From Analysis to Genealogy. Bernard Williams and the End of the Analytic-Continental Dichotomy

Roberto Mordacci

Abstract: In this paper I want to show how Bernard Williams contributed, especially with his 'turn' in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, to overcoming the dichotomy between analytic and continental philosophy, creating a style of reflection in which conceptual analysis is deeply connected with historical awareness. The idea of genealogy, taken from Nietzsche but heavily modified by Williams, then emerged in books such as *Shame and Necessity* and *Truth and Truthfulness*, as an efficacious method for reflection in theoretical and practical philosophy.

Keywords: Bernard Williams, genealogy, ethics, analytic philosophy.

1. *Beyond the analytical tradition*

Bernard Williams practiced a style of philosophical research in which argumentative rigour and clarity (although sometimes in complex forms, since clarity is not simplicity) are intertwined with a deep historical awareness. His work highlights the central issues of ethics: personal identity, the search for good reasons, the dangers of reflection for ethical life, moral theories, the ancient and the modern image of morality. The interweaving of theoretical analysis and historical inquiry is a characteristic feature of Williams's thought and this makes his qualification as belonging to a particular school or philosophical tradition highly unlikely.

Williams loved paradoxes. He adopted one when he decided to describe his position with regard to analytic philosophy, defining himself as "both deniably and undeniably an analytic philosopher: deniably, because I am disposed to deny it, and undeniably, because I suspect that few who have anything to say on the subject will accept that denial." (Williams 2006: 201). In a very similar vein, one can hear an ironic tone in his witty critique of the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy: there is – Williams says – an evident mistake in the use of categories in this distinction, which consists in the confrontation of a philosophical method with a geographical area, with

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the result that distinguishing between analytical and continental philosophers "is like classifying cars as Japanese and front-wheel drive" (*ibidem*). Williams' attitude towards these classifications was thus, in large part, to ignore them.

Yet, Williams was keenly aware of the implications underlying issues of nomenclature. In this case, the distinction between the analytical and the continental styles (as Williams preferred to say) implies a question on how philosophy should understand itself, and that question essentially concerns the relation between rational argumentation and historical competence. "In philosophy, there had better be something that counts as getting it right, or doing it right, and I believe that this must be still associated with the aims of philosophy of offering arguments and expressing oneself clearly, aims that have been particularly emphasized by analytic philosophy, though sometimes in a perverse and one-sided manner." (180). As Williams contends, philosophy (and even less the analytic method) has no monopoly on clear and well-argued expression; other humanistic disciplines, history for instance, do offer arguments with clarity. And the case of history is highly emblematic, because it is exactly on this issue, i.e.,historical awareness, that the so-called analytic and continental philosophers are split. Williams does not repudiate Paul Grice's tenet that we "should treat great and dead philosophers as we treat great and living philosophers, as having something to say to *us*." (181). But if this means reading a text by Plato 'as though it had come out in *Mind* last month', then it does not make much sense any more to read Plato. The meaning *for us* of a classical text *is not* that of being a contemporary text, but on the contrary precisely that of being a historical testimony of how our problems came to be formulated and, at the same time, of which solutions came to appear viable at the theoretical level in a certain historical and cultural context. Whether those solutions are still plausible for us is a no less theoretical than a historical-hermeneutical problem, and it is incredibly shortsighted to think that the former kind of problem can be faced without the awareness of the latter.

As Williams writes, "Philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry." (192). In the analytic style, philosophical enquiry is done essentially through conceptual distinctions based on definitions taken from the common or the scientific language. The distance from the continental style of deriving long arguments from more or less imaginary etymologies and complex historical reconstructions is abyssal. Linguistic analysis has, in the two traditions, a diametrically opposite meaning: conceptual analysis on the

basis of definitions taken from common language is juxtaposed to the historical-hermeneutical reconstruction of a whole complex of related ideas. Now, Williams thinks that this rigid alternative between two styles of research is totally misleading. Above all, though he tends to inscribe himself in the analytic tradition, he is well aware of its serious limits.

