American soil," and accepted as that by the American public at a time of nationalistic fervor (Howe 2007, 741). *The Confidence Man*

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approach throughout the book. Asked whether he is an abolitionist, the confidence man replies: "If by abolitionist you mean a zealot, I am none; but if you mean a man, who, being a man, feels for all men, slaves included, and by any lawful act, opposed to nobody's interest, and therefore, rousing nobody's enmity, would willingly abolish suffering `supposing it, in its degree, to exist) from among mankind, irrespective of color, then I am what you say." Melville is, yet again, parodying the kind of northerner, like Delano, who believes that the problem of slavery could be solved through compromise and accommodation.

forces its readers to ask themselves whether they are capable of viewing their circumstances honestly, or whether their political system is merely a republican façade and they have abandoned the truthfulness necessary within a democratic system.

As effective as *The Confidence Man* may be as a defense of the importance of truthfulness it is, to return to Williams' earlier distinction, dense but not stark and grim farce rather than gripping tragedy. It does show its audience how their actions might potentially compromise their political values, but it does so in a way that does not display the more immediate human costs of those prejudices. Its narrative design and particular structure encourage its readers to see themselves through a literary funhouse mirror, rather than urging readers to see the world through the lens that Williams believes stark fiction provides. However, Melville's work offers examples of tragic fiction that more clearly advance the realist aims of tragic critique outlined above. Consider, for example, the case of *Benito Cereno*. It too has a unique narratological structure, one that lends itself less to ironical detachment but rather a process of self-reflection and criticism. The novella's narrator has long been the subject of scholarly scrutiny (Mclamore 1995). The narrator does not consistently retain one single perspective on the events aboard the *San Dominick* and during their aftermath. While events are often described through the mechanism of third person narration, the thoughts and feelings reported are almost exclusively those of the American Captain Amasa Delano. However, while the narrator is often an interlocutor for Delano, Melville breaks away from this device at two crucial points in the story. The first is at the very beginning, and in doing so Melville suggests that he does not want the reader to be neutral about the things they observe. After describing Delano as a man of a "singularly undistrustful nature" who is not, even in the most extreme of cases, willing to impute "malign evil" to members of humankind, the narrator breaks from their neutrality to ask: "Whether, in view of what humanity is capable, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to

determine" (Melville 2002a, 35). Coming as it does, this passage suggests, at the outset of a story that is largely told from the vantage point of Delano, that Melville's intention is to have the reader engage in the form of what I referred to above as embedded criticism. The reader is meant to assess whether or not Delano's tender-heartedness is consistent with the world around him. As the novella progresses, the scope of the reader's critical scrutiny is expanded to encompass his ethical and political beliefs as well as the consistency with which Delano holds to his various commitments.

Delano, we are told, sees himself as an exemplar of a kind of thoroughgoing egalitarianism. In particular, he is deeply committed to "republican impartiality." Moreover, Delano also styles himself as a kind of racial egalitarian who views the slaves aboard the *San Dominick* "genially" the way that "some men view Newfoundland dogs" (Melville 2002a, 67, 71). He is also a critic of slavery, believing that it inspires "ugly passions" in their masters. As I indicated above, he is implicitly committed to a belief in his own moral goodness and believes that his moral purity—in a world he sees as governed by goodness and rationality—will keep him safe.[91] Even as Delano experiences doubts about the things he witnesses aboard the *San Dominick,* he always manages to find a way to steer himself back to the calm harbors of certainty and serenity. The Delano that Melville constructs is a moral person, and an individual who believes himself to be committed to some of the nobler aspirations of nineteenth century American politics.

