Bernard Williams on Pluralism, Liberalism, and History

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The relation between pluralism and liberalism has been a central concern in recent political philosophy. The work of Bernard Williams provides good reason to think that in addressing itself to such concerns political philosophy cannot be an enterprise relying on purely rational argumentation alone, but rather must also incorporate historical inquiry into its work. Williams' work on liberal pluralism evinces precisely this historical-philosophical sensibility. This article, accordingly, discusses Williams' contribution to recent debates in political philosophy not only with respect to substantive issues concerning liberal pluralism but also with respect to methodological issues concerning how political philosophy ought to address itself to such substantive matters.

One of the most important and interesting features of contemporary political philosophy concerns the increasing attention to pluralism we have been witness to over the past century. Pluralism is now central to reflection on politics across every major philosophical tradition including analytical, phenomenological, pragmatist, critical theoretical, and genealogical theory. The many forms of pluralism under consideration across these traditions all have in common a basic concern with deep conflicts among values or ideals or interests that are not easily resolved. Prominent questions raised by such pluralism include the following. When we confront the conflict of pluralism, what sorts of things is this a conflict between (values, ideals, interests, ways of life, etc.)? How deep do these conflicts run (all the way down, or only to the surface of a minimal standard such as reasonableness)? What concept most accurately captures the logic of said conflicts (incompatibility, incommensurability, inconsistency)? Where are these conflicts most pressing (among groups, within groups, within persons)?

Today the situation is such that no serious political philosopher can afford to trivialize pluralism as a merely practical matter. But why? It is not entirely clear why questions such as these should have emerged with such force in recent political and moral philosophy. Why was it, for instance, that Rawls’ explicit attention to pluralism was one of the most attractive features of his work for so many of his readers? Of course, some amount of concern over value pluralism had always been a feature of modern political thought, in part because pluralism itself has always been a feature of modern moral life. But if political philosophers of the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth century were confident about the possibilities of a unifying theory of justice in the context of pluralistic conflict, then political philosophers of the last century, and now of our own, are extraordinarily more cautious. Whereas canonical political philosophy in past centuries tended to sublimate conflicts in values to make room for a given philosophical conception of order or justice or right or good, the problem of value pluralism itself became canonical over the course of the twentieth century. We all live under the shadow of William James’s prescient but threatening words: “Some part of the ideal must be butchered” (1891, p. 622). There is, James observed as the nineteenth century drew to a close, an increasing sense that whatever is ideal is inherently fragmented and fractured such that some of its parts may be subject to irremediable loss. James gave expression to exactly that tragic conflict of values which many of us know through the more prominent discussions of Isaiah Berlin: “The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realization of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others” (1958, p. 168).

It is not obvious why political and moral philosophers began to explicitly and self-consciously concern themselves with pluralism over the course of the twentieth century. It may just be that philosophy’s increasing attention to pluralism has been, at least in part, a function of altered historical conditions involving the escalation of visible pluralistic conflict over the twentieth
century. If this is so, then it may be that one of our best contemporary guides to the challenge of pluralism is Bernard Williams. For it was one of Williams’ signal contributions to have urged a more historical perspective on the way in which we work to understand ourselves. In his writings in the final years of his life, Williams makes a detailed case for resituating the project of moral and political philosophy as a historical, or more precisely genealogical, effort. It is not widely known, though it is no secret, that Williams’ final philosophical project, which lay unfinished at his death, was to be precisely a history of liberal pluralism. The posthumous remains of that project, published in his In the Beginning Was the Deed (2005), make the case for a more genealogical-historical approach to political philosophy, even if they do not fully deliver such an approach themselves. That Williams conceived this new kind of effort in political philosophy against his own inherited background of analytical philosophy, a tradition that has been and still largely remains resolutely ahistorical, is in part what makes his work interesting. I shall here explore Williams’ attempt in that book, and in some of his other late writings, to undertake a more historicist analysis of liberal pluralism as follows from his more general point in favor of forms of political philosophy that combine the work of historical inquiry with conceptual analysis.

