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The Political Realism of Bernard Williams: A Critical Examination

by

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Abstract

In this essay, I present a reading of one of Bernard Williams's late political essays, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory." Using the work of John Rawls as a foil, I articulate what I take to be distinctive in Williams's approach to political realism, focusing on his account of legitimacy, his emphasis on the role of history in making sense of politics, and the way political theory relates to political contestation. After presenting my reading of the essay as a whole, I focus on one aspect of his account of legitimacy, problematizing both how we should understand his account of legitimacy and how it would function in political practice. I conclude by posing some questions about Williams's realism for further development.

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Chapter One:

Bernard Williams as a Political Theorist

The Political Thought of Bernard Williams

Late in his life, Bernard Williams turned his attention toward the problems of political theory. While this exercise was unfortunately cut short by his death, a posthumous collection of his late political works was published, called *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (2005, hereafter *IBD*). His political thought was a reaction to the "intense moralism of much American political [and] legal theory" (*IBD*, 12), and he tried to think through difficult issues without falling back on the (relatively) clear answers of a moral doctrine: human rights, toleration, censorship, humanitarian intervention, political lying. Though his political works could be called fragmentary at best, they contain a hard core, a set of concerns and ideas that weave through each essay in *IBD,* and it will be a worthwhile endeavour to examine what lies at the centre of his thought.

That Williams is one of the most influential British philosophers of the last century is not something in doubt; his contributions to ethics and metaphysics significantly shaped both past and current debates about personal identity, relativism, and the status of morality in the context of human action. His late work on political theory cannot be said to command the same attention that his earlier works did. While his work on ethics has recognizable political implications, and his article "The Idea of Equality" proved particularly influential in the pre-Rawlsian world of political philosophy, it is only recently that political theorists have started engaging with the challenge that his late work poses to mainstream theorizing about liberalism.

Articulating a complete Williamsian account of political theory, one that took into account arguments from across his entire philosophical career, would be an interesting and massive project, one that I cannot undertake here. One way of tackling the challenge of discussing Williams's political thought is to take a synoptic view, briefly discussing how the major themes of his work tie together. The political elements of his work are scattered through his writings: from several essays in *Moral Luck*, to his reflections on power and politics in *Shame and Necessity*, to his explicit discussion of liberalism in *Truth and Truthfulness,* to a number of posthumously collected essays (collected in both *IBD* and *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*). Pulling all of this together would result in a deep and interesting account of the relationship between politics, philosophy, and how we live our lives.

Several authors have done this thus far, to varying depths (Flathman 2010, Sleat 2007, Galston 2010). These efforts are useful and insightful, but the need to skip across the surface of his work, in order to cover it all in the space of an article, limits the extent to which the synoptic approach can probe the depths of Williams's thought. (A book-length treatment of his political work remains to be done.) What I propose to do in this essay, rather than try to put together another synopsis, is an exposition and examination of one specific essay from *IBD*: the first, and I think key, essay, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory." It is in this essay that Williams most fully articulates his account of the key concepts of his approach to politics. Moreover, it gives the impression of being only partially complete; it is deeply compressed, filled with abbreviations, and addresses the concerns of political theory in a seemingly scattershot way. (For the sake of readability, I will expand the abbreviated terms when I discuss them.)

There is another reason that I want to focus on "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory" on its own. In her obituary for Williams, Martha Nussbaum said:

> I think his non-angry attitude to tragedy was of a piece with his critique of the Enlightenment: doing good for a bad world did not energize him, because his attitude to the world was at some deep level without hope. The world was a mess, and there was no saving or even improving it. It was childish, naïve, to suggest that improvement was possible. (His liberal politics were difficult to reconcile with this view, and this perhaps explains his increasing withdrawal from politics and even political thinking in later life.)…what energized Bernard, cheered him up, was a kind of elegant assertion of the hopelessness of things against the good-newsers, a contemptuous yet brilliant scoffing. (Nussbaum 2003)

There is something quite obviously false about this characterization, if for no other reason than nearly all of the essays collected in *In the Beginning Was the Deed* date from the last decade of Williams's life, and his widow reports that he was working on a book about politics at the time of his death (*IBD*, vii). But beyond that, it is clear that we have to figure out exactly what is at stake in Williams's political theory before we can attempt to demonstrate how it connects with his other work. Whether Williams is a pessimist (and if so, whether that pessimism can be justified), or whether his critique of "the morality system" (1985, ch. 10) ties to his critique of what he calls political moralism, is something that we cannot determine unless we know how the pieces of his political thought hang together.

This essay, then, is a fairly humble effort toward starting this process. I will proceed in five steps. The remainder of this introduction will be dedicated to fleshing out the distinction that Williams makes between political realism and political moralism, a distinction that has more or less structured the (few) ways that his work has been taken up at this point. Political realism has taken on something of a life of its own, taking Williams in tandem with others who are skeptical about the possibility of achieving stability and consensus in politics and in the liberal political theory that dominates current discussions. I will also outline some of the ways that his work has been discussed in the literature, most of which I believe to be mistaken in a way that drains the vitality from Williams's work.

As John Horton notes, the development of political realism (as a movement) has been more or less parasitic on the existence of political moralism, defined primarily by the rejection of certain aspects of moralism, like the minimization of deep conflict (2010, 445). Williams does go beyond simple rejection, but the force of his claims is best seen in contrast with an account of political moralism. I will, in my second chapter, provide a brief outline of the approach that John Rawls takes in *Political Liberalism* to provide that contrast. *Political Liberalism* makes for a good contrast, because Rawls, like Williams, wants to identify an approach to politics that is distinctly political. The way that the two thinkers go about this, however, is quite different. Rawls conceives of a distinctly political approach to political theory as one that makes political justification independent of a comprehensive moral doctrine, but still relies on a moral foundation for identifying a legitimate regime. Williams, in contrast, wants to jettison moral considerations from inside politics altogether, though I will argue that this does not commit him to rejecting moral claims outright from the scope of politics.

My third chapter will be dedicated to a reading of “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory.” This essay, and Williams’s political thought in general, are not well known, so a thorough discussion of what is at stake in his thought is worth doing before probing deeper into its individual components. I will more or less follow, in my exposition, the structure of “Realism and Moralism.” The essay itself becomes more complex as it proceeds; while Williams begins with a fairly simple formal account of legitimacy (roughly, an explanation of what would make some act of coercion acceptable to the person subject to it, which he calls the basic legitimation demand), it becomes rapidly more convoluted, as he modulates it to include history, interpretation, contestation, and the fundamental worldliness of politics. It will become clear that actually fleshing out Williams’s discussions in “Realism and Moralism” alone would be a massive interdisciplinary undertaking, which I suspect Williams would take to be a strength of the position.

Because this essay is of limited size, my fourth chapter will contain the bulk of my probing of Williams’s position. The disclaimer applies to the fact that my efforts will be dedicated to parsing one sentence in light of the interpretation that I present in the previous chapter: “I shall claim first that merely the idea of meeting the basic legitimation demand implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power to *each subject*” (*IBD*, 4). By identifying just a few elements that could be amenable to multiple interpretations, I will be able to draw some fairly radical conclusions about Williams’s account of legitimacy relative to the account that liberals like Rawls put forward: Williams’s account of legitimacy is voluntarist (without a moral basis), coherentist, and defeasible in practice. I will also take some time to differentiate Williams's approach to liberalism from the moralistic approach, drawing on Rawls as well as Jeremy Waldron’s “Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism.”

I will conclude by gesturing toward a number of questions for further consideration in the discussion of Williams’s thought. Some are suggested by his text, and others by what things were left unsaid: How does justice fit into his conception of politics? What sorts of agents are citizens and subjects? What attitudes should we have toward politics and history, considering that things that are legitimate in one era are illegitimate in another? What does practicing politics actually look like? And what does Williams’s account mean for the way we should (or should not) think about political theory? I will endeavor to suggest rudimentary answers for some of these questions, but providing good answers to them is something that needs to be taken up in another context.

Debate: Realism and Moralism

Williams begins "Realism and Moralism" by making a two-tiered distinction between political realism and political moralism, which delineates a sort of minimal content for political realism. The basic distinction between political realism and political moralism, which comprises the first tier, concerns the relation between morality and politics. Political moralism describes views that hold that the moral is prior to the political, and that "political theory is something like applied morality" (*IBD*, 2). Placing the moral prior to the political subsumes politics into the realm of practical activity governed by moral principles. Political realism, in contrast, denies that the moral is prior to the political, and asserts that politics is a discrete and distinct type of practical activity that is not simply subordinate to morality. What exactly this means for the relation between morality and politics is not entirely transparent, as I will discuss shortly.

It is not entirely clear what exactly Williams means by the term realism here, as he never explicitly identifies what is realist about it, given the baggage typically associated with the term realism in other philosophical inquiries. Elizabeth Frazer traces some connections between Williams's realism and realism in other philosophical fields, tying it to issues of realizability, of the sorts of facts that could constitute legitimacy, and his commitment to the existence of objective political phenomena in the world (Frazer 2010). While I do not have any particular disagreement with this extrapolation, I suspect that Williams's use of the term realism here is primarily one of identifying a family resemblance, "in relation to a certain tradition," between his work and the canon of political realists through history that have diminished the prominence of morality in politics: Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Clausewitz, and so forth (*IBD*, 3)[1].

Types of Political Moralism

The first tier of Williams's distinction differentiates between two ways of conceiving of politics: political moralism, which places the moral prior to the political, and political realism, which does not. This is not complete, though, as the moral can be put before the political in more than one way. The second tier of Williams's distinction identifies two ways of placing the moral prior to the political, which he calls enactment moralism and structural moralism.

In enactment models of political moralism, moral reasoning prefigures and determines what politics ought to be. Enactment models make politics something like the handmaiden of morality (*IBD*, 2). On this account, "political theory formulates [moral] principles, concepts, ideals, and values" (*IBD*, 1), and then uses the tools of politics to instantiate them. The only conditions that determine how things get done politically are those of efficacy; political and moral deliberation consist in identifying principles, then modulating them in accordance with empirical conditions in the world to implement them as effectively as possible. In some circumstances, this could include implementing things that are generally taken to be distasteful; if enslaving some proportion of the population is the most effective way to implement an ideal in political terms, then enactment moralism would have the population enslaved. More than this, the moral perspective provides a viewpoint, external to politics, for criticizing society as a whole when it fails to live up the principles determined pre-politically. Williams refers to this as the "panoptical view" (*IBD*, 1), the notion that from a moral point of view, we are always obligated to determine how a situation can be improved and to develop programs (politically or otherwise if appropriate) to realize that improvement.

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[1] Moralism faces a similar problem insofar as the use of the particular term remains unspecified, though there is no canon of moralism that I know of. It seems to reflect a disposition, a tendency to displace reflective judgment about a case with a moral algorithm to determine how one ought to feel about it. This makes it a not inappropriate term to use here, though I wish Williams had said more.

[2] There are other ways of making this sort of distinction. Fabian Freyenhagen

The paradigmatic form of enactment moralism, according to Williams, is utilitarianism. According to the well-known conception of utilitarianism that he put forward (with Amartya Sen), it consists in the conjunction of three claims about moral mathematics: consequentialism, welfarism, and sum-ranking (Sen and Williams 1982, 3-4). Consequentialism is the claim that "actions are to be chosen on the basis of the states of affairs which are their consequences" (Sen and Williams 1982, 3-4). The relevant consequences for utilitarianism, as a welfarist theory, are those of welfare (which admits of multiple definitions, including pleasure, happiness, desire-satisfaction, and others). The way we determine the best state of affairs is sum-ranking, which means that the best state of affairs is the one that maximizes the sum of the utility functions (defined in terms of welfare) of all relevant beings (which also admits of multiple definitions, ranging from adult human beings to all sentient creatures) (Sen and Williams 1982, 4). Utilitarianism gives us a clear principle (maximize welfare), and commands us to develop political and moral schemes to enact that principle. The complete content of legitimate politics, under ideal conditions, is the set of institutions and policies that most effectively maximizes welfare under given empirical conditions.

Enactment moralism identifies moral conditions that we can use to judge what we do in politics. Structural moralism works differently; if enactment moralism focuses on identifying moral conditions that regulate the what of politics, structural moralism aims to regulate the how of politics. Structural moralism uses moral reasoning to identify what sorts of political acts are permissible. Williams says that in structural models, “theory lays down moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be justly exercised” (*IBD*, 1). Theory, in this form, impacts the exercise of politics in two ways. First, it provides a morally grounded way of choosing the sorts of principles and policies that can regulate the practice of politics. Second, it provides an external standpoint, roughly parallel to the panopticism of enactment moralism, by which we can judge the permissibility of a policy or law, in accordance with the structural conditions laid out by the theory. Structural moralism can, but does not need to, shape the actual substance of politics; Rawls’s difference principle, for example, contains in it claims about the appropriate way to achieve distributive justice.

Williams suggests that Rawls is the paradigmatic structural moralist in contemporary political theory, both through *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. Since I am interested in developing my reading of Williams’s work by contrasting it, at least in part, with *Political Liberalism*, I will save the elaboration of this point for the next chapter. In its stead, I will suggest that

Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* functions clearly and explicitly as an exemplar of structural moralism.

Nozick's moralism is evident from the first sentence of his book: "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights). So strong and far-reaching are these rights that they raise the question of what, if anything, the state and its officials may do" (1974, ix). Rights are, on his account, "side constraints upon [actions] to be done" (1974, 29), and any action that violates them is impermissible regardless of whatever outcome arises from them. As *side* constraints, rights are not built into the pursuit of any particular goal, but serve to "set the constraints within which a social choice is to be made, by excluding certain alternatives, fixing others, and so on" (1974, 166). The justification for these side constraints is basically Kantian, expressing "the inviolability of other persons" (1974, 32) based on the "principle that individuals are ends and not merely means; they may not be sacrificed or used for the achieving of other ends without their consent" (1974, 31).

The regulative principle that governs Nozick's account of politics, then, is the inviolability of human beings; he suggests that individuals can consent to a sort of minimalist/quasi-state for their own protection, but any state beyond this cannot be justified on the grounds of inviolability (1974, 149). This restrictive account of rights as side constraints serves to rule out any role for the redistribution of goods in politics. Distributive justice, in its purest form, would obtain when all individuals possess only what they have come to legitimately possess, either through acquisition of things in the world or through the fair transfer of goods from one person to another (1974, 151). Any policy or acquisition that conflicts with this is illegitimate, as determined with reference to the side constraints of politics, and anyone harmed by a violation of those constraints deserves restitution in some form (1974, 152-53).

Thus, structural moralism provides a set of principles (rights as side constraints) that delimits the scope of what is permissible in political practice, and a way of determining whether those constraints have been violated such that legitimacy or illegitimacy can be determine without looking at political phenomena. The constraints on politics are established pre-politically, and are not open to contestation in the realm of politics. When a political system is governed by structural moralism, the boundaries of politics are more or less fixed in place, and outcomes, whatever their optimality, are constrained by those boundaries.

Types of Political Realism

Williams, then, leaves us with three basic claims about the relationship between morality and politics that political moralism can adopt. Most broadly, political moralism places morality prior to politics. More narrowly, moralism takes morality to directly define the content of politics, or to strictly shape the form that politics can take. Realism rejects each of these claims, seeking "an approach that gives greater autonomy to distinctively political thought" (*IBD*, 3). But realism is not univocal in how it rejects these claims. I think that a useful distinction can be made between two forms of realism: negative and positive[2].