Melville, by employing the narratological perspective that he does, gives the reader a clear view of Delano's thoughts and —by the end of the story—a keen sense of the reality around him. What the reader is encouraged to see is that Delano's commitments are ultimately hollow, and more importantly, that his beliefs help implicate him in a system of human suffering that ultimately

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[91] Melville's Delano asks himself, in a passage typical of his worldview: "Who would murder Amasa Delano? His conscience is clean. There is some one above" (Melville 2002a, 56).

renders these commitments obscene. For our purposes, the point here is not to dwell on the ways he violates his principles—from being disgusted by the presence of blacks when it is time to conduct business with Don Benito, to reassuring himself that the slaves could not be working with the Spaniards to trick him because "[the Africans] were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes" (Ibid, 63). Instead, the key consideration is that Melville portrays these beliefs—which his antebellum audience, made up primarily of New Yorkers and New Englanders, would have all identified with—as ultimately both incompatible with the continued existence of slavery, but also helping to sustain it. It is exactly because he believes himself to be an upright and absolutely righteous person that Delano cannot see the human cost of slavery. Moreover, it is why he and Don Benito, who has personally experienced the brutality of slavery, are unable to draw the same conclusions about the events they witnessed together. By allowing his readers to view in Delano what he cannot view in himself, Melville enables the reader to criticize Delano's delusions, his naivete, and his hypocritical behavior. However, by linking the reader's perspective to Delano's sense of self-understanding, Melville encourages the reader to recognize the dissonance between their own commitments and the political system they support. By drawing on the ethical materials that would have made sense to his readers in the 1840s Melville invites them to reflect on their own behavior and its consequences.

However, as a form of stark fiction, Melville's work helpfully downplays the potential for reconciliation between antagonistic interests and resists the temptation to provide a moralistic version of Whig history. That is not to say that it casts reconciliation as impossible—that would be helpful only to the most reactionary of social conservatives. Rather, Melville dramatizes the barriers that even this modest form of realist critique must contend with. Delano, hermetically sealed off from the world around him, cannot be made to reflect on the costs of his actions by anyone or

anything. At the end of the novella, the slaves are either dead or returned to chains, and the only person to have had his eyes opened to the horrors of slavery has committed suicide. The worldview of Delano and Webster seems triumphant, even as the reader recognizes the instability of the situation and the gruesomeness of the institution that has been left untouched. Melville's tragedies are fictional, and, as Williams reminds us, this means that we can take a range of attitudes towards the outcomes of those works that we cannot take to the actual manifestations of tragedy in the empirical world. It prunes our aspirations while allowing a sort of indignancy to take root. It pushes us to dispel the Delano from ourselves while also reminding us of the inevitability of individuals like him. This is the appropriate balance for a realist critique to strike, and Melville's fiction, read alongside Williams' reflections in this same vein, represents a powerful way of practicing it.

Melville's fiction challenges readers to confront characters whose ethical and social circumstances are different, but not disconnected, from those Americans live with today. To return to Williams' reflections on Wittgenstein, Melville's characters are both fictional embodiments of part of our society's history, and individuals whose concerns are adjacent to our own. They are historically particular without being alien. Many of the themes that interested Melville—such as slavery and white supremacy, the grim consequences of America's imperial aspirations, and the human costs of technological innovation and mass society—are not just recognizable features of contemporary American politics. They are among its undeniable flashpoints. The failures of his fictional protagonists to redress these wrongs challenges us to reflect on the ways in which some of our most deeply held, and widely celebrated, commitments might be incompatible with the kind of world we are actively creating. The concern to minimize human suffering—so central to Melville's fiction and Williams' "liberalism of fear"—sits awkwardly alongside the exploitation and expropriation necessary to maintain the standards of living that many Americans have become accustomed to in the 21st century. American public opinion about race and the legacy of slavery

retains some features of the over-optimistic Delano like view, in spite of the observable costs of trying to wish these problems away, or indeed to legislate them out of existence altogether by banning any mention of the civil rights movement or Jim Crow from American public schools (Hinger 2021). Both *The Confidence Man* and *Benito Cereno* can provide a different set of insights to help counter this pernicious trend, with each exploring, in their own way, some of the costs involved with following them to their culmination. *The Confidence Man* shows how the aspiration to be governed by self-deception, to refuse to see one's actions for what they are, can lead to a politics of deep unfreedom, where one is left within the arbitrary power of wanton deceivers. *Benito Cereno* offers an evocative portrait of what one risks by attempting to ignore the kinds of injustices that one might in fact consciously disapprove of. In both cases, they show the signature virtues of realist fiction as a form of critique. Read in conjunction with Williams' realism, Melville's fiction provides direct critiques of these and other pressing political problems, while also forcing us to consider our own depth of involvement in them.