In the course of my discussion, I shall develop a defense of two aspects of Williams’ views on liberal pluralism and on how political philosophers might address themselves to liberal pluralism. The first has to do with his skeptical view concerning the inability of purely analytical philosophy to address itself to pluralism and the threat of relativism it engenders. This view was not proposed as a critique of the practice of conceptual analysis. What self-respecting philosopher could possibly take issue with that? Rather, Williams’ view concerns a critique of the idea that conceptual analysis should be all that there is to philosophy. For if that were so, then pluralism (among many other things) would no longer fall within the purview of philosophy. The loss of pluralism as a topic which philosophers might have something useful to say about would be a loss not only for philosophy itself, but more importantly also for pluralism. The second point on which I shall defend Williams’ concerns the potential of a more historical analytical philosophy to engage pluralism as a deep problem that may yet admit of reconstructive improvement. I shall discuss some advantages of Williams’ rather capacious conception of genealogical philosophy, at least with respect to pluralism as it features in specifically liberal societies. I here understand liberalism as a political vision that, both theoretically and practically, aims to strike a balance between the often-opposed goals of individual liberty and public authority. Pluralism may of course also feature in non-liberal contexts. But I shall here be concerned only with pluralism in its relation to liberalism insofar as we today find ourselves under historical conditions of pluralism and liberalism.

The Philosophical Analysis of Liberal Pluralism

The starting point of much recent discussion of pluralism in liberal political philosophy is the idea that pluralism is a condition of modern political thought and action. Anyone who begins here encounters a crucial question which nearly every political philosopher must face at some point and in some form, namely the question of relativism and its claim that any value or view is as good as any other. If pluralism is a condition of modern politics, then how can we avert the relativism that pluralism seems to make possible? Williams’ answer to the relativism threat, following Berlin, involves liberalism. In a relatively early discussion, Williams writes that Berlin, “deploys the pluralism of values in defense of liberalism” (1978, p. xvii). Williams also proffered this view as his own, for instance in a much later essay where he claims that liberal tolerance is valuable precisely where conflicts of values run most deep: “Toleration, we may say, is required only for, the intolerable. That is its basic problem” (2000, p. 126). The argument in both cited passages (authored some twenty years apart) seems to be the following: to the extent that pluralistic conflict is our condition, then, liberalism will be of use to us, because it will help us block the worst forms of relativism.[1] In assessing this argument, we would do well to consider exactly how liberalism forms a useful way of responding to conditions of pluralism.

Liberalism in the context of pluralism is best seen not as a normative vision so much as a political conception that creates enabling conditions for normative critique in the context of pluralism. Thus, liberal pluralism is not itself right and not itself capable of generating norms of its own accord. Liberalism understood as enabling may of course entail certain normative ideas (and almost undoubtedly it does) but these ideas are not the main part of why pluralists may want to take liberalism seriously.
This view of liberalism suggests that liberal pluralism does not by itself prevent the unwanted slide from pluralism into relativism, but rather creates conditions such that those of us who find ourselves midst pluralism can develop forms of social and political normativity that will avoid the slide into fractious relativism. Liberalism creates conditions for political normativity just insofar as it enables political agents to engage in practices that admit of assessments of better and worse, correctness and incorrectness, right and wrong. Liberalism accepts pluralism, blocks relativism, and makes normativity possible (perhaps even probable) but not necessary.

To explain this view in a little more detail, consider the threat of relativism raised by pluralism as possibly occurring on two levels. On the first level, pluralism might engender relativism if we construe it in terms of a plurality of, say, subjective values. Williams, following Berlin, rejects this approach. Berlin is unequivocal: “There is a world of objective values” (1988, p. 11). For Berlin, values are rooted in human forms of life as ultimate ends which are objectively necessitated by those forms of life. Williams endorses this view, too, though he was famously more cautious than Berlin regarding the idea of “objectivity” with respect to values.[2] Relativism here on the first order is incoherent just insofar as every value that is objectively rooted in a human form of life of itself capable of generating norms.[3] But the very fact that relativism is easily averred in this way makes possible a deeper and more intractable second-order problem of relativism. While values are objective because rooted in forms of life, forms of life may differ from one another and as a consequence generate incompatible objective values. So, although it is the case that values are objective, they need not for that reason alone all be compatible with one another. In this way the threat of relativism arises rather forcefully as a second-order anxiety. It suggests that there may be no way of generating critique in and among objective values since there is no meta-value in terms of which all values are commensurable.

Nonetheless, second-order critique may still be possible under these conditions if we can generate historical constructions that make it possible. This is exactly how liberalism, according to Williams, ought to be understood. Liberalism is best understood not as a first-order objective value that can itself decidedly adjudicate amongst otherwise incommensurable values, but rather as a second-order historical condition of possibility that enables normative critique in the context of pluralism. I shall return to Williams’ argument for this view below.