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[2] There are other ways of making this sort of distinction. Fabian Freyenhagen identifies Williams as a "weak realist," someone who denies that politics is applied morality but who does not oppose the use of morality in thinking about

For the negative realist, realism consists in the rejection of these claims about morality; politics and morality are discrete domains that are not lexically ordered such that either is necessarily prior to the other. Politics contains distinctive non-moral concepts, like power, authority, and legitimacy, and these concepts are adequate to investigate political phenomena without relying on moral concepts for a structure. While negative realism rejects the priority of the moral to the political, it does not make any further claims. To this end, the negative realist allows for politics to make use of moral concepts in practice; I take Williams to be a negative realist insofar as he claims that "[realism] does not deny that there can be local applications of moral ideas in politics, and these may take, on a limited scale, an enactment or structural form" (*IBD*, 8). It is only the claim that morality prefigures politics that is problematic for the negative realism, which is what makes it a species of realism at all.

The contrasting term to negative realism, positive realism, puts forward distinctive claims about the structure of the political realm itself that serve to minimize or negate the possibility of integrating moral concepts into political thought. It puts the political prior to the moral in a manner that excludes the moral (as a stable or regulative phenomenon). This could encompass realism as it is thought of in international relations (at least in some forms), which takes state behaviour to be governed by a set of laws about power that more or less fully

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politics as such (2011, 335). Presumably there is a strong realist counterpart, who does foreclose on the possibility of political justification. I prefer the negative/positive distinction, since it seems to capture the difference in the sorts of claims that different theorists make about that constitutes politics, but nothing vital to my argument hinges on the particular form of the distinction.

determine state conduct, or agonistic models that take conflict, or a Schmittian friend/enemy distinction, to form the ontological foundation of politics.

I take Chantal Mouffe's conception of politics to be an example of a positive realist account. For Mouffe, the ontological conditions of social interaction, which she terms "the political," are constituted by antagonism and conflict engendered by pluralism (2005, 9). Politics, which unfolds above the political (she uses the Heideggerian term "ontic" to identify the relation of politics to the ontological condition of the political), aims to establish order amongst antagonism, creating spaces where conflict can be discharged without spilling over into war (which she terms agonism, transforming the friend/enemy constitution of antagonistic conflict to a we/they conflict about how to organize political forces [2005, 21]). It is always possible for the controlled conflict of agonism to blow up into antagonism; there is no way of securing a moral foundation for politics that can negate the political, no form of reasoned (or rational) consensus that can overcome the intrinsically conflictual nature of identity formation and contestation (2005, 28-34). Moral considerations could perhaps enter politics, but they do not do so by structuring the political (as a space for antagonistic conflict). Rather, they are artifacts of the imposition of hegemony, which functions to delimit the sorts of practices and institutions that are permissible in politics, and which can be contested by forces that are excluded by that hegemony (2005, 17-19).

The key claim that marks Mouffe as a positive realist is her insistence on the necessarily conflictual nature of the political, which can always interrupt the order imposed by the practices of politics. Models of politics that are based on the development of a moral consensus are on this view incoherent, as they cannot account for the possibility of antagonistic disruption. For a negative realist like Williams, it is conceivable that under favourable conditions a consensus-based politics could exist, even though conflict is an important component of politics. To commandeer a distinction that Derek Parfit makes (1984, 219), consensus-based politics is deeply impossible for Mouffe, as it contradicts the conditions that give rise to politics at all; for Williams, consensus-based politics is merely technically impossible (given people and laws as they are), and could be realized under some circumstances (Sleat 2007, 396-97).

The distinction between different forms of realism is not paramount here. Rather, it is primarily a way of recognizing that acting too quickly to conscript Williams into the conflict between realism and moralism can flatten and distort his thought. Williams is, in significant ways, different from those realists that prize agonism or conflict or give priority to institutional analysis, given his explicit support for liberal politics (Galston 2010, 408). It is worth thinking through his work of its own accord, to see precisely what challenge it offers to liberal moralism; moreover, I believe that his thought is significantly more complex than it first appears, and that the intellectual challenge it poses to the way we think about politics is one that ought to be considered carefully before applying it too quickly to a methodological conflict.

Williams in the Literature

While not necessarily surprising, the distinction between realism and moralism has structured the way that Williams's late political works have been taken up in the literature. Admittedly, his work has not been taken up in a big way, for whatever reason (perhaps because it was only published in the last decade, or because it does not present a finished [or necessarily even coherent] political doctrine, or because it represents a somewhat marginal position vis-à-vis the Rawlsian mainstream in contemporary analytic political theory). But one of the more notable features of the way that Williams's conception of politics has been taken up in the literature is the fact that it is rarely treated on its own merits. He is typically lumped in with other thinkers of a similar temperament, especially Raymond Geuss (2008). There seem to be two sorts of responses to his conception of realism: commentators either treat Williams as an interesting but flawed contributor to the cause of a realist critique of political theory, or as an interesting but flawed demonstration of the problems that the realist critique of political theory faces in its current formulations.

Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears exemplify the first way of reading Williams. They treat Williams as a thinker who is sensitive to both the aspirations we have to improving political conditions and the brute reality of how force and coercion shape political experience. Politics, given conditions of pluralism, is deeply conflictual, and history is full of conflict and causes whose good intentions belied their cruel outcomes, but we maintain the capacity to reflect on our practices and justifications in a way that allows us to possibly overcome tyranny. Politics harnesses a tension, between our desires for a stable, secure order and the possible conflict of pluralistic individuals. However, on their account, this spirit is detachable from what they take to be limitations of Williams's account: an excessively rationalistic conception of legitimacy that overlooks the way that we come to accept political justifications (which includes struggles for power), a too-strong emphasis on the value of stability that can minimize the ways that stability itself can be oppressive and coercive in the face of principled opposition, and a pessimism that overlooks the times in history when political action goes beyond the pursuit of mere stability and grasps toward justice. They take the spirit of Williams's work and put it into service for an agonistic conception of political realism, one that diminishes the potentially repressive functions of stability of political order that Williams evokes while embracing his emphasis on historical situatedness and the prevalence of pluralistic contestation (2011, 185-95, 202-05).

Similarly, Matt Sleat situates Williams's work in the context of the broader project of establishing a realist critique (2010, 488-89). Williams is interesting on his account because he is both a liberal and someone who aims to provide a constructive (rather than destructive) account of what realist politics could look like. Williams's critique of liberal legitimacy is not based on simply reflecting on the absence of consensus and justice in existing political societies; rather, he suggests that liberalism confuses its own moral account of political legitimacy with the conditions of legitimacy *simpliciter*, and thus cannot account for why liberalism only became prevalent recently (2010, 492-93). But, on

Sleat's reading, Williams does not sufficiently extricate his own conception of liberalism from the clutches of moralism. First, Williams seems to use a conception of politics that smuggles in certain normative assumptions about how political practice is to be identified, assumptions that roughly parallel those of moralistic liberalism (potentially including universalism and a distinction between politics and a state of war) (2010, 496-98). Second, Williams assumes that there is a liberal consensus on how to interpret politics nowadays, which is both necessary to make his approach work (as a liberal) and explicitly ruled out in the realist approach (2010, 498-501).

Alex Bavister-Gould's treatment of Williams falls into the second category. On his reading, Williams's attempt to derive a realist account of politics brings into view some problems with the very idea of identifying a non-moral conception of politics in modern conditions. Williams is caught between two impulses: on one hand, he wants to be able to differentiate between legitimate politics and brute coercion, while on the other, he wants to allow that some legitimate forms of politics, such as policies that restrict the freedom of women, can appear to involve the illegitimate use of force (from our perspective) (2011, 4-7). Bavister-Gould suggests that Williams, in order to make sense of this, needs to restrict the actual use of the standards of legitimacy in cases where they would be destructive to the thick ethical concepts that people use to make sense of their practical lives, and thus his realist project to develop strictly political accounts of legitimacy, that do not refer to moral or ethical concepts, fails (2011, 13-16).

I have not come across an interpretation of Williams's work that treats it seriously and in depth on its own merits, rather than using it as a springboard to make other claims about what to do in political theory. Many of the claims that I have briefly outlined here are, I think, quite straightforwardly mistaken, trying to make Williams's work into something that it does not seem to aspire to be. I will try to deal with at least some of these critiques in this essay, and at the appropriate juncture I will outline the critique in some more detail; however, I must first present my own reading of Williams's work. I will proceed, then, by outlining a moralist position that I take Williams to be pointedly rejecting, the political liberalism of John Rawls, and from that working through the remainder of "Realism and Moralism."

Chapter Two:

John Rawls as a Liberal Moralist

Two Aims in Political Theory

On Williams's account, John Rawls is the paradigmatic structural moralist, both in *A Theory of Justice* and in *Political Liberalism*. But the way that these two works function as examples of moralism is quite different. For the Rawls of *A Theory of Justice*, the purpose of political theory is to identify conditions under which we can call a society just: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of thought…laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust" (1999, 3). Justice, on this account, is a property of the basic structure of society, "the way in which the major social institutions [the constitution, economic structures, the family, and so forth] distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (1999, 6). The task of political theory, then, is to determine what sorts of principles of justice we should use to regulate the basic structure.

Rawls goes about this by constructing a thought experiment, the original position. For Rawls, people are fundamentally equal, morally speaking, and a basic structure that distributes goods and power in a way that reflects morally irrelevant information (like one's sex, race, or social position) is one that violates this claim of equality. The original position provides a way of abstracting away from these contingencies, by way of what Rawls calls the veil of ignorance. The veil of ignorance is a way of obscuring morally irrelevant information. Under the veil, a deliberator does not know what their sex, race, social position, or ideal of the good is; they are basically left as purely rational choosers (1999, 117-23). Under a veil of ignorance that obscures all non-morally relevant information (but leaves intact general information about economics, psychology, and the conditions under which human societies function, including the fact of scarcity), people in the original position cannot use morally irrelevant information to bend the choice of principles of justice to their benefit, and principles that reflect equality can be identified. Rational agents under a veil of ignorance would, Rawls argues, agree on two principles of justice:

> First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.
> Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonable expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all. (1999, 53)

These principles would be lexically ordered, such that the first principle dominates the second (so liberty trumps social improvement, no matter how large) (1999, 38). Once the principles of justice have been determined, the veil of ignorance is progressively lifted, as citizens instantiate the principles through the constitution, laws, and particular legal judgments (1999, 171-76).

This way of thinking about justice makes it clear why Williams treats Rawls as a structural moralist. The original position provides a morally sensitive method by which we regulate the basic structure of society; through abstraction, the original position goes beyond particular interests to identify general principles that are acceptable to all. The determination of the principles is therefore pre-political, not subject to contestation by political actors (who are subject to conditions beyond the original position), and the principles delineate the appropriate conditions under which power can be exercised. Politics is entirely constrained by the principles determined in the original position, and at any time the legitimacy of a law or policy can be determined by referring back to the decisions made under a veil of ignorance (*IBD*, 2). If it coheres with the rational choice under information restriction, then it is permissible (part of the justificatory process Rawls calls reflective equilibrium, which balances the results of moral theorizing with our considered convictions about what is permissible or impermissible in politics [1999,40-46]).

The Rawls of *Political Liberalism*, though still committed to the two principles of justice under appropriate conditions, takes aim at a different set of problems than the establishment of a just basic structure. *A Theory of Justice* is built upon a Kantian interpretation of moral agency, treating citizens as free and equal, rational, and autonomous beings that have a deep interest in developing and exercising the moral powers that give rise to their freedom and equality (1999, 225, 450-56). Acting justly is a regulative good for them. But the use of reason itself, under favorable conditions, leads to pluralism about the sorts of goods that we take to be important, and assuming that all people would converge on a Kantian understanding of the good is, in effect, oppressive, as it would require that the state force those who disagree to change their outlooks (2005, 37). If a particular picture of moral motivation is necessary to account for the primacy of justice, and thus the efficacy of the two principles, then the account of justice *A*

Theory of Justice provides is inadequate under conditions of pluralism that lead people to adopt other ways of understanding the regulative role of justice, and a new account must be identified that recognizes the force of that pluralism.

The problem that Rawls addresses in *Political Liberalism* is not that of identifying principles of justice; rather, it is determining how to reconcile this plurality of different, but reasonable, ways of making sense of the world and find a way to avoid oppressing people that have widely variable ways of understanding justice: “How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines” (2005, 4)? Rawls wants to ensure that society remains stable for the right reasons, which are moral reasons rather than those of fear or mutual advantage[3] (2005, 390-92). The way that Rawls accomplishes this is through a set of moral ideas that yield what he calls political liberalism: an overlapping consensus, a reasonable moral psychology for citizens, and an ideal of public reason.

Stability and Overlapping Consensus

If reasonable pluralism (that is, a plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, or coherent ways of understanding what is valuable in human lives [2005, 13]) obtains in a society, then it cannot be the case that the basic structure of that society can be justified by referring to one specific comprehensive doctrine. To overcome this, and ensure stability from one generation to the next,

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[3] This alone is sufficient for Williams to characterize *Political Liberalism* as an example of moralism: this distinction “implies a contrast between principle and interest, or morality and prudence, which signifies the continuation of a (Kantian) morality as the framework of the system” (*IBD*, 2).

Rawls proposes that justification should occur in the context of what he calls an overlapping consensus. If reasons for justifying the basic structure could be adduced that could be endorsed from within each comprehensive doctrine (and they need not be the same reasons), then the absence of a single comprehensive doctrine to ground justification would not pose a problem (2005, 144-50). This is what makes political liberalism distinctly political, rather than comprehensive (as existing liberalisms, like those of Kant or Mill, have been); as a freestanding doctrine, one that is not dependent on any specific grounding in a particular comprehensive doctrine, a society that is politically liberal, in the distinctive sense Rawls uses, could ensure that stability persists despite the persistence of pluralism (2005, 10-11, 38-39).

As a freestanding political doctrine, Rawlsian political liberalism is still a normative, moral view, and it contains its own ideals (2005, 11-15, 138-40, 175). The ideal form of society that political liberalism tends toward is conceived of in terms of reciprocity and social cooperation between citizens who treat each other as free and equal (2005, xlii, 15-22, 139). This means that society is not structured in such a way to inhibit the reasonable life plans of those living in it, regardless of their differing comprehensive doctrines. Citizens, in choosing how the basic structure of society is to be regulated, would endorse, in essence, the two principles of justice discussed in *A Theory of* Justice reformulated to specify that it applies to citizens rather than people as such (2005, 23): the priority of liberty and the distribution of primary goods (all-purpose goods that citizens use to pursue both their own conception of the good and their capacities as citizens

[2005, 187-90]) in such a way as to maximize the well-being of the worst off (2005, 5-6). (This choice is not internal to any particular regime; rather, it is a hypothetical choice that represents an ideal, and serves to regulate decision-making [2005, 271-75].)

If this ideal can obtain support from within the diversity of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, then an overlapping consensus can be formed, and stability for the right reasons can obtain in spite of that diversity (2005, 390). It is not simply that each group is content with their distribution of goods or privileges; rather, the fact that the basic structure is whole-heartedly endorsed for reasons specific to diverse comprehensive doctrines means that the basic structure will not be overthrown should a particular comprehensive doctrine come to be observed by a majority of the population. It is not a mere *modus vivendi*, but remains durable from one generation to the next regardless of how power is distributed (2005, 146-49, 392-93).

