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Williams, Bernard. *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*. Selected and edited by Geoffrey Hawthorne. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. xx+174. \$29.95 (cloth).

In the Beginning Was the Deed is the first to be published of three posthumous volumes of Bernard Williams's papers. Its general topic is political philosophy, the subject of a book that Williams was working on during the last years of his life. Williams never completed that book, but this collection gives us a good sense of where he was heading. It consists of articles and lectures, most of relatively recent vintage, that develop a clear and powerful theme about the shortcomings of contemporary political philosophy and how to correct them. Williams earned a reputation over the years as a philosophical gadfly in the field of ethics. This volume should extend that reputation to the field of political philosophy, where he issues an even more provocative challenge to conventional wisdom.

The target of Williams's critique is a general approach to political philosophy he characterizes as "political moralism," an approach that he believes now dominates academic discussions of the subject in most philosophy departments and law schools. Advocates of political moralism treat political philosophy as "something like applied morality" (2, 77). Some, like utilitarians, see politics as a means of enacting the true principles of morality. Others, like Rawls and Dworkin, treat politics as something that needs to be structured by a set of basic, if far less comprehensive, moral truths. But whatever their differences, both groups agree that the job of the political philosopher is to identify the moral principles that should shape our political judgment.

Williams, not surprisingly, describes his alternative to political moralism as a form of "political realism." Examples of this approach to political philosophy include Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear," the subject of one of the essays in the collection, and Max Weber's ethic of responsibility. Political realism, as Williams understands it, draws its political morality from an analysis of the unique social relations that structure political life, rather than from judgments about how far politics will allow us to extend independently derived moral principles. As such, it does more than merely remind philosophers of uncomfortable facts of political life that may pose limits to their moral ambition. (After all, a political moralist like Rawls acknowledges such limits by beginning with what he calls "the fact of pluralism.") It insists, instead, that political morality needs to begin by identifying these facts and exploring their implications. The political realist may sometimes end up repeating "platitudes about politics." But that, Williams insists, "is just the point: political theory should shape its account of itself more realistically to what is plitudinously politics" (13). Failure to do so keeps us from understanding the real moral challenges that political life poses.

Despite the Machiavellian resonance of the term, Williams's political realism thus does not require that we abandon reflection on how we ought to live in favor of how we actually do live. For what makes political philosophy realistic, according to Williams, is its focus on the structure of distinctly political relationships, rather than any assumptions about the

self-interested motivations of human action. The problem with political moralism, from this point of view, is not that it asks moral questions but that it asks the wrong moral questions.

The papers collected in this volume do not provide us with anything like a systematic elaboration of this alternative approach to political philosophy. So I doubt that they will be very persuasive to readers who, unlike myself, are not already inclined in this direction. But they do give us a taste of how Williams would have applied this approach to some basic issues in political philosophy. His reflections on two of these issues, legitimacy and political disagreement, are especially interesting and merit attention, even from those readers who may be skeptical about his more general point about political realism. Williams develops these ideas rather cautiously, as if feeling his way over new ground--which it clearly represents for him. But it is wonderful to see a scholar of such eminence venture out modestly into new territory, rather than rest content with lecturing us from already conquered heights.

Political legitimacy, Williams declares, is the first problem of political life. Moreover, it is first "in essence," not just in time, since it is a problem that needs to be solved "all the time" in ever-shifting circumstances, rather than just by the establishment of foundational principles (3). The problem is relatively simple but has profound consequences for the way in which we lead our lives in political societies. We need a common coercive power to protect us from disorder, but we rightly fear that any concentration of power in the hands of others may recreate the terror that it was supposed to alleviate. A legitimate state must, therefore, do two things: develop means of maintaining a reasonable degree of social order and find a way of persuading its members that the power that it uses to create that order will not be used to terrorize them. Constructing a sufficiently concentrated form of coercive power that people will still trust to be used to protect them is the first and never-ending task of political life.