Towards the end of his life, Williams spoke of a "historicist turn" that had become "prominent in my work in the last ten or fifteen years" (Williams 2004, 83; quoted in Williams 2006b, xvii). Williams's work in the history of philosophy (a field which he contrasted with the history of ideas) has been extremely valuable and original, as it can be seen in the works collected in *The Sense of the Past* (2006, collecting papers ranging from 1962 to 2003). The idea of a 'historicist turn' hints at the need to avoid the compartmentalization of philosophy. As Myles Burnyeat recalls, in Williams's opinion "the more professional the separate compartments become, and the more […] [they] acquire something like a research programme, the less reason do philosophers have to take an interest in the history of their subject"; but, in so doing "they lose one of the traditional functions of philosophy, that of understanding and, if necessary, criticizing the culture they live in." (*ibidem*). The interest in the history of philosophy, then, is more like a critical tool for doing good philosophy in the first place, rather than just re-telling the story of this or that concept over and over again. Knowing the historical evolution of an idea is a way of getting into contact with the questions that originated it and that are still, though differently, at the basis of our interest in them. On various occasions, Williams used the label 'genealogy' to describe one of the methods through which history can be a part of a theoretical (and practical) inquiry in the present, and this seems a less misleading etiquette than that of 'historicism', since what Williams had in mind was certainly very far from Hegel and German idealism, coming rather closer to Nietzsche and his reconstruction of the 'forces' that generate ideas and forms of life. We will come back to this idea in the third paragraph.

Furthermore, in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Williams contrasts philosophy with a certain scientist spirit. The latter appears sometimes as an even too appealing model for analytic philosophy: the ideal of a neutral description of phenomena, in particular of human action, cannot represent a plausible aim for philosophical reflection. "Although philosophy – Williams writes – is worse than natural science at some things, such as discovering the nature of the galaxies […], it is better than natural sciences at other things, for instance making sense of what we are trying to do in our intellectual activities." (186). The scientific model of the understanding of the world remains, for Williams, the best approach to a description of the world. Williams himself, in *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (1978) has defined this point of view

as the 'absolute conception of the world', thus attracting critiques from Hilary Putnam (who accused him of attributing exclusively to physics the possession of an ultimate metaphysical truth) and others. Williams limited himself in fact to granting science the ability to offer a description of the world "to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives and idiosyncrasies of enquirers, a representation of the world, as I put it, 'as it is anyway'." (184). This does not mean to attribute to scientific knowledge the status of a metaphysical truth. It is just a kind of representation of phenomena, which can be reached by any competent enquirer, not a conception completely devoid of presuppositions or even irrefutable.

Williams was, above all, keen on highlighting that this model, though it can be suitable for some aims, in particular for the description of natural events and facts, is totally inappropriate for the greatest part of the aims of philosophical research:

> Even if it were possible to give an account of the world that was minimally perspectival, it would not be particularly serviceable to us for many of our purposes, such as making sense of our intellectual and other activities, or indeed getting on with most of those activities. For those purposes – in particular, in seeking to understand ourselves – we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world. (186-187).

Philosophy is a humanistic enterprise precisely in the sense that it is intrinsically historical, since the ideas that constitute its subject have a history, ignoring which is a secure way to miss the target: in particular, moral ideas are mainly contingent and for this reason they require, in order to be understood rightly, not so much a conceptual analysis, but rather a deep historical comprehension.

The opposite side of the scientist slope, which tends to be favoured by conceptual analysis, is represented by the 'ironical' and substantially relativist attitude adopted, for exampled, by Richard Rorty (1989). In this perspective, our belonging to a historically contingent horizon should be considered with a total detachment, in a substantial suspension exactly of our adhesion to that cultural framework. Now, Williams observes, this detachment can certainly create a distance that can lead us to a critical stance, but it cannot be so radical that we completely stop taking some traits of our point of view seriously. We are essentially constituted by this point of view, and detaching totally from it means becoming totally detached from ourselves, which is simply impossible. The aspiration to a complete detachment is analogous to the pretence of the absolute neutrality of the scientist outlook, with the difference that, when such detachment hits the most fundamental of our conceptions, that of the meaning

of our actions and of our thought, the whole intellectual and moral enterprise collapses and loses all its meaning.