Moral Psychology

What is required of citizens for an overlapping consensus to emerge? Given the fact of reasonable pluralism, Rawls cannot rely on a comprehensive conception of the person, such as a Kantian one that prizes autonomy, since not all people will agree on it. In lieu of this, he proposes that political liberalism puts forward an ideal of the citizen, as someone who is rational and reasonable, as represented by two moral powers: the capacity to conceive of a conception of the good and a sense of justice, respectively (2005, 29-35, 48-54). This citizen is an ideal type. People may not, in practice, be ideal citizens, but so long as the idea of the citizen remains realizable (and does not contradict what we know about human nature), a stable overlapping consensus is possible (2005, 86-88).

Citizens are rational and reasonable, and Rawls uses these terms to refer to distinct claims that are not derived from the other (2005, 51-52). Citizens are rational insofar as they are capable of identifying desirable ends and the means to achieve them, and of ordering the various goods that they want to achieve, giving some priority over others so they can allocate their resources in a way that makes their lives coherent and appealing (2005, 50-51). Rationality here is not simply egoistic or self-interested, but it does not include the values of social cooperation that make society possible. These values fall under the purview of the reasonable, which governs the way that citizens interact with one another.

The two moral powers are defined in such a way that the reasonable restricts the rational. Citizens' sense of justice restricts their pursuit of their conception of the good, so society cannot simply be a method of coordinating individual pursuits of goods. But both powers are necessary. The capacity to form a conception of the good provides an orientation for the lives of citizens, and carries with it the ability to revise that conception of the good and to make claims upon others in the pursuit of that good. Without it, citizens would have no reasons of their own to participate in society (2005, 48-54).

The sense of justice is more complex, but basically contains the sorts of social virtues that citizens would have to possess for social cooperation to be possible. Citizens must accept what Rawls terms the burdens of judgment, the recognition that they do not possess ultimate truths with which to persecute others and that other citizens are reasonable in their conduct, even if there is disagreement about the best comprehensive doctrine. They must treat other citizens as equals worthy of respect, which carries with it several moral duties that govern social conduct (including civility and sincerity in their motivations). Citizens must also abide by the terms of social cooperation, even when the terms are disadvantageous to the pursuit of a citizen's conception of the good.

When citizens are both rational and reasonable, they can come to support an overlapping consensus around a liberal basic structure. As rational agents, the primacy of liberty and the fair allocation of primary goods enable them to pursue their conception of the good. As reasonable agents, the ideal of social reciprocity and cooperation is an expression of reasonableness that they willingly participate in. Over time, they develop principle-dependent and conception-dependent desires to enact those ideals; as trust develops between citizens and their cooperation bears fruit, citizens will remain motivated to abide by the commitments of an overlapping consensus, further solidifying social stability (2005, 81-86).

Public Reason and Constructivism

The idea of the reasonable is tied to two other key ideas in *Political Liberalism*. The first is that truth is not a relevant political consideration, at least as a property of a comprehensive doctrine or justification. Rather, the appropriate criterion by which legitimacy is determined is the reasonableness of a position or principle (2005, 94). Citizens, as rational and reasonable agents, construct principles from those materials, under certain deliberative conditions (the original position); the conception of the citizen is a key element of their design (2005, 93, 107-10). The principles are thus public in a way that truth is not, since they are the result of intersubjective deliberation, rather than private intuition or scientific discovery (2005, 100-01). They are objective, for political purposes, insofar as they provide a recognized set of criteria for making judgments that citizens can agree on and use in practice (2005, 110-6).

The regulative principles for the basic structure are not self-evident, then, insofar as we cannot simply call them true and correct those who disagree. They have to be presented in a way that allows citizens, subject to the conditions of reasonable pluralism, to endorse them from within their own understanding of value. Moreover, these principles must be acceptable to all citizens because they are implicated in the coercive use of force. The basic structure of society, regulated by constructed principles, is enacted through coercion, and it is a necessary component of the reasonable that this coercion is done in a way that is permissible to citizens (2005, 214). This gives us the liberal principle of legitimacy: "our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational" (2005, 217).

Reasonable justifications are those that follow the guidelines of what Rawls calls public reason, which governs the reasoning of citizens as a public (rather than as private individuals, or members of an institution) (2005, 213, 216-20, 223-27). Since citizens cannot simply refer to what is true to justify the coercion of the basic structure, they must present their reasons in terms that individuals who do not share their comprehensive doctrines can understand (2005, 136-37, 217). The only coercive acts that citizens will authorize, given that citizens recognize a duty of civility to each other, are those that each citizen can endorse for reasons internal to their particular comprehensive doctrine (2005, 217). Moreover, coercion will only be done under conditions where its justification is public and transparent, such that all citizens can understand it (2005, 66-71).

Elements of Moralism

In summary, political liberalism starts with the fact of reasonable pluralism. In order to overcome that pluralism, citizens must be conceived of in such a way that they are willing to endorse an overlapping consensus on the justification for the basic structure of society, which is freestanding (and thus strictly political) insofar as it does not rely upon any particular comprehensive doctrine for its foundations. The overlapping consensus does not depend on the discovery of truths about social organization; rather, the principles that guide it are a product of the reasoning of citizens under some constraint, and justification must reflect that. Rather than relying on truth, political liberalism posits a mode of discourse called public reason, wherein the reasons that are offered are independent of any grounding in a comprehensive doctrine, such that all citizens can understand and endorse them.

As this schematic presentation of *Political Liberalism* suggests, there are significant elements of moralism throughout this professedly political form of liberalism. First, it posits a moralized conception of the citizen, as someone whose interest in being reasonable and abiding by the terms of social cooperation dominates their rational interest. Second, it demands moral justifications and ideals for the organization of society, and makes those justifications prior (hypothetically) to politics. The choice of regulative principles in *Political Liberalism* functions much the same as it does in *A Theory of Justice*. Third, public reason presses on citizens as a moral demand, restricting the range of permissible justifications through moral criteria.

Depending on how you conceive of political theory, none of these are intrinsically problematic. But Williams, I think rightly, suggests that these claims obscure political phenomena and make them neater than they are in reality. He rejects each of these claims, some more forcefully than others. To see how, let us return to "Realism and Moralism," and explore what gives rise to politics and how politics functions.

Chapter Three:

Bernard Williams's Political Realism

Williams's account of politics, unlike Rawls's, is not born out of moral phenomena. There are no claims about original positions, or reasonable pluralism, or other phenomena that reflect moral concepts. How, then, does it work to explain what is at stake in politics?

As befitting an account of political realism, Williams looks to political relationships to develop his political theory. Political relationships are not derived from a conception of the reasonable, or an ideal of social cooperation, but from responses to overcome the avoidable harms that accompany human life in the absence of a force to constrain them: coercion, cruelty, suffering, and mistrust. Since politics exists in opposition to these phenomena, there must be some way to differentiate the acts of a state (which uses force and coercion against its subjects) from those harms that persist in its absence. This forms the core of his account of political legitimacy.

But the sorts of things that count as satisfactory explanations for coercion vary from time to time and place to place. Politics is deeply intertwined with the way we interpret the world, and those interpretations form part of the substance of political debate. Theory cannot determine ahead of time what is at stake and what views will prevail. The course of history is determined not by erecting structures of thought, but through action.

This is a rough sketch of Williams's view in "Realism and Moralism." My exposition will proceed in six steps. I will first identify what Williams calls the “first political question,” which gives rise to politics itself. I will then discuss the “basic legitimation demand,” which will be discussed further in the next chapter. Next, I will discuss how Williams ties the basic legitimation demand to his conception of liberalism. This leads to a discussion of the role that interpretation, or “making sense,” plays in politics. I will then discuss what Williams takes the content of politics to be and I will conclude with a discussion of the relation between theory and practice in his work.

The First Political Question

For Rawls's political liberalism, legitimate politics is, at least in part, a response to the fact of reasonable pluralism. Williams's political realism, in contrast, begins with what he calls the “first political question” (*IBD*, 3). Politics is a response to certain broad and enduring facts about human existence, those that could plausibly tie into a Hobbesian state of nature: that we have fragile bodies, that we spend significant parts of our lives dependent on others, that our pursuit of individual goods can come into conflict with others, that we are vulnerable to coercion, torture, and other cruelties, and that in the absence of a force to restrain those who would harm us we are readily subject to the cruelty of others. (I will refer to these as “Hobbesian conditions.” This is not intended as an interpretation of Hobbes, if for no other reason than the fact that Williams makes these conditions subject to interpretation in practice; I am merely echoing Williams’s terminology.)

The aim of politics, in relation to these facts, is to replace the pre-political condition, a sort of state of nature characterized by these realities, with a state that protects us from the harsher elements of the human experience and mitigates some of the conflict that emerges between people. The first political question, then, concerns “the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” (*IBD*, 3), which, once established, opens up the possibility of social cooperation over time. A properly political relationship can only open up once those conditions are established, and in their absence what exists is more properly identified as a state of war (*IBD*, 6). This is why it is the *first* political question, for it concerns the ability of politics to exist at all. Political order can only arise once the state of nature is overcome.

The first political question is not the first in a temporal sense, but rather in a conceptual one: "it is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again" (*IBD*, 3). More than this, the first political question is iterative, in the sense that it must be continually asked, and cannot be settled once and for all (with, for example, a reference to a particular story about the state of nature, or a privileged choosing position) (*IBD*, 3). There is no stable foundation for politics. Politics arises by superseding the Hobbesian conditions, and laws and policies must always be checked against those conditions to ensure that the state is not inflicting those conditions on citizens, since doing so fails to answer the first political question and nullifies the political relation between the state and the subject. Moreover, political actions (and the Hobbesian conditions) are conditioned by empirical circumstances, and the sorts of actions that are appropriate must be considered anew from whatever historical vantage point one occupies. As conditions change, so too do the appropriate responses to political problems, and so too do the sorts of actions that are understood as satisfactory answers to the first political question. For example, the sorts of politics that are appropriate where there is no reliable transportation between different places in the state is different from a state where the entire populace can be accessed easily; if nothing else, large-scale redistribution is difficult or impossible in the former (Hampshire 2000, 63). This will emerge again in the discussion of liberalism.

The Basic Legitimation Demand

The most basic condition for a legitimate political relationship, for Williams, is that it satisfies the first political question: the coercer (the state) is capable of providing order, security, and the possibility of social cooperation for those who are subject to its coercion (*IBD*, 3). A state or a coercive act cannot be legitimate if it does not improve the lot of its subjects beyond the Hobbesian conditions of vulnerability and hostility. Put another way, the state cannot be legitimate if it is part of the problem that it aims to supersede (*IBD*, 4). This, admittedly, does not by itself give the concept of legitimacy much content, though it does suggest that there is a gap between an illegitimate act and an act of war. To flesh out the content of legitimacy, Williams distinguishes between necessary and sufficient conditions for a legitimate state to exist.

The ability of a state to answer the first political question is a necessary condition for legitimacy, but for Williams, it is not sufficient on its own. For someone like Hobbes, where the conditions necessary for securing order and stability are stringent, with roots deep within a conception of human nature that effectively determines the only appropriate responses to the problem of conflict, there may be only one possible answer to the first political question (the establishment of a sovereign to whom we alienate our liberty to all things in the state of nature). Williams suggests that "someone who disagrees with this may merely be disagreeing with Hobbes on this point" (*IBD*, 3); doubtless, Williams does disagree.

Legitimacy, then, is not simply answering the first political question, though Williams is committed to denying that there could be a legitimate political regime that does not answer the first political question (as a corollary to the claim that answering the first political question is a necessary criterion). What, then, comprises the content of the concept of legitimacy? What needs to be satisfied beyond the first political question for legitimacy? Williams denies that we can determine what legitimacy is casuistically, stating that if "more than one set of political arrangements, even in given historical circumstances, may solve the first political question, it does not strictly follow that the matter of which arrangements are selected makes a further contribution to the question of legitimacy" (*IBD*, 3). Since the question of what arrangements are legitimate is conditioned by "historical circumstances," hunting for empirical evidence about legitimacy can be a useful historical exercise (if for no other reason than we can examine the sorts of regimes that pass as legitimate and those that do not), but it does not necessarily contribute to our understanding of the concept itself or how we should understand it nowadays.

The concept of legitimacy is not simply identical with the set of regimes that have been considered legitimate. The concept itself is transhistorical, and

Williams conceives of legitimacy as a *formal* condition. It remains consistent through the variety of legitimate regimes that have existed through history; it is an "all purpose concept" (*IBD*, 10). As it is instantiated in the world, legitimacy takes on additional content, because it is subject to interpretation. It must be understood in light of the sorts of circumstances that shape the practice of politics (as an adequate response to the Hobbesian conditions). However, this content is not intrinsic to the idea of legitimacy, and views that posit that it is are, on Williams's account, mistaken. This additional interpretive content shapes the sufficient criteria for legitimation, which vary through history. Williams identifies the basic structure of the concept of legitimacy with what he calls the "basic legitimation demand," which "distinguishes a legitimate from an illegitimate state" (*IBD*, 4).

The form of the basic legitimation demand consists in the relationship between the state and the subject that it seeks to coerce. The relationship itself is one of justification: "the idea of meeting the basic legitimation demand implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power *to each subject*" (*IBD*, 4). This formal conception of legitimacy makes no particular demands upon a mode of explanation, nor does it prescribe content for a legitimation; as Williams notes, "the idea of a state's meeting the basic legitimation demand, and its having further political values...are two different *ideas*" (*IBD*, 4). The shape of those elements is determined historically.

There are three elements to legitimacy, then: the state, the subject, and the offer that the state makes. Williams adopts a minimalist conception of the state, defining it in terms of its relation to those subject to it. The ability to coerce others is the functional core of the state (*IBD*, 4). This suggests that legitimation is a one-to-one concept, insofar as it is tied to acts of coercion against a given subject; hypothetically, there could be one justification offered for every act of coercion. In order to cohere with the form of the basic legitimation demand, this conception of the state cannot presuppose the existence of its modern, bureaucratic form, as there can be legitimate states that do not follow this scheme; a tribal or charismatic leader who commands others, for example, could satisfy this requirement. Nor can it rely on the existence of well-established borders, or a well-defined population, as their existence is historically contingent (*IBD*, 6).

As a corollary, the subject is a person that accepts the coercion of the state, roughly speaking; "the subject of a state is anyone who is in its power, whom by its own lights it can rightfully coerce under its laws and institutions" (*IBD*, 4). For legitimate coercion to obtain, subjects have to be meaningfully integrated into the order of the state. A person coerced by the state who remains in Hobbesian conditions, like a slave or an internal enemy (Williams offers the Spartan Helots as an example), is not a subject, but rather something more like a captive. Williams calls the condition of those under the coercion of a state who remain in Hobbesian conditions "radical disadvantage," defining it in terms of the "coercion, pain, torture, humiliation, suffering, [and] death" they are vulnerable to (*IBD*, 4). The failure of a state to rectify radical disadvantage in those it coerces is "an objection to the state," at least on the part of those suffering (*IBD*, 5). Under these conditions, they could validly claim that their human rights are being violated; for

Williams, the hard core of human rights involves those rights that allow us to make claims about being in and avoiding Hobbesian conditions (*IBD*, 69-72).

How to conceive of the offer of justification takes up the bulk of Williams's essay. The primary role of the offer is to differentiate what the state is doing from how an agent could act in Hobbesian conditions; "if the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution to the first political question...*something* has to be said to explain...what the difference is between the solution and the problem" (*IBD*, 5)[4]. This means that there must be some difference, that something has to happen in the relation between the coercer and the coerced, in order to distinguish between a legitimate act of coercion and a use of brute force. Since this must be explained in every act of coercion against every subject (treating legitimacy as a one-to-one concept), Williams says that "the basic legitimation demand itself requires a legitimation to be given to every subject" (*IBD*, 6). The upshot of this is an axiomatic claim that "might does not imply right, that power itself does not justify" (*IBD*, 5); if it did, and success in domination was sufficient to make force into legitimate coercion, politics itself could not be differentiated from Hobbesian conditions.