Before doing so, further analytical clarification of liberal pluralism itself will be useful. There are many ways of construing the relationship between liberalism and pluralism. One view is to suggest that pluralism straightforwardly entails liberalism. I shall call this the entailment view. This view holds that something like liberal tolerance follows directly from the existence of a conflict of values that cannot be adjudicated fairly.

An argument against the entailment view can be summarized as follows.[4] Pluralism is either a norm or a fact. If pluralism is endorsed as a norm, then it cannot possibly entail liberalism, unless it also entails a contradiction. This is because liberalism itself is one norm amongst many, and endorsing this norm involves rejecting others, and hence contradicts pluralism. But, on the other horn, if pluralism is accepted as a fact, then we cannot generate any normative ought, such as those required for liberalism, on the basis of that. A mere description of the conflict of values does nothing to suggest that such plurality, or such conflict, is a good thing. Indeed many parties to the conflict would themselves disagree.

In response to this and similar critiques of the entailment view, some have attempted to develop more sophisticated versions of that view. A good example is found in the political philosophy of John Rawls.[5] Rawls presents pluralism as a bare fact, namely what he frequently referred as “the fact of reasonable pluralism.” But this is misleading. For Rawls actually endorses a norm, and not just a fact, of pluralism. The fact of reasonable pluralism may indeed be a fact, but it is a fact that picks out a normative construction, namely a plurality of doctrines all of which are “reasonable” in a sense that cannot but be normative. In restricting pluralism to the reasonable, Rawls builds a norm into his conception of the fact of pluralism. Indeed it would be odd, after all, for Rawls to have made political liberalism respond to pluralism as a mere fact. This would have amounted to merely pragmatic accommodation, which is a strategy that Rawls consistently criticizes as falling short of the
normative ideal of justice, for example in his frequent dismissal of “modus vivendi” solutions to problems of conflict. Joshua Cohen points out that the right reason for the Rawlsian to accommodate reasonable pluralism is not in response to merely pragmatic considerations, but rather because reasonable doctrines are those that express the diversity of the exercise of free practical reason itself.[6] In any event, Rawls clearly construes the relationship between pluralism and liberalism on the entailment model. His idea of reasonable pluralism functions in such a way as to entail his political liberalism as a normative ideal.

The problem with the entailment view, even in the more sophisticated form it assumes in Rawls, is simply that it makes things too easy. In addressing ourselves to the nonideal condition of pluralism, it does little good to operate on the level of ideal theory. Rawls manages to evade the real conflicts of values that so perturbed Berlin and Williams. One can close one’s eyes to conflicts of values that cannot be brought into reasonable relation to one another, and one can further claim that this is not a proper topic of justice or political philosophy, but that just amounts to giving up in the face of a severe problem that just will not go away. Pragmatically, this amounts to handing the problem over to the politicians, bureaucrats, and ‘realists’ who are all too happy to have authority over such matters. If Rawls is right that addressing ourselves to a plurality of unreasonable doctrines is not a matter of justice, he is wrong to suggest (implicitly, by leaving entirely unaddressed) that this is not a matter of concern.

To return now to Williams, it needs be noted that he rejected the entailment view. Some have, however, attributed the view to Isaiah Berlin, and this considerably complicates matters insofar as Williams’ work on liberal pluralism is on most points consistent with Berlin’s.[7] But I doubt that Berlin took this to be his considered view. In an interview he once said: “Pluralism and liberalism are not the same or even overlapping concepts. There are liberal theories which are not pluralistic. I believe in both liberalism and pluralism, but they are not logically connected” (1992, p. 42). That seems rather unequivocal, although critics might object that this is but a convenient late-life view that retrospectively tidies up what remain loose ends in Berlin’s published views on the matter.