This concluding section has examined the ways in which Melville's fiction can act as a form of embedded social critique, consistent with the aims of realist stark fiction outlined in the previous chapter. However, I want to highlight a few further relevant features of this style of realist critique for the politics of contemporary liberal democracies today. First, as I mentioned above, Melville's fictional critiques are uniquely well-suited as a defense of democratic values in an age of democratic decline especially in the United States. This is in part because Melville's themes and animating concerns are sufficiently remote from those that lie at the heart of American politics today, yet they are clearly share more than a passing historical resemblance to them. While few willingly defend slavery today, it is impossible to escape the debates surrounding its historical legacy and what steps

need to be taken to preserve America's public recognition of its legacy.[92] More to the point, it is unclear what obligations are owed to the ancestors of those who were enslaved, especially from people who see themselves as entirely unconnected to those who held slaves and or otherwise benefitted from the system of chattel slavery. Those who seek to contravene any discussion of reparations or the recognition of slavery's lingering socio-economic and political legacies, adhere to a rallying cry: those of us living today aren't responsible. That this line of thought is pervasive among Americans is confirmed both by public opinion data concerning the desirability of reparations for the descendants of slavery (Sharpe 2021) and what sort of history ought to be taught in American schools (Fingerhut and Ma 2022). While it is unlikely that anything could dissuade some of the strongest adherents of the "we are not responsible" view, the nuances of the public opinion research on this topic suggest that many others are likely to be more open-minded.[93] Fiction like *Benito Cereno*, by marshalling the resources of imaginative literature, offers a way of engaging with those who, like Delano, might not see themselves as directly responsible for the system of racialized injustice that exists in the United States or who, in fact, might think it completely abhorrent. The conceptual framework that many Americans still bring to these questions holds that responsibility is largely individual and that the weight of history should not trouble the individual political agent so long as he or she lives up to the same values of "republican impartiality," that Delano espouses. Melville's work pushes individuals like this towards a more capacious notion of responsibility, one centered on opening their eyes to what is around them. It shows them the tragic fate of those who refuse to correct their blindness, and in doing so it offers a way of addressing what is at the heart of these debates. Melville's work helps to cast the act of supporting political elites who peddle disingenuous

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[92] The remarks of Senator Tom Cotton, candidate Roy Moore, and anti-government protestor Cliven Bundy in recent years all suggest, in one way or another, that the debate over the desirability of slavery is still with us today.

[93]

Delano-like myths as tantamount to choosing to live under an illusion and live with blind disregard for an injustice with steep human costs. In this way it leverages the unique strengths of tragedy to serve constructive political ends.

Second, Melville's work offers a related way of challenging the use of disingenuous democratic rhetoric to undermine democracy itself. Democracies are not often killed off in spectacular fashion, as Livtsky and Ziblatt have recently observed, instead their norms are slowly chipped away from within until they rest on an unstable foundation (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Two other recent works have diagnosed how the language of democracy can be weaponized to destroy the very norms of liberal equality and democratic self-government. Jason Stanley, in *How Fascism Works*, documents how authoritarian movements regularly seek to draw upon a mythic past, steeping themselves—in the American context—in a language of reclaiming a once functional democratic system that has fallen into disrepair. These authoritarian movements claim unfairness and censorship at every turn, casting themselves as unfair victims of a creeping culture of censorship and repression whenever possible. At the same time, as a matter of political strategy, they attempt to stuff the courts with loyal party members to diminish, at all costs, the scope of democratic agency (Stanley 2018). Additionally, Nancy Maclean in her *Democracy in Chains* has documented the decades long efforts of the school of "public choice" academics, James McGill Buchannan most of all, and their billionaire libertarian backers, to similarly obstruct the political power of democratic majorities (MacLean 2017). The chosen vernacular of this movement was one of promoting greater "liberty" and "choice," as they sought to create a system in which the elected branches of the American government would be left functionally impotent. At present the present disingenuous mantra is the need for "freedom of speech," a freedom which has the dubious distinction of requiring that, for example, online social media platforms allow conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and the same far-right groups that stormed the United States Capitol to thrive. Melville's work, both *Benito Cereno*