Williams suggests that there is a complementary idea to the might axiom, which he calls the critical theory principle: "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified" (*IBD*, 6). If power is used to create conditions under which the use of that power seems legitimate (when it did not otherwise), then it is tantamount to the use of brute force. What actually constitutes a violation of this principle is a matter for interpretation by subjects. This must obviously be tempered for issues like education, but Williams does not discuss this further in "Realism and Moralism."

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[4] If this requirement of a justification is a moral one, as Williams allows it might be, it is one that arises from the basic conditions of politics itself, and does not fall afoul of the realism-moralism distinction by placing the moral prior to the political (*IBD*, 5).

Williams posits that the principle of justification is an exclusionary one, insofar as it functions primarily to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable justifications. It is not prescriptive and does not provide rules for when it ought to be applied (*IBD*, 6). The occasion that gives rise to the demand for a legitimation, though, is generally a conflict; when a state coerces someone, but claims that its activities "transcend the conditions of warfare" (*IBD*, 6) and thus should not be resisted, a legitimate ground for requiring a justification can be found since the claim of differentiation needs to be cashed out. This does not guarantee that the justification will be successful, or even that the demand for a justification is valid, if for no other reason than individuals can demand a justification for any coercion (even those that they already accept), and legitimations can fail.

Since the basic form of the legitimation relation is a justification offered by the state to the subject, some basic claims can be inferred. Anyone that the state tries to coerce as a subject is entitled to a justification for that coercion, since this coercion must be differentiated from what the state might do to an enemy or someone subject to radical disadvantage. By corollary, anyone that the state tries to coerce without offering a justification to them is excluded from membership in the way the state is organized, and is effectively an enemy (even if they share territory with the state). This does not reduce politics to a distinction between friends and enemies, but rather differentiates between politics and war, which involve different sets of reasons: "while there are no doubt reasons for stopping warfare, these are not the same reasons, or related to politics in the same way, as reasons given by a claim for authority" (*IBD*, 6). The structure of the legitimacy relation excludes war (which necessarily falls short of answering the first political question), and war relies on other claims for its justification. Williams recognizes that this is not without problems (especially as it relates to stateless people), but he leaves those problems of extension as exercises for the reader.

Liberalism

As mentioned before, the basic legitimation demand cannot deliver liberalism by itself, since liberalism goes beyond the necessary condition of answering the first political question. It is possible to conceive of legitimate but illiberal regimes. Liberalism, by virtue of being a more ambitious theory, modifies what we take to be the sufficient conditions for legitimacy, by shifting the sorts of justifications that we find acceptable. Under these interpretations, merely avoiding radical disadvantage is not sufficient to answer the first political question. Williams identifies two impulses that help carry the acceptable form of legitimation toward a recognizably liberal one. The first is to "raise the standards of what counts as being disadvantaged" (*IBD*, 7), recognizing the ability of the state to accomplish more. (One example of this is Judith Shklar's attempt to distinguish between misfortune and injustice. What we accept as bad luck reflects what we think the state is capable of mitigating and what we take to be under the active control of human agency [1990, 51-82, also *IBD*, 146].) The most straightforward example of this is the modern welfare state. By recognizing issues like unemployment or poor health as forms of disadvantage, interpreting humiliation or pain or coercion in economic or medical terms, the state can be held to task (vis-à-vis the basic legitimation demand and its call to differentiate between a state's actions and brute coercion reminiscent of Hobbesian conditions) for a higher level of care for those subject to its authority. Williams also suggests that this advancement in what we take the state to be capable of can come in tandem with more sophisticated ways of determining whether the basic legitimation demand is being met. Free speech rights, on Williams's account, could be accounted for in this way as a method of holding the state to task by publicizing its successes and failures in satisfying the first political question (*IBD*, 7). Importantly, these rights are derived instrumentally, with any moral justification ancillary to the instrumental derivation (preserving the distinction between realism and moralism). There are no external moral criteria in political realism by which justifications are judged.

The second impulse could be called the corrosive power of reason. For liberals, legitimations based on hierarchies or generalizations are generally impermissible if they disadvantage those subject to them. A caste system, or legal disadvantages based on race or sex, for example, will fail for a liberal if there is not a compelling, non-mythical reason for their existence (which there typically is not, at least under modern conditions). Once the legitimation has failed, it cannot be put back in the bottle, so to speak: for hierarchical legitimations, once "the question of their legitimacy is raised, it cannot be answered simply by their existence" (*IBD*, 7). The corrosive element is this: when legitimations based on hierarchy or discrimination "are perceived to be mythical, the situation approximates to one of unmediated coercion" (*IBD*, 7). Reason and reflection can undermine the justifications offered for coercion (Williams 1985, 140-48). If the rationalizations behind hierarchies are dissolved, then so too are legitimations based on them, because the justifications offered no longer make sense on their own grounds. This does not necessarily defeat the coercion itself, if another justification can be provided, but it does demand a new justification. This can be related to the critical theory principle, but there does not seem to be a necessary connection between the two.

The most important point here is that modes of justification can be modified by claims and modes of understanding found in the broader culture in which the legitimation is grounded. Reason and technology can shift our understanding of disadvantage. Legitimacy is *porous* to claims from outside politics, even moral claims. The sufficient conditions for the acceptability of an answer to the first political question, the way that they make sense to those being coerced, are not fully determined by political theory.

This alone is sufficient to dispatch part of Alex Bavister-Gould's critique of Williams. I think Bavister-Gould mischaracterizes Williams's project from the start, suggesting that he aims to, from his conception of politics and the basic legitimation demand itself, draw forth in its entirety an adequate set of justificatory norms that can be used to evaluate politics throughout history (2011, 2-3). But this, as I have suggested, is not what Williams wants to do, and claiming so makes his discussion about the way we come to liberal politics incoherent. Liberalism does not follow from the basic legitimation demand, but Williams does not intend it to; the sorts of justifications that make sense, and the conditions to which they must respond, are porous to non-political interpretive claims (including moral ones). His project is to delineate a core formal framework with which we can try to make sense of politics, using political concepts (as opposed to moral ones, which in moralistic approaches to politics seep into and obscure political ones [*IBD,* 3]); the sufficient criteria for legitimacy, the ones that lead to liberalism, are external to politics. They are analytically distinct ideas (*IBD*, 4).

What sort of liberalism does Williams think this account of politics leads us to? The approach he endorses is Judith Shklar's liberalism of fear, which he takes to be built out of our aversion to radical disadvantage and the horrors it inflicts on people (*IBD*, 55). The liberalism of fear, as Williams construes it, is fundamentally dedicated to diminishing the possibility of a state reverting back to Hobbesian conditions (*IBD*, 56)[5]. But this does not exhaust its ambitions, and once the state is relatively secure, fearful liberals can pursue more exalted, morally laudable goals like social justice (*IBD*,60-61).

Williams's conception of the liberalism of fear differs from Shklar's in a few key ways. Shklar's account is a moral one, albeit one based on avoiding a great harm (rather than pursuing a great good). For Shklar, cruelty is the worst thing that human beings can inflict on one another, as it destroys any possibility for the exercise of freedom by those who suffer its effects; liberalism is defined by the fact that it puts the avoidance of cruelty first on its list of things to mitigate (1998, 10-12). Williams, in contrast, does not necessarily accept that cruelty is the worst, and places the avoidance of radical disadvantage at the base of his account of political existence (rather than conceiving of it as an extra-political restriction). Shklar also has a much stronger interest in the institutional structures that are necessary to minimize the exercise of cruelty, emphasizing the importance of the rule of law, robust legal protections for the weak in the face of the state's power, and the division of power between state institutions such that no one institution can dominate (1998, 9-10, 12-16). Williams largely leaves these considerations to be determined in the context of historical circumstance (though he recognizes their importance). It would be most accurate, I think, to suggest that the two share an orientation, rather than a programme: they have in common a foundation in human frailty and an aversion to the worst in human nature, and they recognize that there is in politics a fundamental distinction between the strong and the weak, the coercer and the coerced[6].

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[5] It is true that there is no deductive conclusion to be drawn here, as other forms of liberalism could be intelligible under some historical circumstances (Sleat 2007, 396-97). Williams endorses the liberalism of fear because it is deeply tied to the permanent existence of Hobbesian conditions.

The sort of liberalism endorsed here contrasts with moralistic liberalism, which differs in key respects. Unlike moralistic liberalism, is historically contingent, recognizing that historical circumstances modify the sorts of legitimations that we will find acceptable (while realizing that "now and around here the basic legitimation demand...permit[s] only a liberal solution" [*IBD*, 8]). It does not articulate a particular conception of the person, as Rawls does with his ideal citizen, or any other moral claim like universal respect, as a foundation for making sense of politics, but places moral concepts in a supplementary role (insofar as we can use them to make sense of the relations of politics). On Williams's account, by offering moral arguments for legitimacy, moralistic liberalism makes a mistake; moral legitimacy is an impostor claim, in the sense that it attempts to displace the political phenomenon of legitimation and replace it with a moral problem in the same guise. Impostor legitimations take contingent moral phenomena as foundational, when the moral phenomena are more accurately conceived of as conjoined to politics, such that, for example, a liberal account of the person conceived in terms of autonomy "is a product of those same forces that lead to a situation in which the basic legitimation demand is satisfied only by a liberal state" (*IBD*, 8) and thus cannot ground a liberal politics. (Williams takes the inability of moralistic liberalism to explain why it only arose in a specific historical moment to be a failure rising from this sort of mistake [*IBD*, 9]).

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[6] Katrina Forrester (2012) investigates further the relation between Shklar, Williams, and the realist critique of moralized liberalism.

Making Sense

Williams returns to his discussion of political realism by reasserting "the refusal of a mere moral normativity" in establishing criteria for understanding politics (*IBD*, 10). What, then, replaces morality as material for making sense of politics? Williams wants to put history at the base of our understanding of politics. The basic legitimation demand provides a formal and non-historical structure for making judgments about legitimacy, but the way we interpret it is a historical, hermeneutic exercise; legitimations and political orders "make sense to us" (or fail to make sense to us) as "intelligible order[s] of authority" that satisfy the basic legitimation demand (*IBD*, 10). The materials that give rise to politics, the Hobbesian conditions in the many ways they could be interpreted, are basic truths about the human condition; "it is a human universal that some people coerce or try to coerce others" (*IBD*, 10). The way we put them to use, the way we interpret them, and the ways we support or disapprove of regimes in light of those criteria form our understanding of political life.

For Williams, the "project of taking seriously in political theory an understanding of what modern social formations are" (*IBD*, 10), rather than what they could be under ideal conditions (as Rawls arguably does, given his idealized moral psychology and hypothetical account of agreements about justice), is a central concern in our attempt to make sense of politics. Now and around here, to use Williams's phrase, liberal legitimations are more or less the sorts of legitimations that we find acceptable. What makes this so, on his account, are the conditions of modernity, which he identifies primarily with the work of Max Weber: pluralism, bureaucracy, individualism, disenchantment and the dissolution of received forms of understanding (*IBD*, 9). Under these conditions, the solutions we find acceptable mostly look like the modern welfare state: Williams pithily summarizes this by saying that "Legitimacy + Modernity = Liberalism" (*IBD*, 9). He intends by this to refer to broadly empirical, sociological claims about the way political life is construed in modern liberal democracies.

Competing modes of understanding politics tend to exist in reaction to these facts, or are subsumed into them.

In his critique of Williams, Matt Sleat emphasizes that the use of the idea of modernity in this context is ambiguous. Modernity does not necessarily lead to liberalism, as modernity contains other strains of thought that do not lead to liberal conclusions. Marxism and existentialism are as much products of modernity as liberalism is, and Sleat thinks that Williams has to foreclose on the possibility of the validity of those positions (establishing a consensus on the claim that liberalism is the dominant mode of understanding politics in modernity) in order for this liberal realism to hold up (2010, 498-501). I will address this critique in the next chapter; for the moment, it will suffice to say that this claim is misplaced, and it puts more weight on the idea of modernity than Williams intends. On Williams's account, modernity is, I think, simply an abbreviated way of identifying what matters to us as political agents, rather than an element in a deductive equation that demonstrates the primacy of liberalism.

The claim that modern political life is structured by these considerations does not imply any particular attitude toward other sorts of legitimations. It is a descriptive account of what it means to live inside a particular historical space, capable of orienting us only toward determining what we find acceptable, not what conditions are acceptable to anyone at any time. Williams takes this to undercut theories that have aspirations to universalism, mocking them as "imagining oneself as Kant at the court of King Arthur," making judgments about the past that are "useless and do not help one to understand anything" (*IBD*, 10);

they mistake their particular understanding of (impostor) legitimation for a universal one. The way that we make sense of a legitimation is itself something that is embedded in particular historical moment; there is no hermeneutic decoder ring that grants us, in a straightforward way internal to thinking about politics, a universal method for making sense of claims to legitimacy. It would be mistaken to invoke a concept like Reason to explain all legitimate politics, at least independently of a teleological or progressive account of history that could explain why, for example, liberalism only started emerging as a way of thinking about legitimate politics around the 18th century (Williams 2002, 253).

This claim about historical situatedness suggests that we have two sets of perspectives for making sense of legitimations. The idea of making sense is both an evaluative and a normative one, though not at the same time. When it comes to past societies, we can only make sense of them in an evaluative context. History serves as a repository for other forms of legitimations and ways of making sense of them that we can explore. We can canvas historical examples to try to determine "how far...a given society of the past is an example of the human capacity for intelligible order, or of the human tendency to unmediated coercion" (*IBD*, 10). This admits of degrees, given that most societies have been regulated by some combination of legitimate coercion and brute force; because legitimacy is a one-to-one relation, it can be thought of as a scalar concept in the global sense (in contrast with a binary distinction between legitimacy/illegitimacy as pertains to a state as a whole) (*IBD*, 10).

We can identify better and worse states through history; the times when tyrannical rule prevails through unmediated, illegitimate coercion "are humanly entirely familiar, and what the tyrant is doing makes sense (or may do so) and what his subjects or victims do makes sense," but those times can be criticized (*IBD*, 11). What is missing from this situation is the properly political relation, the thing to be explained that differentiates legitimate coercion from force, and historical interpretation involves finding what that legitimation was and evaluating its success, failure, virtues, vices, and incoherences. If there is any normative content to this application of history, it comes in the interpretation of that history in light of the milieu the interpreter lives in; this is related to what Williams calls the "relativism of distance."

Some conflicts between worldviews are real, insofar as someone in one particular milieu can actually choose a different way of life than the one they currently occupy (by moving to another country, engaging in different religious practices, etc.). Others, like those that emerge by interpreting history, are only notional. They conflict with how we understand the world, but they cannot be chosen and enacted, because the conditions that existed to make them make sense have disappeared (one of Williams's examples is that of the samurai). These notional conflicts between how we make sense of the world now and how others used to make sense of the world form the substance of the relativism of distance (1985, 160-64). Those older, non-existing ways of making sense can inform our interpretations of current practice, but nothing more, as they cannot be realized.

The gap between different ways of making sense of the world, both through history and within our own time period, itself shapes our understanding of political practice. As Williams notes, relativism as such is defeated by the fact that it only exists once two current frameworks have met; it is always too late, since it is either not in play (when the two frameworks are ignorant of each other) or already subject to interpretation within a framework, disarming the supposed incommensurability of those worldviews (*IBD*, 68-69). It forces us to make sense of divergent modes of practicing politics and making sense of the world, and our responses to those differences shape what we expect as well.