In his introduction to Berlin’s Concepts and Categories, Williams delineates two possible interpretations of the former’s view of these matters. The interpretation of Berlin which Williams describes as the “obvious” one is the following: “[I]f there are many and competing genuine values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More, to this extent, must mean better” (1978, p. xvii). Williams does not reject this as an interpretation, but he does not seem particularly excited about it either. For this interpretation suggests that pluralism entails liberalism. And how do we come to recognize this entailment? It appears that we glean it by conceptual analysis alone: in other words, reason reveals the right relation. This sort of approach suits Rawls, for whom it seems the relation between pluralism and liberalism must admit of some rational explanation. The devices of the original position and overlapping consensus by virtue of which we reach a liberal compromise in the face of reasonable pluralism amount to rational answers to the question of liberalism’s relation to pluralism. Rawls develops his view by reasoning and not, for instance, by way of inquiring into the historical, psychological, or anthropological conditions of pluralism and liberalism. Rawls of course makes reference on occasion actual historical events. But these are never used to develop his argument. They are always mere examples which demonstrate the force of his rational argument or which illustrate certain details of that argument.[8]

Williams, by contrast to Rawls, made a name for himself precisely by calling supposed capacities of reason into question. Williams thought, especially as concerns matters of value, that philosophy should take reason to be rather limited such that the mark of wisdom and learning was to acknowledge these limits. In an early essay on pluralism titled “Conflicts of Values” he offers this characteristic line: “the enterprise of trying to reduce our conflicts, and to legislate to remove moral uncertainty, by constructing a philosophical ethical theory (in the sense of systematizing moral belief) is a misguided one” (1979a, p. 80). It is misguided in part because the rich textures of moral life, especially in the context of lived moral conflict, always far exceed the tidy confines of any and every ethical theory. This is a deeply Humean view, concerned as it is with recognizing the limits of human reason in the face of the empirical complexity of actual experience.

The second interpretation of Berlin that Williams offers is rather different in tone. It appears decidedly less
rationalistic. This interpretation involves the idea that “consciousness of the plurality of competing values is itself a good” and involves “knowledge of an absolute and fundamental truth.” Liberalism is valuable just insofar as it truthfully affirms the pluralism that we face. He continues, “[T]he correctness of the liberal consciousness is better expressed, not so much in terms of truth... but in terms of truthfulness.... What we understand is a truth about human nature as it has been revealed – revealed in the only way in which it could be revealed, historically. The truthfulness that is required is a truthfulness to that historical experience of human nature.” Williams is clearly intrigued by a reflective strategy he describes as Berlin’s “implicit appeal, once more, to historical understanding” (1978, p. xviii).

This more historical view, which does not do away with conceptual analysis so much as it aims to enrich it, was the one that Williams himself would increasingly take up as the best hope for philosophy when we truthfully face up to its limitations as a purely rational enterprise. If earlier works such as Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (1985) end on a skeptical note concerning the abilities of rational philosophy, then later works such as Truth and Truthfulness (2002) manifest a greater confidence about the abilities of a form of philosophy that invokes both rational explanation and historical understanding, and understands the proper place of each. To elaborate on this, I turn in the next section to a consideration of the place of history alongside reason in philosophy.[9]

From Philosophy to Historical Philosophy

What does a more historical analysis of liberal pluralism involve? How can history help us understand liberal pluralism, and in such a way that we will not feel the invitation to relativism, or at least if we begin to understand that invitation can nevertheless resist it, as we rightly should? It is worth pointing out that Williams is not alone in pressing a historical model of explanation in accounting for the relation between pluralism and liberalism. Two other recent instances of this can be found in the work of John Gray and Richard Rorty, both of whom also reference Berlin.[10] This, I think, speaks well to the advantage of Williams' attempt to bring history into the business of philosophy. In this section I shall very briefly discuss this advantage before moving on in the next section to considering how Williams leverages his proposed style of historical philosophical critique for the purposes of an inquiry into liberal pluralism along those lines proposed in his second, and favored, interpretation of Berlin.

For Williams, the path from pluralism to liberalism is a function of contingent practical effort, and so should be construed on a historical view that models explanation in terms of historical understanding, rather than rational entailment. In urging that we must engage pluralism historically, Williams did not intend to suggest that historical engagement is opposed to philosophical engagement. Rather, for Williams, the two work together. He writes in one late essay: “[H]istory helps philosophical understanding, or is part of it. Philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient” (2000a, p. 192). Or again in another: “I very much prefer that we should retain the category of philosophy and situate ourselves within it, rather than pretend that an enquiry which addresses these issues with a richer and more imaginative range of resources represents ‘the end of philosophy’” (2000b, p. 211).

What can history, construed as collaboration with philosophy, help us with? Williams’ answer is that history helps us understand our present by way of our past. History helps us, employing one of Williams’ technical phrases, “make sense” of ourselves, and also of others quite unlike us, though making sense of ourselves and making sense of others involve two different kinds of making sense.[11] History, at least when it is used to make sense of ourselves, helps us judge ourselves better, because it helps us to better understand who we are.

