Towards a Unified Interpretation of Bernard Williams's Philosophical Projects

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Abstract

This article proposes an interpretive key to Bernard Williams's philosophy. It posits the idea that at its core, his philosophy consists in the following interconnected epistemological and metaphysical views: (1) scientific realism, (2) metaphysical naturalism, (3) methodological pluralism, (4) anthropological contingentism and (5) a post-analytical/humanistic understanding of philosophy. These are extracted in the first two sections. The third section provides a demonstration of how this interpretation can be applied vis-à-vis Williams's critique of morality. The text concludes with some critical remarks on Williams's metaphilosophical position.

Keywords: *Bernard Williams, science, philosophy, contingency, ethics*

> *. . . the natural world is not designed as our home*
> Bernard Williams [16, p. 111]

Introduction

Bernard Williams was one of the leading figures in contemporary philosophy, making significant contributions in many areas, particularly ethics. Yet it is striking that we do not have a comprehensive interpretation of his work. No doubt there are reasons for this state of affairs. His predilection for skepticism and anti-theory, since his philosophy is in

large part critical, is one of the most compelling. The other is his peculiar, essayistic style, often troublesome to a commentator. So if one wishes to remain faithful to the spirit of Williams's writings, one may find the pursuit of a comprehensive interpretation daunting. As a result, his writings are usually interpreted in isolation from any larger structure they may be a part of, as contributions limited to a particular debate [5, p. 73].[1]

There are reasons, however, not to follow such an approach. If Williams's skepticism grew out of more basic claims and presuppositions, they will reveal the core of his views. And if this core is successfully extracted or reconstructed, it could link together major themes of his philosophy, thus improving our understanding of it. I propose an interpretation of Williams's philosophy conducted in this spirit. Concentrating mainly on ideas developed by Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [16] as well as his essay *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* [20, pp. 180-199] among other texts, I shall advance the hypothesis that certain interconnected epistemological and metaphysical beliefs are at the core of Williams's philosophy.[2] In the first two sections of this paper, I will extract these core epistemological and metaphysical beliefs. In the third section, I will use one example to show how those beliefs can provide an interpretive key for understanding the larger structure of Williams's opus.

1   Science, Philosophy and the Absolute Conception

The views that form the core of Williams's philosophy appear to be shaped by his understanding of differences between science and philosophy. This account is elaborated in his discussion of scientism and pragmatism, which Williams interprets as both extreme and narrow accounts of a rather complex matter. In this context Williams introduces the absolute conception of the world.[3]

A. The Rejection of Scientism

Let us start with scientism. The term is vague. Williams distinguishes some characteristics of scientism that were or still are common in his own analytical tradition: scientism as a matter of writing style; scientism as a way of teaching or conducting philosophy (through imitating scientific procedures); scientism as ahistoricism [20, pp. 180-184, 204-205]. All of

this, however, is derivative of a more substantial view. This view seems to Williams to consist of the following beliefs (SB = scientistic belief):

(SB1) Science is a reliable and successful cognitive discourse.

(SB2) The reliability and success of science are grounded on and secured by its methodology, which aims at an objective description of the world. Scientific methodology includes empirical data, logical scrutiny, repeatability of experiments and so forth, thus, ensuring reliable cognitive contact with reality. Contingent, non-epistemic factors do not influence the process of formulation, justification and acceptance of this or that scientific claim or theory in any significant way. These positive characteristics of science are confirmed by its technological achievements.

(SB3) Therefore, we have reasons to think that science actually does describe reality in an objective manner. Thus, the intellectual authority of science is justified.

(SB4) In comparison, other discourses, such as philosophy or the humanities, do not appear to be as reliable or successful; on the contrary, their outcomes seem to be largely contingent.

(SB5) The overall defectiveness of other discourses must follow from their defective methodologies. Contingent, non-epistemic factors influence the process of formulation, justification and acceptance of respective claims and theories. The intellectual authority of these discourses is therefore not justified.

(SB6) In general, science is superior to other discourses [*Ibid.*, pp. 184-190].

Williams himself accepts SB1–3 as representing a correct view of science. At the same time he rejects SB6. To accept SB6, one needs to take SB4 and SB5 for granted, that is, that quality of cognitive achievement in objective terms is an appropriate ground on which to compare science and other discourses. In other words, Williams ascribes to scientism the claim that valid intellectual authority inheres only in a discourse that delivers an outcome approximating to an objective description of the world. If there is any hope for philosophy (and humanities, but for our purposes, let us put them aside) to claim intellectual authority, it would have to assimilate itself to the superior paradigm and adopt its methodology.