Now, in the present time, we make sense of politics in the same way as we do historically. However, because they are *our* concepts, making sense is a normative exercise, insofar as the way we navigate politics and political discourse shapes the sorts of legitimations that we find valid or invalid. They are regulative of how we want to understand and regulate our own political lives. What makes sense to us shapes the sorts of orders that we are willing to live under, "because what (most) makes sense to us is a structure of authority that we think we should accept" (*IBD*, 11). We can know that a political order makes sense (or not) by the way we talk about it, the concepts that we use to express our acceptance or rejection of it, through "first-order discussions using our political, moral, social, interpretive, and other concepts" (*IBD*, 11). It is a broadly Wittgensteinian claim: what makes sense to us as a legitimation comes across in the sorts of language and concepts that we use. A corollary to this is that legitimations that no longer make sense to us are not generally refuted by our new understanding of what sorts of legitimacy make sense; new understandings do not necessarily render old ones false (instead of right under different historical circumstances), and claiming that falsification can occur (and consequently knowledge about legitimacy can be gained) over time requires a claim beyond a basic conception of making sense.

To explain why the normative and evaluative senses of making sense are the same, Williams identifies what he calls the "hermeneutic principle, which is roughly that what they do makes sense if it would make sense to us if we were them" (*IBD*, 11). When we are ourselves, so to speak, we do what makes sense to us (hence making sense is normative); when we interpret the legitimations of others, we conceive of this in terms of what we "would have done" under their circumstances, an evaluative framework that does not guide our current actions. This is a claim about temporal distance, not spatial. When we evaluate the legitimations of those in other contemporary cultures, we do so from within our own normative frame of making sense (*IBD*, 14): we engage with them as ourselves, because our interpretations are shaped by our own circumstances and how we understand the world to make sense. This does not rule out sympathetic identification with the views of others, which is valuable in minimizing the possibility of Hobbesian conditions re-emerging.

The Content of Politics

Legitimation cannot constitute the entirety of political life, since legitimations are offered in response to political actions (or actions that become political in their interpretation). While Williams identifies his political theory as "realist," he does not intend that in the same way that realism is typically understood in political science, to represent an approach to politics that takes the pursuit of one's interest (as a single agent, organization, or state) as the basic unit of analysis. This sort of realism is, on Williams's account, the obverse of the moralistic tenor of American political theory, "a Manichean dualism of soul and body, high-mindedness and the pork barrel" that diminishes the value of both types of investigation (*IBD*, 12).

Realism in political practice, for Williams, seems to consist in the removal of fetters on the sorts of reasons and practices that are acceptable in politics, which both moralistic liberalism and interest-based politics use to define the domain to be studied. He calls for

> a broader view of the content of politics, not confined to interests, together with a more realistic view of the powers, opportunities, and limitations of political actors, where all the considerations that bear on political—both ideals and, for example, political survival—can come to one focus of decision...the ethic that relates to this is what Weber called the ethic of responsibility. (*IBD*, 12)

This is, of course, a deeply ambitious and broad claim, one that Williams himself could not possibly fully cash out on his own. If this is a valuable way of approaching politics, it would call for the obliteration of disciplinary and institutional divisions, since a complete account of politics would call for an analysis of every factor of social life that figures into politics. Philosophy could still contribute, as Williams's contributions on issues like human rights and censorship indicate, but it cannot prevail alone.

Williams suggests that there is a style of thinking typically associated with moralism, treating politics as a debate between "rival elaborations of a moral text" (*IBD*, 12) about which agreement could be reached at a deep level (by identifying the best or most appropriate interpretation). By placing a privileged moral position at the core of politics, moralism speaks to those who would fancy themselves the founders of a society, perhaps choosing from a privileged choice situation like the original position, or in possession of an inviolable moral principle with which all political action must comply. Disagreements about politics are on this model disagreements about the best way to treat moral principles and the way they function in political life.

Politics in the real world does not resemble this, and Williams contends that it deeply misrepresents what is at stake in politics. One cannot develop an abstract model of society and impose it on the world through sheer force of reason, if for no other reason than this would only be possible under conditions where there was no other competing conception of society. (If everyone agreed, then there would be no problem here, as there would be no competing views that make sense.) One can develop elaborate ideal models of political practice if they like, but it is only through the ebb and flow of politics in its manifold forms (deliberation, opposition, persuasion, and so forth) that they can be realized. We can argue about the merits of a particular proposal, whether in the form of theory or otherwise, but that will not determine what is actualized politically.

Politics is not about being right or wrong about the best way to organize society. It is about power. We are in possession of a wealth of possible ways of engaging in politics, whether they are grounded in a theory, or history, or in individual interests, or in the passions (one looks in vain for the moralist's treatment of anger or betrayal in politics), with none of them so politically solid and sure that they cannot fall into disfavour. They are all historically shaped, often with "obscure causes and effects," and "we would be merely naive if we took our convictions, and those of our opponents, as simply autonomous products of moral reason" (*IBD*, 13). These ideas are not all compatible, and the fact that one prevails over another does not mean that the winner is correct. All it means is that someone lost, and they could, at any point, return to a winning position.

This is not to downplay the possibility or value of reaching consensus. Consensus is, on this model, a strategic concern, not a moral imperative, and it may be to the benefit of some to encourage dissensus. But politics is basically oppositional. Williams suggests that treating those we disagree with "as *opponents* can, oddly enough, show more respect for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers" (*IBD*, 13). Such a position recognizes that there are many ways to make sense of the world, and demonstrates a measure of trust and good faith in one's opponents. Disagreement is not caused by some agents being too stupid or blinkered to see the truth, but occurs because we have different ways of making sense of politics. Political agents have various understandings of what they want in the world (even if they are ill-defined, or lack a specific plan for implementation), and what they are prepared to do to accomplish it, and in their interactions with others similarly equipped they aim to win and put political force behind them. Williams takes these claims to be "[platitudinous] politics" (*IBD*, 13), realities of political life for which liberal moralism cannot account.

The same principles of politics govern politics beyond the state level, as well. The ways we treat other states, as legitimate or illegitimate, have impacts that we cannot always foresee; judging a state to be illegitimate could contribute to the erosion of its political order, or could lead the way to aggression, or reform, or to any number of other consequences that the state is ultimately responsible for. There could be an interesting linkage between this undeveloped claim and the literature on international relations; Williams does not develop it here, and it seems to be mostly used in terms of justifying state conduct as it pertains to other states (humanitarian intervention and such).

Theory and Practice

How, then, should political theory relate to political practice? He takes as his guidepost "the truth discovered by Goethe's Faust: *Im Anfang war die Tat*, in the beginning was the deed" (*IBD*, 14), a claim that he takes to question "how much, at what level, can be determined by social and political theory with regard to modern states" (*IBD*, 15). The efficacy of a theory in politics has to be a function of the power it can muster in political life, not its rationality; a theory cannot determine (on theoretical grounds) how it will be applied to reality. Political theory can inform the way we make sense of the world, but it cannot settle it in advance; it is "a question that belongs to the level of fact, practice, and politics" (*IBD*, 17). The boundaries of politics cannot be identified through the identification and discussion of moral principles.

By way of an example, Williams outlines a view about the way we understand democracy. On his account, democratic procedures are an important component of the way that we make sense of politics, but their grounding is "delivered at a fairly straightforward and virtually instrumental level in terms of the harms and indefensibility of doing without it" (*IBD*, 16). He contrasts this approach with Habermas's project to connect democratic institutions to the rule of law, intertwining the two such that they legitimate each other. Accomplishing this requires taking a particular view of citizen deliberation, that citizens must drop their private interests and adopt a public understanding of how to order social goods. If someone disputes this point we cannot simply present an answer in terms of the moral discourse that grounds the view being denied. If they accepted the discourse, the problem would not arise.

If a problem like this arises, Williams claims, it must be solved politically, not theoretically, and must rely on "ideas which already make sense to the public and might move toward possible political action" (*IBD*, 16). Simply appealing to the theory, on the grounds that the processes it offers are superior, cannot by itself resolve the problem; it has to be solved through practice. Convincing citizens to adopt a public mode of reasoning must occur by demonstrating that it is a politically viable way of making sense of the world. This may include considering conflicts about the appropriate way to balance competing social interests, like participation and efficiency. The outcome will not be resolved by appeals to extrapolitical phenomena, and is contingent on historical circumstance and interpretation: "no transcendental or partly transcendental argument—one might say, more generally, theoretical argument—could serve to resolve these conflicts" (*IBD*, 16).

Conclusion

Williams predicates his political realism on claims about the human condition, especially the prevalence of coercion and our vulnerability to harm.

Politics comes into existence when we try to overcome those problems. In order for politics to be legitimate, there must be some way to differentiate it from the exercise of brute force or coercion; this is the basic legitimation demand. What constitutes a satisfactory answer to the basic legitimation demand depends on historical circumstances, and it need not be a liberal answer. The relevant criterion is that the legitimation makes sense to the one being coerced. Politics is deeply oppositional, with views from many sources coming into conflict, and the extent to which different views win and lose power shapes the way we make sense of politics. Political theory is not capable of resolving those conflicts in advance.

I think it is clear, at this point, that Williams's account of politics poses some challenges to the moralistic view of politics. It also raises some questions of its own. My next chapter will be dedicated to untangling just a few threads from his account of legitimacy. I will conclude by posing some further questions that would have to be answered before we could satisfactorily understand what Williams actually contributes to political theory.

Chapter Four

On the Basic Legitimation Demand

It would be fair, I think, to call legitimacy the key concept of Williams's approach to political theory. Justice is not, illustrated by the fact that it is only mentioned in discussions of other thinkers; neither is fairness, the right, or autonomy. While his discussion of legitimacy presents it as a straightforward and simple concept, it quickly becomes immensely complex when you try to think through what it would mean to put it into practice. This chapter will be dedicated to identifying some different interpretations of the basic legitimation demand and how it could be used as a tool in actual politics.

To refresh, one of Williams's key claims about legitimacy is that "the idea of meeting the basic legitimation demand implies a sense in which the state has to offer a justification of its power to *each subject*" (*IBD*, 4). Saying that the relationship between the state and the subject is legitimate does not tell us anything about its justice, or the values it contains. Legitimacy concerns the validity of the state's power, its ability to coerce subjects, in the eyes of the subject.

This tells us very little about what legitimation actually consists of. First, what does it mean to *offer* a justification? I will propose three possible ways of interpreting the act of offering a legitimation, which I will call the disjunctive reading, the rationalistic reading, and the voluntarist reading, drawing on Jeremy Waldron's "Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism" (1987) to flesh out the distinctions. The three vary in how they connect the offering of a justification to the act of coercion. I will suggest that Williams uses the voluntarist reading. I will also briefly differentiate this reading from a sort of moralistic consent theory, wherein legitimacy is based in the voluntary authorization of the state's coercion.

The second question I will ask concerns how the idea of justification should be conceived. Rawls, as I said before, takes the idea that coercion should be rationally acceptable to all those affected by it as the core of the liberal principle of legitimacy. Williams does not seem to share this conviction, at least as a claim derived internally to politics. I will propose three readings of justification here, which I will identify as universal, restricted, and particular, where the first two are present in Rawls's work and reflect his emphasis on publicity. Williams, I think, relies on the particularist reading, one that can be derived from politics, though it is possible that other interpretations could supplant it if they made more sense. I will take a moment here to further discuss, beyond the question of legitimacy, how Williams's approach differs from that of a liberal moralist, again relying on Rawls and Waldron.

At this point, there will be enough material to address the critiques presented by Bavister-Gould and Sleat that I mentioned in the last chapter. Bavister-Gould mistakenly focuses on the content of a legitimation rather than the way that it fits into a subject's way of making sense of politics, and misinterprets the way that the basic legitimation demand is applied in political practice. Sleat, similarly, puts too strong an emphasis on the content of legitimations, and his error is compounded by his insistence that Williams is aiming at articulating a universal form of legitimacy that can address all citizens. Since neither of these claims apply to my reading, Sleat's argument that Williams requires a pre-political consensus for his theory to be intelligible cannot stand.

I will then turn to a cluster of questions around how this idea of offering a justification could be put into practice. Can it account for all the sorts of things that states can impose on subjects? I do not think it can, but there does not seem to be a necessary contradiction between the basic legitimation demand and things like the state's ability to impose obligations on its subjects. How does the practice of legitimation proceed? Williams could wind up with a pragmatically impossible account of legitimacy here, as, hypothetically, every act of coercion could merit a justification, but he cannot provide a stable, second-order answer like a moralist can. I will suggest that his account is defeasible, inverting the traditional account of legitimacy so that it functions on the presumption that, in the absence of any objection, a state's coercive acts are legitimate. Finally, how do we relate the legitimacy of a set of coercive acts to the legitimacy of the state? A state can be legitimate but do illegitimate things, and vice versa. I will suggest that Williams's realism requires an account of how to make the transition from act legitimacy to state legitimacy, but that this will be inflected by what makes sense.

I will conclude by considering one last question: why should the state bother with legitimacy at all? Williams cannot invoke moral obligations, at least from inside politics. I will suggest that he cannot provide a strong foundation for politics that could compel legitimacy, and that this is not a failure, but rather reflects the essentially fragile nature of political life.

What It Means to Offer a Justification

Since legitimacy basically concerns the relation between the state and subject, I will start by recapitulating my earlier discussion about the relation between the two. The state is defined, for Williams's purposes, as an agent capable of coercing someone, a subject. Their relationship is predicated on a power differential, where the state uses its power to coerce the subject. The demand for a justification emerges above this relationship, and provides some way of demonstrating how the state's coercive act is not simply an expression of brute force[7]. This tells us little about the form that a justification can take. What does it mean for the state to have to offer a justification?

i. Disjunctive

It is important to recall that for Williams, meeting the basic legitimation demand is essentially connected to the first political question. A state cannot satisfy the basic legitimation demand if it cannot demonstrate the difference between its acts of coercion and what could be expected in Hobbesian conditions. A state is always capable of regressing into Hobbesian conditions by supplanting the basic political relationship with one of brute force, and when it does this, it fails the basic legitimation test and acts illegitimately. Thus, any act of coercion by the state must be justifiable, and there is an essential connection between the act of coercion being justified and the justification itself.

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[7] I think adapting Elizabeth Anscombe's conception of action under a description is a useful way of thinking about this process (2000, §6, §19). Acts are only coercive under certain descriptions; barring a door with a chair is not itself coercive, but locking someone in a room by barring the door with a chair is. Offering a justification could be thought of as searching for a way of describing an act involving the use of force that is not seen as coercive. Disagreement about this could result from different ways of interpreting those descriptions, as when a state claims its action is justified while a subject denies it (the state shuts down a neo-Nazi rally in the interest of public safety, the people attending the rally claim their freedom of expression is being violated). The adequacy of this account, or some other one, belongs to the broader philosophy of action, which would have to be part of the apparatus of making sense that is brought to bear on how we understand political actions.

This conclusion rules out one reading of what it means to offer a justification. On what I will call the disjunctive reading, all that is required for the state to satisfy the basic legitimation demand is to make some claim after coercion; the claim to legitimacy is discharged in the assertion of the claim rather than its acceptance, and it is irrelevant if it is acceptable to the coerced agent. (For example, act Σ is legitimately coercive because it is Tuesday, assuming there is no further fact about Tuesdays that makes it so.) It makes the offering of a justification a formality. On this interpretation, the state could claim that any coercion is legitimate so long as *some* claim is possible (beyond the sorts of claims that are offered in the guise of mere domination and fail by the critical theory principle, or perhaps those that are internally inconsistent).