and *The Confidence Man,* again offer a way of confronting the evils of these malign developments. As we have seen, self-deception, in both works, is connected with a deep unfreedom and an inability to view the world around oneself honestly. The ability to exercise meaningful political agency requires that one is able to tell whether one has, unknowingly, become trapped in what Williams describes as a "deceptive social hologram." By focusing on the way in which this form of shared self-deception operates, both works foreground in the minds of their audience the risks of losing sight of the virtue of truthfulness and its constitutive importance in maintaining a democratic society. *Benito Cereno* and *The Confidence Man* each prompt their readers to consider how far the quintessentially American platitudes, both the ones at the heart of each work and beyond, have come to displace a more meaningful understanding of the political reality that they are a part of. *Benito Cereno* is also particularly adept at portraying the risks of continuing to sleep-walk towards political oblivion.

Finally, Melville's work, seen as a form of Williamsian tragic critique, also offers a very modest sense of hope, of the sort that is appropriate to an age of democratic decline. As we have seen, Williams ends *Truth and Truthfulness* with the conclusion that "a more hopeful story" might serve believers in liberal democracy—beset as they are by radical and reactionary critics—better than the alternative of embracing the kind of historical misanthropy we encountered in the last chapter (B. Williams 2002a, 266). Melville, for his part, declares, in a celebrated passage of *Moby Dick,* that: "There is a woe that is wisdom and a woe that is madness" (Melville 2002b, 328). Reading both authors today means reading them at a historical moment when social forces they both detested—superstition, cruelty, and bigotry—have come to pose a formidable challenge to the ideals of democracy in Anglophone countries and around the globe. In view of these circumstances, their work provides two distinct forms of reassurance. The first is a kind of realism: Realism about politics, the human condition, and the limitations of both. However, by also providing models of how one might deploy this realism to attack—rather than accept—the malign forces threatening

democratic institutions and practices today, they supply the reader with the grounds for a kind of hope (and the tools to achieve that hope) borne out of resolve rather than naivete.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have sought to reimagine the political thought of Bernard Williams, to argue that Williams' moral philosophy offers more to political theorists than has been previously recognized. This reimagining has taken the form of arguing that Williams' work contains entirely new critical potentialities, as in Chapter II and that certain other components of this broader body of work ought to be of interest to political theorists today, as in Chapter IV, V and VI. It has also meant revisiting some more well-known concepts from Williams' philosophical corpus and arguing that the scholarly consensus regarding these ideas is mistaken, as I propose that it is as it pertains to the liberalism of fear and the supposedly conservative elements of Williams' realism in Chapter III. However, at the outset of this concluding chapter I feel it necessary to confess that I see this work as incomplete; it seems to me that are a number of further pathways that a more complete reimagination would need to pursue. While this sense of authorial uncertainty is likely an inevitable byproduct of writing a doctoral dissertation, I hope to partially allay it here by sketching out a range of fruitful avenues for extending this re-imagination.

First, future work along these lines will need to say much more about the relationship between the model of scepticism without reductionism that I articulate here and Williams' widely discussed account of realism in political thought. Outside of the discussion in Chapter III I have not engaged extensively with this body of literature. However, as I repeatedly note, this is widely understood to be Williams' signature contribution to the discipline of political theory. The contributors to the recent realist turn or revival are a diverse group, but practically everything written about this movement uses the terminology drawn almost verbatim from Williams' "Realism and Moralism" to describe the commitments that define a particular author as a realist. In large part I have not engaged with Williams' realism as a matter of conscious choice. As I said at the outset of

this dissertation, my reimagination of Williams' work is intended to challenge the implicit assumption that realism is all Williams has to offer political theorists. I have avoided it in part because I want to draw attention to those parts of Williams' work that are less well-understood and, as a result, to challenge the hegemony of this more widespread understanding of Williams' political thought. However, by focusing on what Williams saw as the critical elements of his own philosophy as I have here, I do not want to give the impression that this interpretation is entirely incompatible with Williams' realism.

