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Book Review

In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument. by Bernard Williams
(Princeton University Press, 164 pp. 2005.)

To get right to the essence of it, this book is by turns: intriguing, maddeningly organized, intelligent, sensitive, digressive, provocative, and probably more or less irrelevant. For readers, such as myself, who have known Williams largely through his work in *Problems of the Self* and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, this work represents something of a truly surprising turn, a consistent, almost obsessive, pursuit of distinctively *political* issues. But while the subject is new, the temperament is familiar. In taking up these political matters, Williams shows all his virtues. The subject at hand is invariably marinated in his characteristic “now from this light, now from that” intelligence; he can at times write with a kind of snappy clarity that is most appealing; and he shows a welcome originality on certain matters, such as cross cultural and cross historical comparisons. (See especially in this regard the chapter “Human Rights and Relativism.”) But the work also showcases his characteristic limitations. There is for example a meandering quality to a lot of the arguments, a kind of Oxbridge high table confidence that it is perfectly all right to take up an issue with no clear point of view or systematic conclusion in the offing, so long as each paragraph displays the right level of balance and erudition. But the real difficulty with this book, its fundamental limitation, is that it very rarely takes up in any detail the various arguments we have from the early and later Rawls. And, it turns out that Williams is preoccupied with a fair number of the very same issues that are signature issues in Rawls’ arguments, for example: the degree to which the justification for the state must be normative, as opposed to merely pragmatic; how non-liberal a state could be and still be legitimate; how to think of political equality and equality of opportunity. As a result, the failure to rehearse Rawls’ position on these matters and then chart out (and defend) whatever differences there are just leaves Williams, often as not, with a position that simply strikes the reader as incomplete, undeveloped, the better known argument of his rival inevitably conjured up in the reader’s mind by contrast, and generally providing a more satisfying treatment of the issue at hand.

For example, in his chapter “The Idea of Equality” Williams thinks about what it means to claim people are equal. He distinguishes between an empirical interpretation of equality among persons, which clearly won’t do, (since persons are clearly not equal in any empirical way) and a platitudinous understanding, the idea of persons being equal in simply virtue of their “common humanity.” (97) Williams argues, rightly I think, that the second avenue may not be as vacuous as it first appears – the fact that persons have “the capacity to feel pain, both from immediate physical causes and from various situations represented in perception and in thought, and the capacity to feel affection for others, and the consequences of this, connected with the frustration this affection, the loss of its objects” is not entirely trivial, given that there are political and social arrangements that systematically neglect these facts over

some groups, or fail to give them the weight they deserve. (99) But what of more robust notions of equality among persons, the idea that persons *deserve respect* say in virtue of a distinct moral capacity, or moral agency? (101) Williams is skeptical that it this idea, as Kant understood it at least, can go very far: if we construe our “moral capacity as persons” in a wholly non-empirical way, then we cannot connect it to responsibility in the world of action, which is surely central to being a moral agent. (103) Yet the idea that there is more to persons than their talent or abilities has something to it, Williams thinks; the failed inventor certainly experiences *his own life* as something more than that failure. Perhaps to respect persons is just to see them as more than whatever is “dictated by the criteria of technical success or social position”; persons are owed a kind of “effort of understanding” from their own point of view. (104-5)

While this understanding of what persons are owed, or what it means to see persons as sharing a common humanity is not utterly without content, clearly, it is not a rich enough notion to provide much in the way of political guidance. But this limitation to the general idea may be conceded and set aside. The norm of equality gets a better chance of satisfactory elaboration, Williams thinks, when we turn to equality of opportunity. Indeed, it may turn out that all equality, as a general political norm, may plausibly amount to is the elaboration of what equality of opportunity requires in every relevant domain. (Williams suggests this, thinks it may be right, but does not set out to defend so strong a claim explicitly.) And clearly, articulating a notion of equality of opportunity will require explicitly saying what is and is not a relevant reason for exclusion, what is and is not a satisfactory explanation for why it is that people wind up unequally, when they do. In particular, we have to be sensitive of when reasons which are *operative* are not in fact *relevant*. Consider an ancient society that attached high prestige to being a member of the warrior class, and further assume that in that society only those from aristocratic families could be warriors. Times change, protest occurs, and the aristocratic class announces that competition for warrior membership will be open to all. However, if the poor farmers in this culture remain severely malnourished, it is very cynical to think that in fact all have “equal opportunity” to be a warrior. (110-111) Analogously, if all have equal opportunity to compete for entrance to Oxford, but if only those from wealthy families get the education to do so realistically, as would have been the case through much of Britain’s history, it would have been equally facile to say that Oxford, in say 1900, was “open to all.” A similar point, sadly, can be made for reasonable health care for many Americans: it is open to anyone *if* they have the money. “Having the money” is, to use Williams’s distinction, an *operative* condition, but not a *relevant* reason. And so we may now say: only when the operative and the relevant are in alignment, will we have true equality of opportunity. (107-110).