If this were the case, then there is really no effective difference between justified coercion, coercion that makes sense to the person being coerced, and brute force. A justification cannot simply contingently serve to justify an act of coercion, because the state must be able to provide a justification that is relevant to the act itself that makes sense. A *non sequitur* claim is not itself a reason. Even if a justification based on some claim about Tuesdayness made sense, it would not explain *that* particular act without some further claim. The severing of the particular connection between act and claim renders the act of justification pointless. Justification is reduced to the realm of coercion itself, as even if a successful justification is offered, it can only be done in strategic terms, as a way of perpetuating power (Honig and Stears 2011, 190).

This is related to Williams's comments about Weber's ethic of responsibility. Weber contrasts two approaches to ethical action. For the ethic of principled conviction, what matters is the expression of a principle through action (1994, 359). The ethic of responsibility, in contrast, is addressed to the consequences of actions and the way that they impact people's lives (1994, 359-60). Politically speaking, the ethic of principled conviction does not consider the consequences of the actions that express principles, which makes it dangerous; should it cause suffering through violence, it is not a problem for the principled actor, but for the world (1994, 360-61). The ethic of responsibility commits political actors to being responsible for their actions and the consequences that follow. If the ethic of responsibility is emblematic of political action, for Williams, then we can see why the disjunctive reading would fall short. It severs the state's commitment to being responsible for its coercive acts[8].

Treating the justificatory component of legitimate coercion as irrelevant would undermine Williams's conception of legitimacy as a whole, and on this ground alone it is hard to recommend the disjunctive reading in the context of his work. This account also undercuts Williams's conception of the conditions for political existence. If there is no way to distinguish any coercion from what would occur in Hobbesian conditions, then there can be no politics at all, only conflict that at best could congeal into a stable balance of forces. But it is hard to see why this view would be straightforwardly accepted at any rate, at least in the absence of an account of why it is that the demand for justification is something that we can make sense of in a political context. A state that explained its actions in a way that did not actually make sense in its context would likely fail on pragmatic grounds anyway, since it is hard to see why anyone would allow themselves to be put in its power outside some sort of tyrannical domination that cannot be avoided or overthrown (*IBD*, 4). Such a state would not likely be prone to maintaining conditions of trust and cooperation. Its acts would be chaotic and wanton, preventing the possibility of achieving a stable state that does not inflict radical disadvantage upon its subjects.

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[8] Williams's own account of responsibility in *Shame and Necessity* maintains that there is a necessary connection between particular acts and the sorts of responses to them that are appropriate (1993, 55-57). If we cannot determine what sort of response makes sense for an act of coercion, then it would not make sense to say that the state is responsible. The disjunctive reading would make the state's actions unintelligible from the perspective of assigning responsibility.

ii. Rationalistic

If maintaining the necessary connection between an act of coercion and its justification cannot be jettisoned while continuing to maintain a political relation, then there are two other ways we could make sense of the offer of justification. Following Waldron's useful distinction between different sorts of liberalism, I will call them rationalistic and voluntaristic interpretations (1987, 140). On the rationalistic interpretation, what it means to offer a justification to each subject is to offer a justification that each subject *could* accept. The essential connection between act and justification is maintained here: what gives the justification force is the validity of the justification being offered. On the rationalistic account, if a justification is offered that makes sense of the act in the context of a political relation, then it is legitimate. If someone disagrees with the justification, the state can claim that the subject ought to see that a legitimate explanation does exist. Its use of force is legitimate, and the subject should change his or her way of making sense of politics accordingly.

There are doubtless some elements of this interpretation that could be useful in thinking about a Williamsian politics in practice. At the very least, it can function as an exclusionary device in the course of the state's attempts to articulate a justification (Waldron 1987, 142). If a justification fails the rationalistic justification test, if a justification is developed that nobody could accept or that does not make sense, it is *de facto* eliminated from the possible pool of justifications that can be used to legitimate coercion.

The rationalistic reading of justification does not seem to entirely mesh with Williams's approach, however. To paraphrase Waldron, treating justification in a rationalistic manner places the focus of the justification on the sorts of reasons (in the loosest possible way of understanding what reasons are) that one offers or accepts (1987, 144). But this puts the emphasis on the wrong element of the legitimation, since on Williams's account what matters is the way that the justification fits into the way we understand the world and the structures that we live in. Unlike Weber's ethic of principled conviction, the actual content is subordinate to the form of the justification, and different contents will make sense in different historical times. The rationalistic understanding of making an offer could make sense under some historical circumstances; one example would be an era where Kantian forms of moral philosophy are prominent in the background culture of society, such that only universalized justifications that address everyone's reason are valid. Taking it as foundational, however, seems to parallel what I called impostor justifications in the previous chapter.

iii. Voluntaristic

It is not the justification that is offered, but the way that justification makes sense to an individual and coheres with the way they understand the political world, that matters for Williams. "Makes sense," for this purpose, more or less means "makes sense to me." James Gledhill usefully calls this internalism, paralleling Williams's distinction between internal and external reasons, which holds that we can only be moved by a reason if it connects to some other motivation that we already have (Gledhill 2012, 73, Williams 1981, 101-13)[9]. This points to a voluntarist reading of what it means to offer a justification. On the voluntarist reading, what is relevant is that the justification is accepted by the subject being coerced, irrespective of the content of that justification. The idea of acceptance here must take into account Williams's rejection of brute force as a legitimation as well as the critical theory principle, since it would destroy the political relationship and fail to answer the first political question to base a justification on force without some further justification for that force. The actual content of the justification is subordinated to the way it fits into the way the subject makes sense of politics. Beyond legitimations that do not make sense (because they do not justify the particular act of coercion, for example, or because they are incoherent in the historical context), there is no restriction on the class of reasons that are permissible.

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[9] Less useful, I think, is Gledhill's use of that idea in critiquing Williams. He takes Williams to be trying to restrict the scope of what justifications are permissible by ruling out "external" reasons that citizens do not currently (but could) identify with, like the conception-dependent desires Rawls takes citizens to have. If this is true, then Williams's internalist account of making sense fails, at least under modern conditions, as it cannot reflect the ways that we modify our understanding of the world, which includes the possibility of adopting new, external responses through reflection (that themselves shape our understanding) (2012, 73-75). This is mistaken twice, I think: first, it seems to be predicated on a belief that an external reason, once we adopt it for ourselves, does not become an internal reason, and second, it overlooks the porosity of the basic legitimation demand to new ways of understanding, supposing that the core of the basic legitimation demand (differentiating between Hobbesian conditions and politics) represents the entirety of it. Gledhill claims that "for citizens of liberal democratic societies, the fusion of the basic legitimation demand and modernity is not optional" (2012, 74); this is entirely compatible with Williams's understanding, but taking it as fundamental, as opposed to recognizing that the two are conjoined but distinct, makes it an impostor account of legitimacy.

Because the relevant consideration here is how well the legitimation offered fits into the way that the subject makes sense of politics, and not how effectively the legitimation complies with a moral or external standard, I will suggest that Williams's account of legitimacy is a coherentist one. I do not mean to imply any particular epistemological thesis here; rather, coherentist legitimacy is successful when subjects can square the justifications being offered with their way of making sense of things (in the same way that Rawlsian reflective equilibrium is successful when it makes one's deeply felt moral claims coherent with an account of the principles of justice [Rawls 1999, 40-46]).

iv. Voluntarism and Moralism

Williams provides us no way of taking on an external, pre-political standpoint for normative evaluation of a justification, at least in the realm of politics; we can only mobilize the concepts that we use in making sense of the world. Things have to make sense *in medias res*, not based on a state of nature wherein we alienate certain of our liberties to a state or a hypothetical choosing position. Both forms of moralism, structural and enactment, carry with them evaluative procedures that can function this way. One could try to translate his hermeneutical principle (that what makes sense does so internally to an interpretive frame so that if we were in that frame, what makes sense to a person therein also makes sense to us) into a sort of ideal observer type theory (*IBD*, 11). We could, at least conjecturally, imagine what a future version of ourselves would say about the way we make sense of a justification. This is at least coherent, since we can talk about being on the right side of history, for example. Such a thought process might be useful in tempering the way that we make sense of the world; one could extrapolate from patterns in one's own time to imagine what a future person would think about slavery, or same-sex marriage, or some other contentious issue, and shift our attitudes accordingly. But it cannot deliver determinate judgments, because we cannot adequately predict what will make sense in the future, nor can it be categorically action-guiding.

This allows us to distinguish between Williams's approach and that of a basic sort of social-contract type consent theory. It is the case for Williams that a state can only be legitimate if its justifications are accepted. But there is no moral core or set of rights granted to subjects pre-politically, and one does not alienate or exchange them in order to found a state[10]. (Contrast this with Robert Nozick's claim that "individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them [without violating their rights]" [1974, ix].) Politics arises out of an imposition of the state on the subject, but it does so on the grounds of mere acceptance, rather than alienation. We cannot pull out of that some sort of primordial contract or promise on which politics is founded, since there is no pre-political starting place that grants the ability to generate the sort of contract or promise that can found a durable state. Politics inheres in the relationship between state and subject, and thus it is not prefigured by the establishment of some conditions under which coercion can be legitimate. Put another way, the acceptance of a justification for coercion does not seem to straightforwardly generate any sort of obligation. Legitimacy is primarily a permissive claim, insofar as it allows the state to do something to you that would otherwise be thought illegitimate (Waldron 1987, 136).

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[10] John Horton (2012) explores a realist response to this account of legitimacy, which emphasizes the sorts of practices that politics governs to understand normativity, rather than the sorts of rights that constrain it.

In a sense, the state persists iteratively, insofar as its acts of coercion have to in principle be justified anew each time to ensure they continue satisfying the first political question; there is no durable claim of the state on a subject, or vice versa, and a state can always find its justifications rejected (*IBD*, 3). This is a consequence of Williams's rejection of certain understandings of foundationalism (those that would aim to fix in advance an ideal social order or constitution that would endure from one generation to the next), and is illustrated by the fact that legitimations can cease to make sense, and in doing so they lose their political force. A state, when a legitimation fails, cannot simply point to that legitimation as sufficient grounds for maintaining the coercion (because some claim of obligation fixes it in place). It must offer a new explanation, or acquiesce to the use of brute coercion while undoing the political relationship (*IBD*, 7).

Types of Justification

Williams's account of legitimation, then, relies on the actual acceptance of justifications by subjects *in medias res* as they pertain to certain acts of coercion. I identified his conception, in the previous chapter, as using a one-to-one form of legitimacy, mapping one act of coercion with a justification to one citizen. As a basic structure, I think this is an intelligible way of looking at the problem, but it is not complete, if for no other reason than there are other forms of engaging in coercion that can assimilate the one-to-one relation. When a state passes a law, for example, it engages in a one-to-many act of coercion. Democratic methods of participation could engage in many-to-many acts of coercion, at least in terms of how the justification is generated.

This points to a question as to how the connection between justification and legitimacy functions in the actual practice. What sorts of justifications are offered, given that there are multiple subjects in a state? Liberal theories of politics put a great deal of stress on this question. Consider three different ways of interpreting what it means to offer a justification: the universal, the restricted, and the particular. By universal justification, I mean that one justification is to be offered to all those affected by a coercive act. This is a position that could be attributed to Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. In a well-ordered society, the basic structure is regulated in accordance with the principles of justice picked out in the original position, and individuals are motivated by their sense of justice to comply with those principles in their lives. When a law is passed, should someone disagree with the justification for it, the appropriate response is to refer back to the original position and the principles therein. Under these conditions, either the law will fail to comply with the principles, or the individual's perspective will be corrected so he or she can make sense of the justification through reflective equilibrium. The appropriate way to overcome political disagreement, then, is to refer to the procedure that generated the conditions of permissibility for the coercion, and to change accordingly.

On the restricted view, many possible justifications can be offered, but their scope is limited by some sort of constraint. This is a position that could be identified in Rawls's *Political Liberalism*. Recall the liberal principle of legitimacy:

> Our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational. (2005, 217)

In modern conditions, there is no single evaluative perspective we can adopt, because society is characterized by a diversity of reasonable ways of understanding the world. If we are to satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy while respecting reasonable pluralism, we cannot simply adopt a universal justification that can apply to everyone. Instead, citizens shape their reasons in accordance with the ideal of public reason, rooting their acceptance of reasons in their comprehensive doctrine but expressing those reasons in terms that are intelligible to everyone. Outlawing slavery, for example, could be grounded for one citizen in terms of theology, for another in terms of universal human dignity, for another in terms of the absolute badness of slavery; the reasons are complementary even if they may be incommensurable. Nevertheless, the appropriate realm of reasons is restricted by moral constraints (particularly the idea of the reasonable, and the need to secure stability for the right reasons rather than a mere *modus vivendi*) that make them permissible. Reasons that fall afoul of the conditions put forward by public reason are impermissible in politics[11].

Both of these understandings of offering a justification are coherent, and if they were the modes of justification that made sense in a given historical time, then it would be difficult to see why they could not be applied in the politics of the time. It is difficult, however, to see how it could be internal to the basic legitimation demand, which rejects an external point of view that can restrict the activity of reason-giving. Both of these perspectives seem to demand an external point of view, one that can prescribe a normative framework with which we can regulate the sorts of legitimations that take place. For Williams's account, which subordinates the actual content of a justification in favour of the way that it coheres with our ability to make sense of the world, this kind of constraint does not seem particularly useful.

If the content of a justification for coercion does not matter for Williams (except as a concern for times when the justification does not make sense), then this would seem to strike directly at a notably liberal value, that of publicity and transparency in the way that justifications are carried out. Consider Waldron's claim that, for liberals, "the social order must be one that can be justified to the people who have to live under it...society should be a *transparent* order, in the sense that its workings and principles should be well-known and available for public apprehension and scrutiny" (1987, 146), or Rawls's contention that a well-ordered society ought to be effectively regulated by public principles of justice, that are grounded in a public exchange of reasons such that a full justification of all the institutions of the basic structure of society is available to anyone (2005, 66-7). Internal to the demand for a particularly *liberal* form of legitimation is that the justification makes sense through the exercise of our reason, not simply as a faculty for making sense of the world (as Williams could endorse), but in a manner consistent with one's autonomy as a rational being. The model of reason here is the tribunal, a place where one decides for him or herself if a justification and endorsement of some political act is appropriate (Waldron 1987, 134).

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[11] Barring what Rawls calls the "proviso," which grants that non-public reasons are permissible insofar as they can be expressed in terms of public reasons as well (2005, 462-64).

Conjoined with this idea of individual judgment is what Williams calls a "rationalistic conception of rationality," which "requires in principle every decision to be based on grounds that can be discursively explained" (1985, 18). The basic liberal understanding of justification is that each individual's reason is the appropriate forum for determining legitimacy, and the grounding for this judgment is in the adequacy of the reasons provided as addressed to one's capacities as a rational agent (Waldron 1987, 153). "Society should not be shrouded in mystery, and its workings should not have to depend on mythology, mystification, or a 'noble lie'" (Waldron 1987, 146), which includes forms of understanding based on the community or culture.