As we saw in the discussion from Chapter III, Williams' realism is often discussed as a kind of hidebound conservatism. If a state only has to meet the meanest standard of securing social order in a way that "makes sense" to local understandings of what constitutes the legitimate exercise of political power, then what regime could be appropriately scrutinized according to this account of politics? Further, this Hobbesian understanding of politics, and the way that it rejects "moralist" approaches to political theorizing, seems unhelpful as a means of criticizing entrenched inequalities or otherwise responding to more urgent contemporary crises that go beyond the scope of maintaining legitimate political order. How can Williams' realism, in other words, be compatible with an understanding of his work that emphasizes, as we have seen above, what he sees as its radical critical potential? Building on the themes of the dissertation as a whole but specifically from the answer I offered in Chapter III, I think this potential incompatibility is largely overstated. The point of scepticism without reductionism as a model of social philosophy is to build from the bottom up, to connect with the imagination of its intended audience in a way that begins from what is ethically bedrock, and deploys these values to scrutinize social practices and prejudices which are incompatible with it. Williams' realism, with its focus on the conditions that make the exercise of political power legitimate, offers one understanding of how to put this framework into action. What "makes sense" to the citizens of liberal societies is, itself, constantly subject to political evolution. At

a minimum, any liberal society which fails to supplement the bare minimum of personal security it offers to its citizens with some measure of individual freedom, social justice, and public transparency, will fail to "make sense" to those subjected to its rule. Williams' realism, on this understanding, offers a particular vocabulary and theoretical framework for scepticism without reductionism to use as part of this broader project of defending liberal values.

Along these lines, Williams' realism can be more fruitfully understood as a kind of truthfulness. In this dissertation we have seen Williams uphold truthfulness as a social and civic value, and lament its decline in the contemporary information landscape as a contributing factor to liberal democracy's corresponding decline. However, Williams was also drawn to truthfulness as a personal and philosophical virtue. He repeatedly celebrates Nietzsche for his stated commitment to "facing hard truths," and it is this same capacity, as we have seen, that lies at the heart of his account of tragedy and what it is well-suited to communicate to its audience.[94] Williams' realism is, in this interpretation, not an appeal for a politics bereft of normative value. Instead, it is a way of defending liberalism which rejects the kind of optimistic historiography and "Founding Father philosophy" that a contemporary audience might be, Williams would undoubtedly say "ought to be," sceptical of.[95] That security and legitimacy are the primary questions of politics to a Williamsian realist might seem to offer an unduly pessimistic sketch of political possibility, but if we understand Williams' realism in light of the themes of this dissertation, then there are grounds for viewing this theoretical posture as the expression of something else. It expresses a kind of clear-eyedness about political possibility, but more importantly it expresses a kind of ethical and political urgency. It is centered on the belief that political and social values of genuine consequence face real threats, and that the

[94] On Nietzsche and hard truths, see: (B. Williams 2002a, 13-17).
[95] Owen (2018) makes a similar argument, contending that Williams' realism is a kind of truthful response to the "wishful thinking" of political moralism.

arguments used to defend these values matter, that they are worth formulating with care and attention and an eye towards the history of the social and political order they will be deployed in.

However, much more remains to be said concerning these matters. Beyond the work of more thoroughly integrating Williams' realism with the themes of his philosophy discussed here, it seems to me that at least two additional questions would need to lie at the center of future inquiries into the topic. First, what are the differentiating lines between Williams' realism and the later work of John Rawls. This is not to suggest that one could readily mistake Williams' realist liberalism for the Rawls of *Political Liberalism*. However, the principal criticism that Williams lodges at much political moralism is that it posits liberal values as morally or historically inevitable. In his later work Rawls, as Williams recognizes and celebrates, accepts liberalism as a "contingent fact" and seeks to articulate the terms under which constitutional essentials can be decided within these historically determined conditions. Williams still insists that some of the architecture that Rawls assembles, such as the idea of "an overlapping consensus" is still distinctively moral in nature and thus insufficiently "political." However, given Williams' insistence that his approach to philosophy is itself a form of reflective equilibrium, there are reasons to suspect that the gap between the two thinkers, in certain areas, may be less pronounced than it is often made out to be. Of course, given Williams' own rejection of ethical theory and his tragic sensibilities, the broader gap between the two will remain enormous. Some previous commentators have argued that Williams perhaps misunderstood the specific thrust of Rawls' later project (Hall 2013), an interpretation I find somewhat difficult to reconcile with Williams' rather glowing endorsement of Rawls' political turn (B. Williams 2014j). The relationship between the two thinkers demands more careful attention than it has hitherto received.