According to Williams, "there is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activity of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them; and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from." (194). The perspective from which we look at the world, especially in practice, can be partially crossed but never totally transcended. The forms of life within which philosophical practice takes place are in the end insurmountable: yet, this is not historicism of the 'ironical' kind, Williams contends, nor is it relativism, because reflecting from a local perspective does not at all prevent us from conceiving alternative ways to think and live.

The crucial question remains that, if we have to choose, these ways must be practicable *for us*, i.e., for humans as we are. It is in this eminently *practical* sense that the horizon of our form of life remains insurmountable, but this is the only sense in which philosophical questions, and especially the moral ones, are really *important*. The effort to understand what to do while we are inhabiting the world starting from where we actually are is the most general motive of philosophical enquiry. The latter is "part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves." (182). This conception of philosophy is a peculiar characteristic of Williams's thought and it is the sign of a research spirit definitely alternative to the value-free and purely analytical ideal of that philosophical tradition that, more than any other, has tried to equate, through the medium of linguistic analysis, the intellectual enquiry to the chemical breakdown of elements.

Thus, though Williams insisted on recalling that analytic philosophy, for its aspiration to non-ambiguous language and clear arguments, for its ability to dialogue with the sciences and for the fact that it fosters a genuine progress in discussions, 'remains the sole authentic philosophy that there is', his own way to practice it aims at crossing its borders. The relevance of Williams's thought lies in particular in what motivated him to move beyond these limits: i.e., the need to bring the most rigorous form of reflection back in contact with the real life of agents committed to the uneasy task of living as humans. It is in this direction that we can understand Williams's insistence on such notions as 'importance' and 'limits of reflection', which have a great place in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). Philosophy is regulated by a criterion, i.e., being a locus of the human commitment to live, an aim that is far more important than the formal completeness of a list of possible combinations of concepts

in a logical demonstration. Given its nature, philosophy cannot be an activity completely detached from its subject. The diversity of our points of view is the heart of our thought and when the latter wanders away from the former this is a sign that it has ceased to be human thought.

Now, in the rest of the paper I wish to show that Williams's thoughts on method in philosophy constitute a movement beyond the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, bringing new life to philosophical reflection and stimulating new insights and issues to emerge.

2. *The life and death of analytic ethics*

In a sense, we might say that Williams's thought emerges precisely when a certain style of philosophical research, that which has been called 'analytic philosophy', ceased to be predominant in ethics. Moral philosophy had been one of the main areas where this style of thought appeared, starting with G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* in 1903 (Moore 1903), but it had also been the field in which the exclusive concentration on the analysis of language, both in terms of semantics and pragmatics, had been gradually superseded by other methods becoming more relevant.

Analytic ethics has been interpreted mainly as 'metaethics', i.e., as an analysis of the meaning of the fundamental concepts of ordinary moral language, with the aim of defining the essential and legitimate meanings and 'clearing away' the confused and misunderstood ones, which make our moral world so difficult. This self-understanding of ethics dominated the debates in the English-speaking world, as it, evolved in the first three decades of the 20th century, then becoming predominant from the 1940s to the 1960s and, after being renewed, even persisting into recent times. But we can say that its glory days were over more than fifty years ago. More radically, we might be tempted to say that analytic ethics, understood strictly as a conception of ethics that consists exclusively in logic and semantic analysis of ordinary moral language, existed for exactly the span of G.E. Moore's life, i.e., from 1873 to 1958.