It is clear that Williams rejects this as something intrinsic to political life, if for no other reason than he allows that non-liberal states can be legitimate. Justifications based on culture, or theological interpretation, are entirely permissible, so long as they make sense for the person being coerced. Taking the exercise of reason as the ultimate condition for establishing legitimacy is a product of contingent historical forces, particularly those that give rise to the conditions that make liberal justification make sense. For Williams, transparency and publicity are only instrumentally valuable in political terms (though they may be intrinsically valuable to certain ways of making sense of the world), in the same way that the right to free speech is (*IBD*, 7).

The understanding of offering a justification that I find in Williams, then, is the particular interpretation, which places no restriction in principle on the types and number of justifications that could be offered. One could offer one sort of legitimation to a particular favoured religious group, another to a disfavoured one, and so forth without violating any particular political claim. Such a scheme could very well contribute to the marginalization of one group or another, depriving them of participation in political processes, for example. If that arrangement is repulsive to people, it is so in the domain of what makes sense in the broader context, rather than due to conditions internal to politics (unless, of course, their marginalization crosses over into radical disadvantage, in which case the state has to justify maintaining its claim over them). So too is the claim about publicity part of the apparatus that subjects use to make sense of the world.

Alongside the rejection of an individualistic and rationalistic account of legitimation, Williams's account of legitimacy is primarily distinguished from liberalism by this sort of claim about the location of reasons for criticism (rejecting that the resources that we have for thinking about politics are sufficient to criticize all forms of political life that we dislike).

Two Critiques of Williams

At this point, I think I can respond more completely to the critiques of Williams's work that I mentioned in the last chapter. Alex Bavister-Gould and Matt Sleat both err in their tendency to treat Williams's basic legitimation demand as something that determines the content of a legitimation, rather than its form. As such, I do not believe that either of their arguments succeed, and their attempts to undermine Williams's approach as an example of political realism fail.

To recall, Bavister-Gould starts his critique by assuming that Williams aims to produce a set of criteria for judging legitimacy that is entirely internal to the political. The gap that Williams puts between legitimacy and liberal legitimacy poses a problem for this view, as there must be some way of identifying a political fact that responds to the demand for liberal justification. Bavister-Gould suggests that the basic legitimation demand is restricted in its application by the broader culture that the explanations are offered in. He suggests that since the basic legitimation demand carries the critical theory principle with it, it is impossible to apply it in situations where, despite local acceptance of the legitimation, the critical theory test would point to the illegitimate use of coercion to generate acceptability, using gender-based subordination as an example (2011, 9). If such a society is justifiable to those living in it, then it must be so because the critical theory test was not applied. The reason for this is that applying a critical test is destructive of the ways of life for those whom it is applied to, undermining beliefs and values that constitute the thick ethical concepts that guide their understanding of the world (2011, 13-15).

Bavister-Gould frames it in terms of the gap between genuine legitimation and legitimation that can be decently considered genuine; if there is a legitimation that could fail by the critical theory principle, but persists anyway, there is a "further question" that has to be answered in terms of how people live their lives (2011, 9). This is, I think, valid as far as it goes, but I think that this way of reading Williams misses the way that legitimations function politically. It is not that the basic legitimation demand is withheld from societies insofar as it can be destructive of their ways of approaching the world; rather, the basic legitimation demand is applied internally to the ways that a legitimation makes sense to subjects. Another way of saying this is that the focus of the basic legitimation demand is on the way that a reason interacts with a person's broader sense of the world, rather than on the reasons themselves. Legitimations fail or succeed if they make sense or fail to do so, and if the critical theory principle is one way that this shift can occur, it can only do so internally to the way that subjects make sense of them. An outside observer, perhaps with a liberal way of making sense of politics, can raise the issue of unjustified coercion, but that is not sufficient to defeat a legitimation unless it is taken up by someone within the legitimation relation.

The critical theory principle is not necessarily a tool for computing the objective appropriateness of reasons. It is a process carried out within a particular frame for making sense, not something that is applied *to* a justification or belief. This is borne out, I think, in Williams's brief discussion in *Truth and Truthfulness* of how the critical theory principle could work. He conceives of it as a process by which a group (or an individual) answers the question "if they were to understand properly how they came to hold [some] belief, would they give it up?" (2002, 227). Answering this question means interrogating how structures of authority have inculcated an idea in society, and if this idea is undermined, what is destroyed (through critique) is not the belief, but the subject's understanding of how the belief can fit into a broader structure of making sense. This is how the use of the critical theory principle can distinguish between education and illegitimate coercion: the relevant consideration is not the content of the belief, but the way it functions in their understanding of the world (2002, 227-30). It is about power, not tracking the truth or validity of a legitimation (2002, 231). This is why, contra Bavister-Gould, Williams does not seek to limit the application of the basic legitimation demand if it would undermine social practices, but treats situations that (to us) appear illegitimate as practices that are in their own context legitimate, and could be undermined should the demand for their removal come from inside.

Matt Sleat, as I mentioned before, bases his critique on the diversity of views that could be considered to be components of modernity that do not lead to liberalism, like Marxism and existentialism (2010, 498-500). The root of this criticism comes from his claim that "universal acceptance is a necessary condition of legitimacy" (Sleat 2010, 496). In order for liberal politics to arise, given the formula that legitimacy + modernity = liberalism, it must be the case that there is a consensus on the claim that liberalism is the best way to make sense of politics in modernity (Sleat 2010, 500). Moreover, this consensus must arise prior to politics, since universal acceptance for politics can only be generated if that interpretation shapes the way that politics comes into existence. Given the plurality of non-liberal features in modernity, it is impossible for a consensus on liberalism to arise this way, since generating that consensus would require some sort of coercion (Sleat 2010, 500, Sleat 2011, 477-82).

The way that I have interpreted the notion of universal legitimation suggests that Sleat may be conflating two senses of the term. It is true that justification to each subject is a necessary component of the basic legitimation demand, as that justification is what distinguishes politics from war or radical disadvantage. This does not mean that the justifications need to be the same; justification to all does not entail *identical* justification to all unless there is some other criterion, external to politics, that makes that make sense. The particularist reading of legitimacy I offered in the last section allows that it could be the case that different people, who make sense of the world in different ways, could respond to different modes of legitimation. There does not seem to be a clear reason why a pre-political consensus on liberalism would have to be achieved for Williams's realism to lead to liberal conclusions.

As I have suggested, Williams's account of legitimacy relies on the coherence of legitimate justifications with the ways we make sense of the world rather than on the correctness of the content of those justifications. His equation legitimacy + modernity = liberalism does not depend on emphasizing, from a theoretical perspective, particular elements of modernity. Rather, it is an expression of what makes sense to us now and around here under the conditions of modernity. If existentialist or Marxist modes of making sense were common, now and around here, then it would be false to claim that liberalism is the way we make sense of legitimacy, and we would use existentialist or Marxist criteria for evaluating political judgments. But this does not seem to be the case. Liberalism is the dominant mode of making sense of politics. The only consensus Williams relies on is whatever one emerges through political practice. (The question of how the state can legitimately coerce those who radically disagree with its acts, as a dedicated Marxist would in a liberal state, remains open, but the extent to which this is a problem is a function of political practice, not theoretical reflection. I will touch on this again at the end of the chapter.)

Legitimation in Practice

Offering justifications, given Williams's voluntarism, is an activity, not simply a matter for rational reflection. How do states engage in the activity of justification? What do we have to account for in a practical account of legitimacy? One consideration is that the diffuseness of reasons, insofar as they do not have to be public, transparent, or universal, primarily rules out certain ways of conceiving of political organization because there are multiple possibilities for justification in a state. Williams's realism does not on its own provide a complete account of the sorts of relations that exist in actual states. Williams's own approach to politics seems to be limited primarily to addressing situations where the state, as an agent that coerces a subject, is called upon to distinguish its actions from acts of brute coercion; this is despite the diversity of his examples of how his political theory could be applied, from human rights claims to censorship (*IBD*, 69-73, 139-41).

It would be a remarkable accomplishment if the entirety of what the state did, especially in contemporary conditions, could be expressed in these sorts of relations. It does not seem likely that this is the case. I have already suggested that Williams does not explicitly account for legitimations that do not take the one-to-one form. Perhaps all legitimations could take that form. Such a claim would not be self-evident, however, and would require further justification. There are also problems that can arise with different forms of legitimations that he does not account for. It may be the case that democratic procedures are necessary now and around here and can be derived in simply instrumental terms; however, this tells us nothing about how to conceive of a concept like sovereignty, nor of conflicts that can emerge due to the dispersal of power, and so forth. A more complete account of a Williamsian political theory would have to articulate a fuller typology of legitimations, at least to make sense of politics for us. (This does not mean that it would have to be one derived in philosophical terms, if a sociological or historical system makes sense.)

The impositions that states can have on subjects take on forms other than permission-granting legitimacy as well. The examples that Williams uses are generally bounded, in that the legitimation and justification process is exhausted within the one-to-one relation. (A state censors a publication, then is called on to justify that censorship, then the parties modify their actions in some way. Or a state violates some basic human right, then is called out on it, then is dealt with in a way that makes sense to those involved.) But states can also do other sorts of things, like impose duties and obligations on us as well, at least in some historical configurations. They can command us to do some further act, like enlist in the military or serve on a jury. They can restrict our conduct as we relate to other subjects. They can promulgate liberties and rights for subjects to use that are not tied to particular acts of coercion. I do not need to continue expanding this list to show that Williams has not provided an adequate account of realist politics that can speak to these concerns, which seem to be fairly basic claims about what the state can do. There would be good grounds for calling into question the adequacy of any account of "realism" in politics that cannot either explain how we use concepts that appear to be at least quasi-moralistic, like sovereignty and obligation, or why we can dispense with them when thinking about how politics actually functions in the world (Simmons 2001, 132-35). If it is the case that all of these can be accounted for in a realist account of politics, such a claim cannot be inferred. Part of the task of identifying a realist account of politics is to identify the sorts of practices that politics consists in, explain how human agents interact politically, and determine how we conceive of political relations under those conditions (Horton 2012, MacIntyre 2007, 204-11).

Another practical question is how we understand legitimations to be done in practice in any given time. Part of this must, on Williams's account, be incorporated into what it means for a given justification to make sense in its historical context. Some ways of justifying an act of coercion make sense in one time, then fail in another. (Consider the introduction of the secret ballot in democratic elections. Would we, now and around here, accept a political justification based on a vote that was subject to the sorts of abuses that public ballots suffered historically?) The political theorist can contribute to this project of making sense of how we conduct justifications, but cannot by his or her own rights fully articulate and deploy an account of valid forms of justification, if only because the sorts of justifications we find acceptable are subject to political contestation as well.

There is a companion question here, one that relates to the way that justifications can be demanded. Since, for Williams, legitimacy is a one-to-one relation, every act of coercion is one that subjects can demand a justification for; hypothetically, a particularly recalcitrant populace could attempt to demand an explanation for every single one. This would be ironic, given Williams's identification of a realist approach to politics, since actually providing a satisfactory set of answers to this demand would be an impossible demand on most states. It is not enough to minimize this problem, as Williams does, by saying that "we cannot say that it is either a necessary or sufficient condition of there being a (genuine) demand for justification, that someone demands one...anyone who feels he has a grievance can raise a demand, and there is always some place for grievance" (*IBD*, 6). The grounds on which a state can accept or reject a call to justify an act of coercion are subject to contestation as much as any other element of political practice.

One typical response to this sort of individualized justification demand, which a thinker like Rawls favours, is to develop a second-order conception of justification. A concept like pure procedural justice, which Rawls identifies in terms of a decision procedure to the effect that "what is just is specified by the outcome of the procedure, whatever it will be" (2005, 73), shifts the justificatory burden away from the work of making sense to an external procedure. If one accepts the procedure, and accepts it as capable of rendering pure procedural justice, then whatever the procedure identifies is sufficient to ground any justification that could be asked for (beyond a demand that would call into question the validity of the procedure itself). Put another way, the legitimacy of a law or policy is granted due to its creation by a legitimately endorsed political institution using legitimately endorsed decision procedures.

Williams does not offer a way of abstracting away from the contingencies of everyday life to come to a position that the political system as a whole can be evaluated. There is no position, at least derived internally to politics, that can ground a second-order conception of legitimacy. If such a conception could be elaborated and found to be generally acceptable as a way of making sense of political life for a group of subjects, it could be the case in that in a particular historical time only those justifications that pass a test of second-order justification are valid. But this cannot be taken for granted or incorporated into the idea of legitimacy itself without changing to an impostor form of legitimacy.

Williams must try to identify a position between an all-encompassing form of second-order justification that grounds all legitimations and an infeasible particularist form of justification that would have every act of coercion, no matter how small, require a distinct justification to each subject of the act. The best way of addressing this, I think, is to recall that the subject's demand for a justification of coercion is itself an act, part of a practice that comes bundled with the political relationship and the way that the state can claim authority over a subject. The claim that coercion "gives rise to a demand for justification" (*IBD*, 6) leaves open the possibility that no such concrete demand need be enacted in practice, that no explanation could be required. If the state can dispense with some demands for justification (on the grounds that they are merely the expressions of a grievance, under given political conditions), and if there is no necessary connection between the act of coercion and the demand for its justification, then it need not be the case that *every* act of coercion needs to be justified. A state only needs to offer justification if its actions are called into question.

Legitimacy, on this understanding, is a defeasible concept, in the sense that it is "subject to termination or *'defeat'* in a number of different contingencies but remains intact if no such contingencies mature" (Hart 1949, 175). This could be framed in terms of tacit consent: if subjects do not raise an objection to the coercion of the state, they more or less find it acceptable, perhaps because they can generate their own justification for the coercion, or because it is consistent with previous justifications that have been offered. This carries with it a running presumption that, *ceteris paribus*, subjects find the coercion of the state justified if they previously found it so, that there must be some difference in how the subject understands the state's coercion for them to seek a new justification. Demands for justification will increase if this presumption starts to be faulty, and subjects begin to suspect the general legitimacy of the state; as a corollary, for states that are generally presumed to be legitimate, it is less likely that individuals will raise concerns with how they are being coerced. This is tied to the question of how states remain stable.

This is roughly an inversion of the typical approach to legitimation, which is (to use A. John Simmons's term) a "defensive" understanding of legitimacy, such that "we ask for justifications against a background presumption of possible objection" (2001, 142). In Rawls's political liberalism, for example, coercive actions need to be legitimated prior to their enactment in order for them to be considered legitimate at all. An act that is not acceptable to all citizens, justified through the capacities of their reason, is one that violates the liberal principle of legitimacy; one cannot act then ask for a retroactive or retrospective legitimation, since that violates the duty of civility, which holds that we must "explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason" (2005, 217). Williams, by making the demand for justification come after the action has been objected to, makes legitimation not about prior moral consent, but about the way that individuals function in political life, in response to how states and other powerful political actors shape possibilities for action. (This is one possible consequence of taking seriously the claim that "in the beginning was the deed" [*IBD*, 14].)

This a raises a question about the sorts of considerations that we ought to take into account when judging the legitimacy of a state. Is Williams's realism incapable of making sense of broadly legitimate states that engage in "atrocious conduct," as Richard Flathman suggests (2010, 86-87)? As I noted previously, for Williams, legitimacy is a scalar concept, one that admits of degrees, and I think the defeasible understanding of legitimacy makes sense of this claim. This does not tell us anything about how we ought to determine the way to think about the legitimacy of states. One possibility is that it is simply additive, and to determine the legitimacy of a state we sum up its legitimate justifications and its failed ones, and if on balance the state comes out more legitimate than not, we call it legitimate.