Second, much more remains to be said about two of the central ethical categories in Williams' philosophy, confidence and the idea of a "life worth living," on the one hand, and the social and political state of "making sense" on the other. In the postscript to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams argues that the category of "a life worth living" is at its heart a political and social one, and that it ought to be one of the central interests of the kind of reimagined philosophy he describes in that postscript (B. Williams 1985a, 201). These are tantalizing suggestions which are clearly connected with the concept of making sense which is so important to his later philosophy and his realism in particular. It seems clear that Williams wants this idea of "a life worth living," to carry some evaluative weight, to act as a contemporary manifestation of something drawn from Aristotelian virtue ethics. He proposes a social philosophy that can make sense of how larger political and sociological conditions shape the possibility of individuals living such a life. As with so many of these other suggestive ideas that can be found at the intersection of Williams' moral and political philosophy, this concept demands a kind of textual archaeology. It seems clear that Williams understood such a life in intersubjective and social terms: there was no one archetypal way of life that was best in all places and at all times, and a single disappointed malcontent could not rightfully claim that an entire social order was unjust simply because it failed to provide them with a life they considered worthwhile. However, Williams seems to believe that such as a part of a reimagined social philosophy this concept could be brought to bear to criticize a society that was full of discontented and anomic individuals, one that failed to live up to its own values. In the same way that a political and social order could be rightfully criticized if it exercised power in a way that failed to "make sense," to those under its authority, the failure to provide the conditions under which such a life can be realized seems like a different avenue for lodging justified theoretical complaints. A fuller investigation of the connections between the political themes of Williams' broader

philosophical project and his political theory realism would undoubtedly involve expanding upon these connections and determining how these themes might be put to critical political ends.

Beyond marrying the themes of scepticism without reductionism to Williams' realism, further work remains to be done in articulating how to put this approach to political thought into action. In Chapter VI, I identified Melville's tragic fiction as a form of embedded social critique that embodied the main philosophical underpinnings of scepticism without reductionism in a way that connects what Williams saw as the unique capacity of tragic fiction to spark reflection to more distinctively modern concerns. However, I am inclined to doubt that Melville's work commands the kind of popular attention that would it would need to in order to achieve the aims I outline in Chapter VI. As I said at the outset of that chapter, there are certainly other authors and examples of tragic fiction that convey a similar message to Melville's work, but this does not address what I see as a more fundamental problem. Tragedy, as Nussbaum and Williams remind us, was a civic spectacle. It was uniquely well-suited to promote shared civic reflection, as we saw Nussbaum emphasize, because it was a form of entertainment that captured the attention of an entire society. I do not believe that any form of "high-brow" literature can reasonably be expected to draw such a broad cross-section of social interest in the contemporary information landscape. In recent years, the landscape of media consumption has shifted towards a decentralized model in which its hard to say whether there is any form of entertainment more generally that could draw the kind of broad-based attention that ancient tragedy could. At a minimum, I suspect that if there is a contemporary form that stark tragedy can assume, it will no longer be literary, but instead it will be visual. In fact, I propose that interactive digital media like video-games are the most likely form that a truly effective form of tragic critique will take.

I am not proposing to construct an entire account of the relationship between political thought and video-games, nor does space permit a fully-throated defense of this form of entertainment as a worthwhile topic for aesthetic consideration. Both of these undertakings are dissertation topics in their own right. However, my intention is to offer a brief account of why this medium, often overlooked as a possible site for political theory, is worth considering as a contemporary source of tragic fiction. It's easy enough to discount these sorts of games as an artistic medium. In the worst case, they are often the subject of moral panic, taken to be, variously, responsible for the rise of school shootings or amoral youth violence or, in other cases, as interactive embodiments of a certain kind of male desire. Likewise, the actual politics associated with self-identified "gamers" are a smorgasbord of white-male-resentment and unreflective conservatism; the most vocal segment of game players openly pine for a space free from "politics," "wokeness," and women. More benignly, video-games might not seem to merit serious consideration because they are seen as a simple commercial enterprise, at present the single highest grossing entertainment industry, or a somewhat base way for people to fritter away their lives. These various rationales have their merits, as with any artistic medium, there are innumerable examples of uninteresting, derivative, bigoted, and reactionary video games. However, it is precisely because they reach so many consumers that games represent the ideal form for contemporary stark fiction to take.