Not a project in pure rationality, history for Williams is rather a project in historical rationality. History helps us understand the rationality internal to who we are, which is to say that it helps us understand our internal reasons, which are the only reasons whose tug we feel.[12] Expressing this view in connection with pluralism, Williams wrote, “it must itself always be a political and historical question, how far conditions will allow that form of liberalism, or indeed any other, to exist or to achieve anything” (1996, p. 138). Understanding the liberalism whose reasons we are now inside requires, Williams urged, understanding liberalism historically.

Why historically rather than purely rationally? Because a model of purely rational explanation is insufficient to answer questions as big as this one. That is a point, of course, which remains to be shown. I cannot show that point here in any kind of general way.[13] But

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I can refer to the particular discussion in the last section, insofar as it was suggested there that a purely rational approach fails to bring the relationship between pluralism and liberalism into view in any kind of useful way. For that approach either fails to explain the real problem, or it succeeds in explaining the problem but only on an ideal level.

The Historical-Philosophical Analysis of Liberal Pluralism

Williams’ work in bringing history into philosophy suggests that the understanding that history yields is not helpfully conceptualized in terms of rational truths which we would be plainly irrational to ignore so much as in terms of historical truths which we would do well to be truthful to. When we apply this historical understanding in, say, developing a genealogy of liberal pluralism, what we will find may be surprising. For we will find not so much that liberalism itself is true or that it is a truth that is entailed by pluralism, but rather that liberalism is truthful to something, particularly to something in pluralism, or something that we meet in pluralism, and something that we meet there by way of historical inquiry. This has to do with what Williams must mean when he says of Berlin’s liberalism that it is better expressed “not so much in terms of truth… but in terms of truthfulness” (1978, p. xviii).

Purely rational models of understanding, be it that of the philosopher who argues that pluralism rationally entails liberalism or that of the cynical relativist whose standards for rationality are the same but disagrees about what the facts are, do not in fact take pluralism seriously. They take pluralism to be either a non-problem or a relatively easy problem. But for Williams, pluralism is a very deep problem indeed. Confronting it requires confronting ourselves, particularly as we are conditioned by our histories. When we thus confront ourselves, we can come to see that our liberalism indeed takes our pluralism seriously. This is not the claim that liberalism is somehow entailed by pluralism rationally or even that it is thus entailed historically (whatever that might mean). Rather, the view is the historical one that liberalism takes pluralism seriously. History helps us see how liberalism is oriented by pluralism. It thus helps us see why liberalism is valuable for us insofar as we find ourselves amidst pluralism.

What does it mean to say that liberalism is oriented by pluralism, understood in terms of deep conflicts of values, ideals, and interests? The point is not quite the idea that pluralism as a condition plus historical understanding yields liberalism as a normative principle or set of principles. Rather, Williams’ idea is that the history of pluralism and liberalism suggests that liberalism is more attractive than any other candidate view currently proposed as a way of responding to pluralism. This is because liberalism helps us to accept the fact of deep pluralism without losing a sense of the value of normative critique. This has much to do with liberalism’s project of affirming the two not always compatible goals of private liberty and public authority.

To explain, recall the distinction above between liberalism as a normative project and liberalism as a project enabling normative critique. To now cash out that distinction, liberalism accommodates pluralism not as a first-order norm that obligates us to respect pluralism, but rather as a second-order enabling condition that makes possible normative critique in the context of pluralism. Thus liberalism does not obligate us to affirm pluralism nor does it obligate us to affirm anything on the basis of pluralism. Liberalism does not endorse pluralism but rather accommodates itself to pluralism in such a way as to institute conditions of possibility for normativity without foundational unity. And note that although the terminology of ‘condition of possibility’ here might suggest a transcendental orientation, my view is that this conception is indeed consistent with the more empirical skepticism characteristic of Williams. Williams’ project certainly is critical, in Kant’s sense, yet without being transcendental. There are, after all, historical conditions of possibility which are not themselves transcendental.[14] For Williams, then, liberal pluralism forms what we might think of as a historical condition of possibility, or set of conditions of possibility, for nonfoundational normative critique.