Another possibility is that there are "fixed points," to use Rawls's term (2005, 8), that categorically identify the state as illegitimate if it violates them. Rawls's suggestion that the endorsement of slavery is one such fixed point seems to be mostly true now and around here, such that any state that engaged in slavery would be *de facto* illegitimate (and people who accepted the legitimacy of a justification for slavery would be thought to have something wrong with them). Any such understanding, however, is limited to the realm of making sense, not the conditions of legitimacy themselves. Both justification and the way we understand the practices of justification are part of the way we make sense of the world, and they function inside that framework. (The question of whether we actually think about legitimacy in this way is an empirical one, not one that can be wholly answered philosophically.)

The Scope of Legitimacy

I will close this chapter with a final question: what does this account of legitimacy say about the way that Williams conceives of politics? He cannot rely on any moral or broadly normative considerations for the provision of justifications to *all* the subjects of coercion. I have suggested that, for Williams, politics only arises when a state provides a justification for why its acts of coercion are different from the use of brute force. Justification to each subject is contained within the existence of politics itself (*IBD*, 6). But this gives the state no categorical reason for extending the political relation to all those that it coerces. If states can be maintained through the use of brute force, should it be arranged in a way to more or less dominate the lives of those who suffer under them, why should a given state bother with the business of justification? Or in cases of radical disagreement, like Sleat's Marxists, why should the state care about the way that they reject its coercion? How should we reconcile deep disagreement when it pertains to the use of force (Horton 2010, 443)?

One way of addressing the problem is to claim that it represents a lacuna in Williams's account of realism, or worse, an attempt to smuggle in a liberal assumption that all individuals are morally equal and ought to be treated as such in a political context (Sleat 2010, 496). This would not necessarily be a problem if the value itself is brought in from the broader set of ways we make sense of politics. If we take universal respect as the foundation for politics, then the only permissible ways of making sense of the state's power are those that enact universal respect, and states that fall short of that can be criticized. This, of course, cannot provide a requirement (internal to politics) on the part of the state to actively incorporate all of those who are in its boundaries (*IBD*, 6).

I do not think that Williams is guilty of this charge. A more appropriate way to look at this problem in Williams's approach to politics is to recall exactly what is at stake in the process of justification. What justification seeks to do is to differentiate what the state does from the sorts of harms that people can reasonably expect to suffer in Hobbesian conditions, avoidable harms that have persisted through history. The specificity of the political relationship means that avoiding those harms is intrinsic to politics. Even fairly recent history is sufficient to demonstrate that this is itself no inhibition on the human capacity for cruelty. This tells us something about his conception of politics.

Williams is not a foundationalist in the realm of politics. He does not provide any way of thinking about legitimacy that makes a hard distinction between politics and coercion, one that we could rest upon in good faith such that our actions can be securely on the side of legitimacy. On strictly political grounds, there does not seem to be any intrinsically compelling reason for the state not to revert to the use of brute force. Pragmatically and historically, of course, there are strong arguments for a state to justify its coercive acts, even if for no other reason than the fact that tyrants die, and the capacity for individuals to tolerate unjustified and inexplicable suffering is finite. But of its own accord, political stability is an intrinsically fragile thing, one that can be upset even in the most enduringly stable states. Avoiding radical disadvantage is a constant struggle. This is, I think, one thing that Williams means in his riposte to some of Rawls's rhetoric, saying that "the very phrase 'a mere *modus vivendi*' suggests a certain distance from the political; experience (including at the present time) suggests that those who enjoy such a thing are already lucky" (*IBD*, 2n.2).

For Williams, then, politics can always be undermined, suffering can re-emerge from stability, and it is a matter of sheer contingency whether any person lives freely or is subject to brute force. Someone protesting a policy can be beaten and arrested, and there is little recourse (outside of the materials that people use to make sense of the world) to counteract that, beyond generating outrage and eroding the conditions under which others find that state's justifications acceptable. (In a way, this is something of an improvement over the moralistic approach to thinking about politics, because it shifts problems of [non-] compliance from the realm of the moral to the political. Recognizing the possibility of unjustified or unaccepted coercion as a political problem renders it familiar, since as Williams notes, the use of brute force against those who disagree with a state is known too well throughout human history. Contrast this with the mental gymnastics that the moralist must engage in to explain why a rational and compelling ideal of conduct could fail to be taken up by all subjects; Rawls, for example, likens the threat that illiberal or undemocratic comprehensive doctrines pose to political justice to the threat of "war and disease," which must be contained [2005, 64n.19, also Honig 1993, ch. 5]). Williams's account of politics provides us with no *telos*, no promises of emancipation or freedom or happiness.

Whether such a claim is a melancholy one is something that is tied to an account of what it is that we expect to accomplish with political theory. Moralists may see this as an affront, believing that legitimate politics is politics that everyone can be happy with, politics that affirms our freedom and autonomy and lets us flourish in peace with one another. The purpose of political realism, if there is one, is to highlight the distance between such a conception and politics as it has existed throughout history. Legitimacy and order are the central concepts of politics, not justice or autonomy or rights. It is a matter of our good fortune that we, now and around here, can enjoy freedom and stability largely without fear.

Conclusion

If there is one central idea in Williams's account of legitimacy, it is the connection between individual acts of coercion and the specific justifications offered for them to subjects situated in a frame by which they make sense of the world. In contrast with a liberal (particularly a social contract) account, I have highlighted how Williams's account of legitimacy relies on actual acceptance (in practice) of justifications by subjects, without positing any intrinsic value to those justifications being transparent or public. The relevant question is how well the justifications cohere with the subject's way of making sense of politics. By noting how the demand for a justification is embedded in practical life, I have suggested that Williams's account of legitimacy is a defeasible one, rather than one that relies on a pre-determined criterion for validity. This embeddedness in practical life also gives his account a sensitivity to the fragility of politics and the divide between legitimate coercion and brute force. I also raised some shortcomings of

Williams's account, which, while excusable (given that he did not finish his account), point to ways that his theory would have to be developed to more effectively identify and explain political phenomena.

Chapter Five:

Further Questions

As the previous chapter suggested, it will take a significant amount of work to fully flesh out the approach to political theory that Williams puts forward. Were he still around to guide this development, we could ascertain exactly what he meant by the terms that he used; under these conditions, assimilating his work into the broader debate between realism and moralism would be a boon to the subject. As it stands, though, his work remains, at best, a sort of buffet from which other thinkers can take his partially articulated ideas and develop them on their own. I remain convinced that Williams's approach is valuable enough to investigate further.

By way of a conclusion, I want to raise a number of questions for further consideration. I will say more about some of them than others. This is not a reflection of their relative importance, but rather indicates the extent to which Williams's work provoked my own thought. Others, I am sure, could come up with different types of questions to develop.

What Sorts of Agents are Subjects?

For Williams, subjects are most basically conceived of in terms of their susceptibility to coercion by a state. Above this, however, they must have some capacities of their own that can be developed, if only because they engage in the complex activity of making sense of political life. Identifying the sorts of faculties that subjects would need to have to perform this activity (reason, judgment, a sense for history, and so on) would both improve our understanding of how, as human beings, we make sense of politics and our understanding of how we become subjects capable of making sense of things. While it would presumably vary with historical circumstances, coming up with an account of education and cognitive development for subjects that is compatible with Williams's realism would reinforce his account of politics. It would also clarify how politics can function for subjects that lack the requisite faculties to make sense of coercion, like children or individuals with severe mental disabilities.

How Does Justice Relate to Politics?

As I mentioned before, the idea of justice only emerges in "Realism and Moralism" in the discussion of other authors' positions; Williams is notably not concerned with justice in the context of politics. This is interesting, in light of his discussion of relativism in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, which prefigures some of the themes of his late political works:

> The legitimations of hierarchy offered in past societies, and the ways in which we now see them, are relevant to what we say about the justice or injustice of those societies...social justice [is] a special case in relation to relativism. Justice and injustice are certainly ethical notions and arguably can be applied to past societies as a whole, even when we understand a good deal about them. (1985, 165)

There is clearly some relation between legitimacy and justice, and investigating what that relation is in the context of a non-moralistic approach to politics would be very useful.

There seems to be something of an asymmetry between legitimacy and justice. It is entirely possible to conceive of a legitimate regime that is not just;

on some views, all existing states are legitimate but not just. But I cannot think of a state that is just, but illegitimate. The idea of justice seems to presuppose that the basic legitimation demand is satisfied. Legitimacy is a more basic criterion than justice, though this does not diminish the importance of justice.

I think that justice, for Williams, must belong to the ways that we make sense of politics. Justice belongs to the realm of the ethical, rather than the political, and it is not derived from the way we respond to Hobbesian conditions. It is a component of the way we evaluate political arrangements, one that appears to be variable throughout history.

Abstracting the virtue of justice away from politics as Williams conceives of it allows justice to retain its edge as a critical concept, one that can identify flaws in political arrangements and agitate for the improvement of conditions for subjects. This critical distance from politics is important and reflects how we think about justice (Rawls's claim that the distribution of talents is morally arbitrary and thus irrelevant for an account of justice, for example, retains both some force and a certain distance from lived political experience [1999, 87]). Trying to incorporate justice into realist legitimacy would be a mistake, I think[12].

How Do Legitimations Fail, and What Should We Think About That?

I have argued that, since Williams adopts a coherentist account of legitimacy, legitimations fail not when they violate some moral principle, but when they no longer make sense to subjects. This does not say much about how this failure can occur. A subject could change, or the state could change, or the world could change. The ways that we make sense of politics, and the content of politics itself, are influenced by all three, and a change in any one of them could lead to a failed legitimation. Investigating further the conditions that can lead to failure would clarify how politics and making sense intertwine.

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[12] Enzo Rossi suggests that a realist could reverse the typical relation between legitimacy and justice, making legitimacy prior to justice and defining justice in terms of the effectiveness of implementing legitimate political practices (2012, 158-61). This may be valuable once fleshed out, but it would seem to cut out part of the critical function of justice. Do we not use justice to stand back and judge existing institutions irrespective of their legitimacy?

This is tied to the way that we interpret history. One problem with Williams's use of the relativism of distance in distinguishing between legitimations that provide real or notional conflicts is that subjects can persist through changes that this distinction would push apart. It is not contradictory to say that a failed legitimation made sense at the time and that the legitimation was always wrong, from a personal perspective. Someone who lived through the abolition of slavery could recognize, for example, that while it made sense at the time, the moral prohibition against slavery is absolute and it was a mistake to have ever endorsed it.

When legitimations change, there are two sorts of perspectives we can take on it. Sometimes, when a legitimation fails it is negated, and from then on the new legitimation is recognized as what makes sense, allowing that prior to the negation the old legitimation made sense. Other times, when a legitimation fails it is annulled, as though it never made sense at all. Differentiating between those cases, or other ways that we can make sense of how and why legitimations fail, would be an important part of understanding how we make sense of politics.

What Should We Do (or Not Do) In Political Theory?

I will conclude by bringing the discussion back to the set of issues that opened this essay. The debate between realism and moralism is basically about the question of how we do political theory. Williams's approach identifies political theory as just one of the contributing sources of political action. The theories we develop are nothing more than new ways of making sense of political phenomena that are subject to political contestation and reinterpretation. On my initial reading of Williams, I took this to mean that Williams was basically thumbing his nose at the practice of political theory, deflating its aspirations toward identifying models for politics. It could even be the case that he is arguing for the general irrelevance of theory as such, subordinating it to the study of empirical politics.

I now think that his view is more positive than that, and its critical force aims squarely at the approach that Rawls takes in *Political Liberalism.* Rawls's conception of political liberalism seeks to elaborate something of a political para-philosophy, a philosophical account of politics that can stand apart from comprehensive doctrines but still provide a stable grounding for political practice. Rawls's attempt to do this has been criticized from a moralistic direction, with critics suggesting that it "depletes the moral resources of liberalism without managing in exchange to broaden its justificatory appeal" (Scheffler 1994, 22), or even that it actively harms those who need stronger moral resources to combat tyranny (Taylor 2011, 312-17). The issue with Rawlsian political liberalism is that Rawls makes it political by evacuating the content of liberalism.

Williams's conception of theory comes at Rawls from the other direction: its political nature is insufficiently political. Just like any other theoretical innovation, it must be subjected to political contestation in practice, and while its non-comprehensive grounding may give it extra appeal compared to other theories, it cannot on its own function as a foundation for politics. It is subject to the same sorts of political contestation that thicker comprehensive doctrines are, which means that it is just philosophy, not para-philosophy. If its freestanding character does indeed diminish its content, then it will have to use those weaker resources to compete with other, more comprehensive, views for adherence by subjects.

It is interesting to note that this squares with the way that Rawls conceives the role of political theory in democratic societies:

> In a democratic society at least, political philosophy has no authority at all...political philosophy has a not insignificant role as part of the general background culture in providing a source of essential political principles and ideals...this role it performs not so much in day-to-day politics as in educating citizens to certain ideal conceptions of person and political society before they come to politics, and in their reflective moments throughout life. (2007, 2, 7)

Admittedly, Rawls strongly emphasizes the role of reason in determining both the content of political philosophy and the sorts of values that it encourages in citizens. But the point stands that, for Rawls, political theory works in the background to shape the way we make sense of politics.

James Gledhill develops this ideal, which he identifies with Rawls's aspiration to "realistic utopianism" (2012, 80-81). For Gledhill, what is valuable about Rawls is not his particular principles of justice, but rather the way that he develops our understanding of the moral principles inherent in the practice of liberal democracy and uses that to shape the way we exercise our practical reason. He takes this approach to be superior to the realist approach of Williams (2012, 75-82). I suggested in the previous chapter that his criticism is at least partially based on a misunderstanding of Williams, but it seems to me that there is a more fundamental problem here: his understanding of Rawls is more or less consistent with how I read Williams's take on the role of political theory.

In the end, I think that Williams's realism actually leaves the practice of political theory more or less intact. His aim is to shift the goal of political theory away from elaborating impostor accounts of legitimacy and toward developing the ways that we make sense of politics. (This squares with the treatment of justice as a value belonging to the way we make sense of politics. Elaborating theories of justice is one way that we can shift what we think politics ought to do, identifying more sophisticated sufficient conditions for legitimacy that reflect our values.) It is not the case, as Honig and Stears suggest, that Williams is unduly pessimistic about politics and overlooks the times that it goes beyond merely satisfying the first political question (2011, 202); rather, he takes those times to belong not to theory, which identifies the basic structure of legitimacy, but to practice. As he says about Shklar's liberalism of fear, his focus on radical disadvantage "does not mean that it is simply the politics of pessimism which has not collapsed into the politics of cynicism...it can be, in good times, the politics of hope as well" (*IBD*, 61).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have worked to elaborate some key themes of Bernard Williams's approach to political theory. The distinction between realism and moralism, which structures both his work and the broader debate about how to do political theory, was deepened by distinguishing between different types of realism. I outlined Rawls's moralistic liberalism, emphasizing the way moral concerns structured his conception of the person, the way we choose political structures, and the sorts of reasons we give for legitimacy, in order to give greater contrast to Williams's work, which dispenses with morality in each of those areas. For Williams, there is no determinate account of the person for political purposes, and both legitimacy and political activity are understood in historical (rather than moral) terms.

After presenting my reading of Williams's essay "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," I focused on one particular component of his basic legitimation demand, and raised questions about both how we should interpret the principle and how we should understand its role in political practice. I also argued that Williams has been misread, responding to some pointed criticisms of his understanding of legitimacy and politics. I concluded by posing some questions for further development of a Williamsian political theory. I hope that future thinkers will answer them (and other questions as well) and give Williams's work the respect that a philosopher of his stature deserves.

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