In a way, the idea that ethics should consist in the analysis of ordinary moral language can be traced back to Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* (1874). This concentration on moral language had the aim of distinguishing moral philosophy from philosophy of science and from psychology. For example, in a passage, Sidgwick says: "The fundamental notion represented by the word 'ought' is essentially different from all notions representing facts of physical or psychical experience." (Sidgwick 1874: 25). Sidgwick's concentration on the analysis of 'ought' set the stage for subsequent disputes concerning the 'in-

ternal ought' (reviving the old tradition of the British moralists, see Darwall 1995), duty, motivation, and, naturally, the meaning of 'good', 'right' and so on. Moore himself recognized his debt to Sidgwick's work, when in *Principia Ethica* he acknowledged: "There is only one ethical writer, prof. Henry Sidgwick, who has clearly recognised and stated" that the fundamental notion of ethics "is an unanalysable notion." (Moore 1903: 14). The agenda for ethics, in this perspective, is entirely dominated by the question 'what is good?', which Moore interpreted as a threefold question: first, what is good to be done?; second, which things are good?; third, what does good mean and how should we define it?

Now, according to Moore, like in the first question, it is not the task of the philosopher to offer moral advice, so any hypothesis of a normative ethics is *out of question*. The second question obviously depends on the third, which is the only enquiry exclusively belonging to ethics so that the meaning of 'good' is the only simple object of thought that is characteristic of moral philosophy. The reference of the word 'good' is therefore the only object of the philosophical analysis in ethics. We know Moore's answer to the third question ("If I am asked 'what is good?', my answer is that good is good, and that's the end of the matter.") And we know that some of his colleagues and pupils raised objections to his answers but not to the general framework of ethics as the analysis of the meaning of the fundamental concepts of ethics (an example is *The Right and the Good* by W.D. Ross, 1930). This method has the merit of concentrating on moral language and morality as an *autonomous* area of research, but of course it interpreted the philosophical enterprise in this field as devoid of any normative relevance and, most importantly, as completely detached from any awareness of the history of moral language, of moral practices and of moral thought from antiquity to the present. For those who shared this perspective, to analyse the meaning of good in English in the early 20th century seemed to be all that moral philosophy had to do.

In many respects, the year 1958 seems to have brought the undisputed dominance of such a method of enquiry to an end, witnessing the emergence of a number of different approaches to ethical reflection, which were not reducible to the logical analysis of moral language. Apart from the death of Moore, some relevant works in ethics were published that year: first, the article by G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (Anscombe 1958), arguing that ethics needed to 'restart' its research, starting again from moral psychology and experience rather than from norms and from language analysis; second, Kurt Baier's book, *The Moral Point of View* (1958), in which the analysis of moral reasons was not so much a matter of linguistic structure, but the locus for elaborating a different perspective on practical reason, against the idea that the

analysis should be exclusively descriptive; third, Philippa Foot's article 'Moral beliefs' (1958, in Foot 1978), revitalizing the possibilities of a naturalistic approach in ethics against the mainstream of non-cognitivism; fourth, the first formulation of John Rawls's theory of justice in the article 'Justice as fairness' (1958), paving the way to a 'normative turn' (Cremaschi 2007) that has been showing great vitality ever since.

Of course, other publications written in a somewhat similar vein preceded this turning point, as for example Stephen Toulmin's *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (1950), contributing to a change in the panorama of moral philosophy. The return of normative issues as 'first level questions' – which means that the real issue of ethics is 'How should I live', as Williams summarizes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* quoting Socrates; the elaboration of a 'good reasons approach', which is more concentrated on the normative force of reasons rather than their role in language; and the tendency towards an anthropological enquiry rather than a logical one, such as that suggested by Anscombe and others, are indicative of a change to which Williams was not only very receptive, but to which he himself contributed greatly, though in a very personal and far-reaching direction.