It is an interesting suggestion, but as it stands, it cannot be quite right, nor in so far as it *is* right, is it always the most promising framework for approaching the norm of equality of opportunity within the political. In the first place, we are often disinclined to make this distinction at all, disinclined to see “the contingently operative” as, for precisely that reason, incompatible with as “the relevant.” Consider athletic contexts: East Africans would seem to have the builds that give them terrific advantage as long distance runners. Yet there is meaningful sense in which the opportunity to compete for the gold in long distance running is genuinely open to all. Explanations by which someone comes to be the likely winner of an otherwise open competition may be quite contingent but not for all that, appropriate objects of political enmity. It may turn out that mathematical ability, or the reflexes by which some excel as fighter pilots are largely hard wired – but no one, for all that, would begrudge the math professor or squadron leader his position or his fame. Williams (like G.A. Cohen in his writings on welfare) seeks a metaphysical distinction, seeks to draw a line between what is and what is not relevant, and then hopes to map it directly onto the political arena. The results are predictably unsatisfactory. When he takes up

what no one denies, that differences across families will strongly influence the ability of their children to secure competitive education, we are, given this distinction between the relevant and the operative, just left with an insuperable political problem. How, unless we were to dismantle the family, could we hope to get equality of opportunity *here*, to make it such that only the relevant was operative? Yet if we do *not* attack such powerfully operative, yet not morally relevant reasons, what does our commitment to respecting the common humanity of all come down to? (113, 114) Williams warns us not to succumb to the simplifying formulations of either side here – not to think that “equality of opportunity is the only ideal that is at all practicable and equality of respect a vague and perhaps nostalgic illusion, or alternatively, that equality of respect is genuine equality and equality of opportunity an inegalitarian betrayal” (114). Clearly, equality opportunity is often *not* so practicable at all, and equality of respect, *is* pretty vague, since it is, on this analysis, simply what we have when attending as best we can to this relevant reasons/operative reasons distinction. We end (quite understandably) on a mildly pessimistic note: we should just muddle through as best we can, “seek, in each situation, the best way of eating and having as much cake as possible.” (114)

As I said earlier, the reader cannot help but think of the alternative approach defended by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. There is a sense in which one might say: Rawls acknowledges the slipperiness of the relevant reasons/operative reasons distinction, metaphysically understood, and fashions a distinctively political solution that bypasses its otherwise paralyzing power. The theory of primary goods, and the further idea of distributing those goods in accord with the difference principle, gives us a way of respecting the equal worth of all while at the same time doing justice to merit and opportunity. It is a distinctively *political* structure in which these ideals are acknowledged and reconciled. Rawls does not have to say, in every case, what is and is not a relevant reason, nor, when we *can* specify a reason as not relevant but operative, (as is the case with the role families play in a child’s talent) are we then, given our commitment to this distinction and its importance in our theory of equality, committed to dismantling that particular bit of social causation. Instead of seeking a stable distinction in the way things are and carrying that distinction forward into politics – the result being a tension we must just accept and muddle through in each fresh case – we have instead, with Rawls, a proposal which represents a systematic and sensible way of carrying forward these two intuitions (all persons deserve equal respect on one hand, some differences in outcome tied to talent or effort will be justified, on the other) into the political sphere. Rawls’ theory pursues the distinctive, and fertile, idea that in politics we must fashion distinctively political solutions rather than look for what one might call perfect moral clarity and apply it *to* the political. But it is the latter that is Williams’ project. Of course, given that *this* is the task, Williams reaches impeccably modest, sensible, and non-dogmatic conclusions. He always does. Reasonable skepticism about the reach of philosophical generalization is Williams’ trademark. But because he does not consider an entirely different and more fruitful approach in any detail, his virtues in this regard – and they are undeniable – are overshadowed by being on the wrong road from the start.

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