If Cavell is to be believed, film was once decried as a kind of mindless and popular medium that did not merit consideration as art. However, Cavell saw film as the perfect embodiment of artistic modernism, the only medium that could truly convey the voice and appearance of its actors and which could construct a bond of intimacy between the actors on-screen and the audience (Cavell 1979). These Cavellian arguments have been appropriated by political theorists to argue that film can act as a specially important form of political theory (Panagia 2013; T. Strong 2016). The structure of video games is both consistent with the Cavellian understanding of film's value as a

form of embodied politics but also crucially extends it. To Cavell's list of films' unique attributes, games add the capacity for interactivity. The player is presented with a world that is at least partially responsible to their agency, but which is also not entirely under their control. As one might gather from my earlier discussion of Williams' theory tragedy, I believe this element makes games the perfect medium for prompting the kinds of tragic reflection Williams is so concerned with.

This is not to say that all, or even many, games are worth consideration by political theorists. Many games attempt to convey political messages and, much like drama and literature, they can fail to do this effectively for any number of reasons. Many could not be suitable candidates for Williamsian critique precisely because, much like "dense" fiction, they are too overly didactic or otherwise deeply unrealistic. For example, in 2016 the game *Papers, Please* generated a great deal of interest even among those not interested in games, because of its subject matter. The game cast the player as a border agent tasked with reviewing the documentation of immigrants and refugees and making decisions about who gets "let in" to their fictional country, and who is turned away. There are awful human rights consequences for the player choosing to straightforwardly carry out their job and, say, returning asylum seekers to their home countries on a technicality. However, the fictional country is exposed to terrorist attacks and political fallout if they choose to freely admit too many migrants. This baldly unrealistic portrayal of the politics of migrants simply conveys a kind of milquetoast message of resignation, and does little to challenge the perspective of the player. Games do not need to be preachy, or minimalist in this same way, and they can convey a sense of tragic reflection without simply being a kind of uninteresting slide-show. I hold that other games with a suitably tragic premise and narratological structure, especially those with a compelling political story to tell, such as *Red Dead Redemption II* or *Fallout,* deserve consideration in the same way that Melville's fiction does. These kinds of games offer the same sorts of social criticism in a more widely

consumed medium with the unique virtues that interactive art forms provide. However, space does not permit me to expand upon these arguments here.

To return to Williams' work in particular, the final area in which further research can extend the lines of argument developed here is by applying them more thoroughly to the on-going democratic malaise. In other words, a fuller engagement with Williams' work would involve not just identifying the templates for social criticism that his work offers. It would, additionally, put them into action as a form of such criticism. This would mean, beyond questions of climate change or race in the United States, identifying the kinds of grave threats that Williams' enlightenment values face and articulating defenses for them that draw on a wealth of different intellectual resources, from history and the social sciences to philosophy and imaginative literature. As I have outlined here, there is no one form for such an inquiry to take, and the polymathic nature of Williams' own work speaks to that fact. Williams' left-Wittgensteinian approach to political theory can take any number of different intellectual shapes, and could, as described above, be realized in the forms both literary and more akin to a traditional philosophical treatise. When one reads *Truth and Truthfulness*, by far Williams' most explicit book-length work of political thought, one is struck by the way that it melds together so many disparate elements, from philosophical genealogy, to exacting descriptions of various of P's and Q's, to literary studies, with it all culminating in an impassioned and hopeful defense of liberal democracy. It merges, in other words, disparate bodies of knowledge together as seamlessly as it does pessimism and hope. A political theorist who sought to perform this same undertaking would need find hope in an even more pessimistic political era, and work across academic disciplines in an even more fractious intellectual landscape. The most important gift that Williams' work offers is that it stands as proof that such a feat of intellectual alchemy is possible.

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