The works that marked the beginning of Williams's career as a philosopher were undoubtedly written in a brilliant version of the analytic style, although with two notable exceptions. While his articles like 'Personal identity and Individuation' (1956-57, in Williams 1973) were clearly based logical analysis (although criticizing its limits and pointing to the body as an irreplaceable criterion for personal identity), as is true of most of the articles collected in *Problems of the Self* (1973), the very first publication by Williams – an essay about 'Tertullian's Paradox' (1954, in Williams 2006) – is hardly an example of logical analysis. Besides, one of the most influential papers in *Problems of the Self* is 'The Macropulos case', a reflection on the *taedium* of immortality which introduced the important notion of a 'categorical or unconditioned desire', broaching the idea of the identity of the subject as based on his motivations, desires and aspirations. In a more general vein, Williams's perspective is from the very beginning much more focussed on the acting subject than on moral language, while retaining a mixture of conceptual analysis and reflection on 'the ethical life' that is the mark of his thought throughout his career. The same focus on the subject is visible in the essays collected in *Moral Luck* (1981), and it is notable that these two collections show quite clearly that Williams treated the issues that he considered relevant at length and over a long period, without writing systematic books but evidently dealing with a topic through articles until he thought it had been dealt with exhaustively. Thus, in the period of *Moral Luck* he moved the centre of his interest towards the relevance of indi-

vidual experience for moral thought. In this respect, when Williams addressed the ideas introduced in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, the need for a different method of reflection in ethics was totally clear in his perspective, and we might say that this book marked the critical turning point of a line that is neither similar to the 'normative turn' of authors such as Rawls, nor to the 'psychological/existential turn' of authors like Murdoch or Cavell (see Donatelli 2015). Williams's turn is rather, we might say, 'genealogical'.

3. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* as the turning point

Williams raises incisive questions regarding moral theory and morality in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. But his attitude is even more critical towards the style of philosophical research that has been called 'metaethics'. Not that he spends a long time criticizing metaethical approaches – though he does take a stance against cognitivism, intuitionism, realism and so on. He just moves the 'Archimedean point' of philosophical reflection in ethics quite far from linguistic and conceptual analysis, towards a more 'phenomenological' (a word Williams himself uses sometimes) and historical-anthropological position. The Socratic question ('How should one live?') is a radically different one from "What do we mean by 'good'?", and Williams begins exactly by recalling the fact that that question is, apart from all the considerations concerning the meaning of 'moral' and 'ethical', the most general and important for a reflective life. Morality is not a separate realm, and even less a secluded region of language: "There is only one kind of question to be asked about what to do, of which Socrates' is a very general example, and moral considerations are one kind of consideration that bear on answering it." (Williams 1985: 6). In this respect, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is an attempt not so much to highlight the *limits* of philosophy, but to reformulate the role of philosophy within ethics (or, more generally, within what he calls 'a reflective life'), while changing the idea of moral philosophy altogether.

Analytic philosophy claims to be a scientific enterprise in so much as its methods are rigorous, its language is clear and its relationship with the natural sciences is strong. Scientific rigour in philosophy has been largely understood as the use of logic and linguistic analysis. Williams never repudiates logical rigour, and often deals with linguistic analysis, but he never reduced all of his arguments to logic. He tries to be clear, but the intricacies of common language appear to him as the mark of a complexity that belongs to life itself, to which our reflection must be more faithful than to logic. This is why he substituted, especially in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, the analysis of 'thin'

concepts such as 'good' or 'right' or 'justice' with the interpretation of 'thick' ones as "coward, lie, brutality, gratitude and so forth" (140): these concepts are 'action-guiding' and, at the same time 'world-guided' and it is not by way of an analysis of their meaning that we will receive guidance for our action. Here is the great distance of philosophical ethics from science (the idea that analytic – or generally rigorous philosophy – has a privileged relationship to science is a particularly misguided one for Williams and he is definitely right in this respect): philosophical ethics cannot work like philosophy of science, and ethical knowledge is totally different from scientific knowledge. Thick concepts will not consist in a convergence of the majority of researchers concerning their meaning, since they are tied to the local and contingent practices associated with them; and thin concepts will be useless, since they 'do not display world-guidedness'. Therefore, Williams concludes, "I cannot see any convincing theory of knowledge for the convergence of reflective ethical thought on ethical reality in even a distant analogy to the scientific case." (152). If analytic philosophy has a privileged connection with science, then there is no analytic philosophy in ethics.