This idea, or something quite like it, is central to one of Williams’ later essays in which he directly addresses the divide that separates pluralism from foundationalism in contemporary political theory:

> Once we regard the ethical life we now have as a genuinely historical and local structure, one that is peculiarly self-conscious about its own origins and potentialities, we shall have less temptation to assume that it is a satisfactorily functioning whole; and we shall be more likely to recognize that some widely accepted parts of it may stand condemned in the light of perfectly plausible extrapolations of other parts. (1992, p. 36)
The strength of liberalism is not so much that it tells us what to do or how to live. Such a first-order injunction would obviously fly in the face of the pluralism that is at the heart of who we are. Liberalism’s strength is that it leaves us space to work out for ourselves the normative structures of our political practices in the face of what would otherwise be a debilitating pluralism. Williams continues:

> Once the resultant picture of ethical thought without foundationalism is made historically and socially realistic, in particular by registering it in the categories of modernity, it provides a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers. (1992, p. 37)

Williams amelioratively offers liberalism as enabling normative political critique. Justice thus becomes something we achieve down here amongst ourselves as a product of our own initiative.[15]

The claim that liberalism is oriented by pluralism but not entailed by it marks the difference between the historicist and rationalist perspectives in philosophy detailed across the previous two sections. This difference might incline us to put an objection to Williams’ central claim that liberalism is a more attractive way of responding to pluralism than any other candidate view now on offer. The objection is that Williams seems unable to offer a demonstrative refutation of the critic who disagrees with his claim that liberalism is an attractive response to pluralism. In meeting this objection, it would be a mistake to attempt to satisfy a purely rational condition of argumentation. Such critics should be challenged not on the terrain of pure rationality but rather on the richer terrain of empirical historicity. If the disagreeable philosopher, or the dyspeptic cynic, means to urge the point that pluralism in no way entails liberalism given that other options are available to the member of the pluralistic society, then the reply must simply be that they have missed the point. Of course there are other possible options. Of course liberalism is not the only possibly rational response to pluralism. Of course we cannot rationally show that liberalism is the most rational response to pluralism. But all of that has always been perfectly obvious to most of us. Nobody, neither Williams nor us, could have missed that. Not having missed it, the point is that this is all beside the point. We thus need to change the conversation in order to bring more salient matters back into view. We can do this by refusing to meet the objection head on and working to shift the territory of philosophical explanation from the rational spaces of a winnowed philosophy to the historical spaces of a more humanistic and capacious philosophy. This is the only terrain on which to effectively compare liberalism against anti-liberal racisms, anti-liberal patriarchies, anti-liberal socialisms, and anti-liberal capitalisms.

Here is how Williams puts the point, in another context, in his *Truth and Truthfulness*:

> [W]e have to appeal to a historical story about our situation, about the origins, development, and character of modernity. As with all large-scale historical interpretations, we could not properly convince anyone of this story, or of the need for this story rather than another, without telling it, and if we told it, we would be claiming that it was truthful. (2002, p. 263-4)

Once we tell our story, the rational philosopher and their cynical counterpart can of course still ask for further justification beyond that provided by our historical explanation. But Williams thinks it is just a mistake to give in to their demands. Sometimes history offers the best possible, indeed sometimes the only possible, justification we might have. Consider what could even count as satisfactory to a severely skeptical questioner who will not let themselves feel the force of historical explanations. Williams realizes that his view will not satisfy some rational philosophers, and some cynical counterparts, because it will feel too circular for their liking. He responds, continuing from the passage just cited: “Is that a circle? If so, it is the circle of the horizon within which any such speech must occur: one cannot blast someone into seeing the point” (2002, p. 264). It cannot possibly be the case that circularity need always be vicious. There are plenty of instances where we trace the orbit of a circle inside of which we already find ourselves. This strikes me as an important insight. Aside from Williams, it is largely absent in contemporary analytic political philosophy. What it amounts to is the idea that it is a mistake to even so much as raise an objection to a genealogical argument before you first acknowledge where you actually find yourself historically situated. Evaluation of the normative content of practices depends crucially on whether or not one finds oneself situation inside or outside of those practices.[16] If we find ourselves inside a constellation of political practices, such as those characteristic of contemporary liberal pluralistic societies, then we should not expect of ourselves that we might be able to crawl outside of that
constellation so as to evaluate it from the outside. Similarly, if we find ourselves entirely outside of some other constellation, we should not expect that our negative endorsement of that other constellation from within our own can crawl of its own accord inside the thinking of those situated within the other constellation. This does not entail an endorsement of relativism. Rather what it involves is the idea that historical situation matters to the practice of political evaluation. This is part of why history matters so much for political philosophy.