This "basic legitimation demand," as Williams characterizes it, cannot be met by any single set of moral principles. For what amounts to a reasonable degree of social order changes with the capacity of states--which leads to the paradoxical result that liberals tend to demand much more order from legitimate states than many of their autocratically minded predecessors. Similarly, what counts as a threat to individuals from the state will depend largely on what kind of other threats to individuals are lurking out there. Finally, any moral judgment about the appropriate standards of political legitimacy has to determine the right balance between concentration and limitation of state power to deal with current problems. American liberals sometimes talk as if such a balance, say, between free expression and state regulation of threatening and provocative speech, can be derived from general moral principles. But Williams rightly insists that it inevitably reflects "political judgments" about the current situation, "above all in telling the difference between the point at which the enemies of liberalism have been given only enough rope to hang themselves, and the point at which they have enough rope to hang someone else" (19).

As for political disagreement, Williams seeks to emphasize the ways in which it differs from moral disagreement. Moral disagreement leads to argument, if we are interested in persuading those who disagree with us, or indifference, if we are not. Political disagreement, in contrast, leads not just to argument but to opposition, since it focuses on what shall be imposed on us by the state. A political "decision does not in itself announce that the other party was morally wrong or, indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that they have lost." Political deliberation may provide a way of cooling and moderating the clash of opposing views. But it is merely a step in the process of deciding whose views will prevail in determining how to dispose of a society's common coercive power. It, therefore--and rightly--generates opposition and competition, not just argument. "Political difference," Williams concludes, "is of the essence of politics, and

political difference is a relation of political opposition, rather than, in itself, a relation of intellectual or interpretative disagreement" (78).

This is the kind of "platitude about politics" that Williams believes political moralists tend to forget, as he demonstrates in an especially valuable essay about the tensions between equality and liberty. Liberal democratic politics, Williams argues there, require a great deal of what he calls "double-mindedness," by which he means the ability to see both the moral value of one's political judgments and the costs, in loss of liberty, when they are imposed on those who lose in the political process.

We need to bear in mind that when their activities are restricted in the name of objectives which they seriously do not accept, they are indeed being coerced against their will, and that when they describe that as a loss of liberty, we should not simply tell them that they are wrong. Our relation to them is not that of offering them instruction in reading a document which we believe we can read better than they can. It is that of sharing a society with them under some degree of liberty, and an expression of that is our sharing with them a concept of liberty which allows us to say that there has been a cost when (at the least) what we believe is fight has to be imposed against the will of people who do not think it is right and who are adversely affected by it. (126-27)

Ronald Dworkin is the specific target of Williams's criticism in this essay. But it is clearly directed more broadly at defenders of Rawlsian "public reason" and the more moralistic versions of deliberative democracy, people who think that we show respect to those who disagree with us by treating them as participants in a moral argument seeking, if never finding, some kind of agreement. Treating people this way, Williams is suggesting, may show them respect as moral beings. But it disrespects them as political beings. For, as democrats, "we should not think that what we have to do is simply to argue with those who disagree: treating them as opponents can, oddly enough, show more respect for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers" who have misunderstood the issues at hand (13).

Interestingly, Williams points to this notion of double-mindedness already in his famous 1962 essay, "The Idea of Equality," which may explain why the editor decided to include it in the volume and place it directly before the essay on the relationship between liberty and equality. Williams argues there that it would be a serious mistake to seek some way of tweaking our concept of equality that would eliminate the tensions he has elaborated between the ideals of equality of opportunity and equality of respect. "It is an uncomfortable situation," he declares, when we have to take into account the costs as well as the benefits of pursuing our ideals. "But the discomfort is just that of genuine political thought. It is no greater with equality than it is with liberty or any other noble and substantial political ideal" (114). Political moralism, Williams argues in this collection, undermines "genuine political thought" (114) by seeking to eliminate this discomfort and the "double-mindedness" (126) it fosters.

At one point in this collection, Williams tells the story of how, after a glass or two, he came to agree with a colleague (Michael Stocker) that their "work consisted largely of reminding moral philosophers of truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings except moral philosophers." After a few more glasses, he adds, they also agreed "that it was less than clear that this was the most useful way in which to spend one's life" (52). However accurate the first of these conclusions may be, I cannot endorse the second. First of all, it is no mean trick to philosophize without losing touch with the commonsense truths that are most relevant to the subject at hand. Second, and more important, for Williams these truths were always starting points for reflection, rather than means of embarrassing his colleagues. In this collection, as in all

of his other works, Williams shows how much more interesting our philosophic reflections on the problems of human life can be when they begin with life's most mundane and unavoidable experiences.

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