Even before that, in criticizing intuitionism, Williams states that "The analogy between ethical and linguistic intuitions seems very weak if one considers the conflict of intuitions […] In none of these cases is the theory of language required to *resolve* the conflict." (98). The reason is that we are not looking for the resolution of a conflict of meaning in an impersonal perspective: we are rather looking for the relevance of those intuitions for our life as individuals. More precisely (while criticizing the method of reflective equilibrium): "The intuitions are supposed to represent our ethical beliefs, because the theory being sought is one of ethical life for *us*, and the point is not that the intuitions should be in some ultimate sense correct, but that they should be ours." (102). And in criticizing Hare on the derivation of utilitarianism from the meaning of moral terms, thus excluding from the picture all the other normative theories, Williams says: "The claim is unreasonable. Alternative theories cannot plausibly be shown to misuse or misinterpret moral language. Even if there were one basic characteristic of 'moral language' as such, and even if that lay in its being prescriptive and universal, this would still not lead inescapably to the theory." (85).

Rather, the key concept, used as a criterion for understanding the source of *normativity* within ethical life, is that of *importance,* which substitutes the much-vexed question of the presumed opposition of *is* and *ought*. There is no logical derivation of ought from is, but this is not really the issue at hand in ethics. Determining what, all things considered, we should do is not a matter of logical consistency: "This always requires us to determine what, on this

particular occasion, in the light of everything, we judge most important." (126). Importance is what matters in ethical life, and in this case it may happen that too much (abstract) reflection is not the best ethical condition: if what matters to us, for example *trust*, is destroyed by too a strict definition of its concept, of its conditions and of its internal contradictions (which are always there), then we should preserve our ethical convictions from the power of reflection.

Williams's conclusion in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is extremely meaningful in that it quotes the two basic notions which will constitute the very title of his last systematic work, *Truth and Truthfulness*, here tied up with the idea of "the meaning of an individual life" (198). It will be one of the marks of the evolution of Williams's thought that these two concepts will be tied, in the later work, much more to the *historicity* of moral life than to its *individuality*. This is why, it seems, the anti-analytical turn, which *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* impressed at least on those who followed, in part, Williams's work, has passed from a largely psychological-phenomenological perspective (with an emphasis on the relevance of individual experience as compared to linguistic analysis) to an almost explicitly hermeneutic one, with the notion of *genealogy* becoming more and more central in his thought.

4. *Genealogy as philosophical analysis*

Williams moved towards a progressive relevance of historical and political subjects in his thought (see Myles Burnyeat's introduction to Williams 2006b). Starting from *Shame and Necessity* (1993), the main interest in his reflection appears to be exactly that dimension which analytic philosophy obscured so much: i.e., history. For Williams, it simply makes no sense to consider the ethical notions as if they had no history, e.g., analysing the concept of 'good' in the contemporary common language (and only in English, obviously). In this regard, analytic thinkers must have appeared to him as peculiarly ignorant of the past. Historical awareness and research should be brought into philosophical analysis, thus merging theoretical inquiry with hermeneutical abilities. This is the only way to do justice to the fact that we are reflective agents, with the need to share meanings in the context of local practices, which change over time.

Truth and Truthfulness bears as a subtitle *An Essay in Genealogy* (2002): Williams declares his debt to Nietzsche, an increasingly influential author in his work, for this term but his use of the idea is definitely different from both Nietzsche's and Foucault's. To begin with, his usage of the term corresponds to his aim of distancing himself on the one hand from the common-language analysis that sets truth out of history, on the other hand, from the 'deniers',

such as Rorty, Derrida and Foucault (at least in Williams's reading of them), who refuse the very idea of truth on the account that it is itself a historical, and therefore local and contingent, concept. In his opinion, a genealogical inquiry offers the possibility to investigate the way in which certain concepts emerged from real practices and real needs, particularly in the social context. Ethical and political concepts, but theoretical ones as well, respond to the critical needs of humans as reflective agents. This means that their validity and 'truth' is in relation to those practices and needs, but this does not imply that it is radically 'relative' or a misguided concept altogether.