The account of philosophical-historical critical inquiry offered by Williams remain, in many ways, at the formal level. For instance, although Williams emphasizes the importance of telling a historical story, he does not himself often tell it (or, rather, not all of it). In the case of liberal pluralism, the history to which Williams appeals in many of his writings is the history of our modern liberal and pluralist culture. What this history suggests is that liberalism takes pluralism seriously, indeed more seriously than any other candidate theory of politics. But, to be fair, the history does not yet fully show this, for Williams never wrote it. Histories are products of inquiries, even if they are about real facts concerning the past.

An Unwritten Genealogy of Liberal Pluralism

Though Williams never completed the project, the success of much of his work depends on his proposed genealogy of liberalism and pluralism in modern society. He was planning something quite like this before he died. Some of the material that was to go into that book was collected in the posthumously-assembled In the Beginning was the Deed (2005).[17] In the introduction to that volume the editor explains that,

> Williams was working on his next book to the very last moment. It was to have been on politics…. [T]he book would not have been on theory alone. He intended to reflect more widely on the ways in which his thinking about politics had been affected by his experiences in the political, intellectual, and artistic life of post-war Europe and America. (Hawthorn 2005, p. xix)

It is not extraordinary to surmise that this book would have been, as the essays collected therein attest, a genealogy of modern politics, focusing especially on liberalism and pluralism and their relation.

Lacking that genealogy, we can nevertheless advance at least two claims on Williams’ behalf. Neither claim is definitive: both are tentative. The first is that the proposed genealogy to which Williams appealed in his historical explanations of how liberalism takes pluralism seriously involves a story that is, at least as initially sketched, very plausible. Williams is right that we cannot pretend to convince anyone historically without actually telling the history, but one must start that telling somewhere, and my claim is just that Williams started with a very plausible hypothesis. The second, and by far more important, claim is that this genealogy is not only plausible, but also is likely more plausible than any other candidate genealogy concerning the same present problem. The result of Williams’ genealogy would have been to the effect that liberalism takes pluralism more seriously than any other contemporary political program.

It is hard to believe that the genealogy of any other contemporary political program would explicate greater accommodation to pluralism, or that the genealogy of liberal pluralism would show that liberalism failed to take pluralism very seriously indeed, even if there are of course many moments where liberalism failed to take pluralism seriously enough.

These are genealogical matters, which is to say that they are matters of both reason and history, in contrast to being purely rational issues. If Williams’ work teaches us anything, then it is that we cannot even so much as raise the latter issues without beginning to explore the former. It also teaches us that exploring the former cannot take place on the model of assessing the latter issues, for the forms of evaluation and explanation in each case are different. What we need to further the argument at this point is a real genealogy, and not just a hypothetical speculation. Unfortunately, that is beyond my scope here, just as it was unfortunately beyond the scope of Williams’ life. Also beyond my scope, though certainly of interest, would be a detailed discussion of how such a genealogy would enable us to respond to recent scholarly contributions concerning pluralism and of how such a genealogy would be positioned with respect to the most recent developments in liberal political theory.

There is much of interest that I am unable to address here, largely because I must remain content at present to merely gesture in the direction of Williams’ unwritten genealogy of liberal pluralism. This gesture, at least, will enable me to make a final point concerning the capacity of liberalism to accommodate deep pluralism. The point is this: there is nothing keeping us now from taking up the task of writing that unwritten genealogy. It would be a tribute to Williams’ insights as a thinker who
was both philosophical and historical if future debates over these matters took place not on the unsustainable terrain of ideal conceptual analysis (as if a philosopher has ever solved any real political problem simply by winning an argument with their peers) but rather on the more enriched terrain where philosophy and history meet amidst a variety of projects including: genealogical explanation, humanistic inquiry, and, of course and as ever, rational conceptual analysis.