Genealogy for Williams has a general meaning that takes two different forms as a method of philosophical research. In general, "A genealogy is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about." (Williams 2002: 20). Therefore, a genealogy of truth means investigating "the various virtues and practices, and ideas that go with them, that express the concern to tell the truth – in the sense both of telling the truth to other people and, in the first place, telling the true from the false." (*ibidem*). This can be done in various ways, and Williams practices at least two of these in his book: the first is "a fictional narrative, an imagined developmental story, which helps to explain a concept or value or institution by showing ways in which it could have come about in a simplified environment" (21), such as a fictional 'State of Nature'. This kind of mental experiment is quite different from, say, Putnam's Twin Earths or Rawls's Original Position, exactly in its genealogical, rather than merely logical, nature. Williams's story in the first part of *Truth and Truthfulness* can be criticized as an account of truth, but it aims more specifically at explaining how *the need for truthfulness* has risen within an imaginary world made of cooperating humans at the beginning of history. Truthfulness is a social and political concept, and it precedes, so to say, the abstract notion of truth. In this sense, it is its genealogical parent, and therefore it helps understanding why truth is of such importance to us, and why it has not only epistemological but also ethical and political value. This kind of story does not make the notion of truth a false one, as Nietzsche (or rather his post-modern interpreters) seemed to imply. Rather, it offers a framework for the notion of truth in which the conditions of the appearance of that concept are made clear, at least tentatively.

The other way to do genealogy, in a more Foucaultian style, is to reconstruct the theories of truth and of other notions (of history itself, for example), as Williams does in the second part of the book, dealing with Herodotus, Thucydides, Rousseau (on the notion of authenticity), Diderot and others. In this perspective, a genealogy is substantially a critical history, in the style of

Enlightenment historians and philosophers, aiming at highlighting the presuppositions of the notions present in common language but which have a thick heritage from the past. Ignoring that heritage is simply shortsighted. In this sense, Williams explains, "philosophical theories of truth, whether more or less ambitious, quite certainly have a history, whereas the concept of truth itself does not." (61-62). This amounts to a critique of those thinkers who throw the notion of truth away on the basis of the evolution of its contents in history. Genealogy is different from a simple narrative, in that it tries to unearth the conditions of appearance (the conditions of possibility) of the concept, thus clarifying the practical and cognitive needs which generated the concept.

Williams tries therefore to devise a 'critical' perspective which takes into account Habermas's version of the critical theory, but is less transcendental in kind: "We need a less abstract approach, a critique that is 'contextualist' or 'immanent', rather than in the Kantian style" (226), which can help to destroy those conditions that create injustice and lack of freedom. This is, in Williams's interpretation, the spirit of Enlightenment. An interpretation that is certainly more accurate than that which sees Enlightenment as the celebration of an abstract and detached 'Reason': "We have something to fear from Enlightenment programmes for the advance and application of truth, but a lot to cherish in its concern for truthfulness." (231).

At the end of the turn away from logical analysis, Williams vindicates a style of inquiry that combines theoretical rigour with historical awareness, adopting the idea of genealogy as a methodological tool that does not end up just telling stories about concepts. The motive behind this turn is at the same time philosophical and political: Williams was a sincere liberal and his appeal to history has the aim of empowering culture as a critical tool against limiting conceptions of how we should live. The limits of philosophy may be those of a reflection that understands itself as too detached from real life, i.e., from individuals and their history. But its advantage is to be self-aware of these limits and to be able to make critical thinking always new and challenging. One of the challenges that Williams brought home is that of overcoming the badly misleading opposition of analytic and hermeneutic styles in philosophy, practicing himself a different and effective method of inquiry of which, so to say, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* was the *pars destruens,* whereas books such as *Shame and Necessity, Truth and Truthfulness* and *The Sense of the Past* were the, much needed and appreciated, *pars construens.*

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