Such a genealogy of modern liberal pluralism would have to include, at a minimum, a rich sense of the history of liberalism and pluralism, and their relation with one another in modernity. In order to vindicate liberal pluralism, as was Williams’ wont, this genealogy would need to show at least two things, one concerning pluralism, the other concerning liberalism. First, it would need to show that pluralism is now something of an unavoidable condition of modern political life, as well as when pluralism thus became unavoidable. This aspect of the genealogy would no doubt include extensive coverage of the Reformation in the fifteenth century but also of Romanticism in the nineteenth century and then the massively rising tide of the politics of nationality in the early twentieth century and of identity in the late twentieth century. Second, this genealogy would need to show how liberalism, both as a formal political doctrine and as an assemblage of political technologies of governance, constituted a unique form of response to these conditions of pluralism. This aspect of the genealogy would no doubt include extensive coverage of liberal theorists such as Locke and Mill, but also of liberal practices, institutions, and strategies as embodied in freedoms of publication and association, ideas of anti-discrimination, and basic ideas of any liberal culture such as due process and private property. Such a genealogy, indeed any genealogy, would be quite a substantial undertaking.

What such a genealogy would provide, if Williams was right in his final metaphilosophical intuitions concerning the twain of reason and history, is an enriched terrain for evaluating liberalism, pluralism, and their relation in contemporary political forms of liberal pluralism. Williams’ view seems to have been that contemporary discussions of liberal pluralism remain impoverished, because lacking in historical sensibility. This does not mean that philosophy itself is or must remain impoverished. It means rather that we, which is to say we liberal pluralists, remain impoverished ourselves if draw our understandings of who we are only through the narrow sieve of an unnecessarily incomplete conception of philosophy. This is why, for Williams, “philosophy, in order to do its business, must move into history” (2002, p. 173). It follows from this that political and moral philosophy concerned with liberal pluralism, in order to do its business, must move into the genealogical history of liberal pluralism. This seems to me a fitting and energetic task for contemporary moral and political philosophy.[18]

Notes
1. Williams also helps us recognize that there are many forms of relativism; see Williams (1985, chapter 9).
2. See Williams (1985, chapter 8) and Williams (1978, p. xv).
3. See James arguing that claims and obligations are “coextensive” (1891, p. 617) with similar implications for the metaphysics of morals. But whereas James sees obligations as flowing merely from claims, Berlin sees them as flowing from rootedness in human forms of life, and these are obviously two quite different routes to objectivity.
4. I have benefited from Robert Talisse’s (2004, 2010a, 2010b) critiques of liberal pluralism on these matters, though I disagree with his conclusions that liberal pluralism fails and that liberal perfectionism is the only viable alternative left once it fails.
7. For example, Robert Talisse recently writes that, “Berlin’s corpus contains repeated attempts to establish the entailment from value pluralism to liberalism” (2010a, p. 303). Talisse is strongly critical of this attempt to derive liberalism from pluralism. I have learned much from his critique. But I strongly dissent from his interpretation of Berlin. Talisse does not mention Williams, though he would have done well to do so.
9. I discuss Williams’ attempt to bring history into philosophy in much greater detail in Koopman (2010b).
10. Gray writes, drawing on Berlin, that “it is in the historical reality of a human subject which conceives choice-making to be centrally constitutive of its identity, rather than in any supposed universal inference from the truth of value-pluralism to the supreme value of choice itself, that liberalism is best grounded, if a ground for it be sought” (1995, p. 160). And Rorty writes, also referencing Berlin, that “an ideally liberal polity... would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization—those of the past and those envisaged by utopians” (1989, p. 53). It is not insignificant that Berlin would be a common reference point for late twentieth-century historicist philosophers addressing themselves to the relation between liberalism and pluralism.
11. On history as helping us to “make sense” of ourselves and of others, see Williams (2002, chapter 10; 2005, p. 11).
12. This suggests a connection, which I here leave unexplored, to Williams’ (1979b) discussion of internal and external reasons.
13. I discuss this more general feature of Williams’ conception of historicist philosophy in Koopman (2010b).
14. For a discussion of this point about critical history and critical transcendentality as they appear in Kant and in Foucault, the general outlines of which I also take to apply to Williams, see Koopman (2010a).
15. For further discussion of this idea of Williams as a meliorist see Koopman (2009a, chapter 6) comparing Williams to the pragmatist philosophers (especially James and Dewey) on this point.
16. As I discuss with respect to both Williams and Foucault in Koopman (2009b), this point has some bearing on the common view that genetic reasoning is fallacious because of its confusion of genesis and justification.
17. On liberalism and pluralism see especially Chapters 3-5 and 7-10.
18. For comments on an earlier version of this article I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal as well as the journal’s editor. I would also like to thank the graduate students in my Fall 2010 seminar on pluralism at the University of Oregon for enriching discussions of these matters.

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