In Williams's view, scientism errs through "a misunderstanding of the relations between philosophy and the natural sciences which tends to assimilate philosophy to the aims, or at least the manners, of the sciences" [*Ibid.*, p. 182]. It does not follow that the rather uncontroversial cognitive superiority of science in describing natural phenomena makes it superior in other functions that intellectual discourses can accomplish. Nor can we infer the overall defectiveness of other discourses. Scientism assumes a monistic standard of evaluation, as if every intellectual activity should have as its goal the most objective possible description of the world. But this is, Williams claims, certainly false. Our intellectual discourses are linked to a variety of aims, needs and aspirations. Science is especially concerned with our cognitive goals,[4] but there are other, no less important goals. It is not unarguable, and may perhaps even be misguided, to think that science is well equipped to satisfy in particular the typically human, overarching need to make sense of life and the varied activities it consists of. Science is limited here because those other human aims, needs and aspirations are strongly tied to a less objective and more local way of apprehending things than science is designed for. There is a space, then, for a discourse or a set of discourses that operate within such a local outlook and aim at helping us to meet such a need [*Ibid.*, pp. 186-187]. How much this can be satisfied through the intellectual resources of other discourses — for instance, philosophical analysis and insights — is a question whose gravity was appreciated by Williams [16, pp. 1-4, 21]. I will return to this issue later.

B. The Rejection of Pragmatism

Pragmatism, associated in Williams's writings with Putnam and Rorty, takes a different approach to the problem of the relations between philosophy and science. For Williams, the approach of pragmatism consists in the following beliefs on these relations (PB = pragmatist belief):

(PB1) Each human discourse is a form of practice and as such it is guided by our goals and needs.[5]

(PB2) Our goals and needs are derivatives of the human way of life.[6]

(PB3) Therefore, there are no discourses within which it is possible to formulate a description of the world that is independent of the peculiarly human perspective; that is, there is no truly objective description of the world, even in science.

(PB4) Thus, no discourse should be taken as cognitively superior and therefore privileged in any sense.

(PB5) Therefore, various discourses have equal intellectual authority ([16, pp. 136-138] and [20, pp. 184-188]), if they are useful in obtaining the specific goals of their respective domains.

Pragmatism seems to offer a genuine pluralism in which each discourse has legitimate authority. According to Williams, however, like scientism, pragmatism too is committed to a monistic standard of evaluation. How is this possible? Pragmatists believe that no discourse, not even science, can arrive at an objective description of reality, for it is necessarily constrained by the peculiarly human way of apprehending the world, and thus its outcome is similarly constrained (PB1–3). The monistic standard is still implied, however counterintuitively, since it is argued that all discourses are equally unable to achieve an objective description of the world (PB4). Thus, no discourse has any claim to superiority on cognitive grounds. They are equally defective.

The pragmatist fears that if we grant superior cognitive authority to science, other discourses become obsolete. But this follows only on the assumption, rejected by Williams as we have seen, that non-scientific discourses should try to deliver an objective description of the world, that they compete with science in the same league. In Williams's view, pragmatism too does not provide a proper account of the plurality of our discourses, and thus fails truly to account for the distinctive goals that drive them [*Ibid.*, pp. 186-187]. We need, then, two things at once that neither scientism nor pragmatism offer because of their monistic assumptions: a reasonable justification of the authority of science, and an account of other discourses that retains their distinctiveness and intelligibility (if they are such). We need a more pluralistic image of things.[7]

C. The Absolute Conception and Scientific Realism

Williams's own account of the relations between science and philosophy is anchored in his defence of scientific realism, a position he holds in opposition to pragmatism. Although he shares with pragmatism what he called "the fundamentally Kantian insight that there simply is no conception of the world which is not conceptualized in some way or another" [*Ibid.*, p. 185], that is, that all discourses are grounded in a peculiarly human perspective of conceiving things, he discards the conclusion a pragmatist would draw from it, expressed in PB3. To accept

the pragmatist's conclusion, one has to assume that after we interpret our concepts in this Kantian spirit, we are unable to differentiate them with regard to their cognitive value. In Williams's view this is false, for even from within the human perspective we are able to distinguish concepts that are more or less dependent on it ([*Ibid.*, pp. 184-188] and [16, pp. 137-140]).

Compare, for instance, the concept of "republic" to the concept of "atom". The former is linked to a whole range of peculiarly human concepts such as "regime", "politics" or "government". To make sense of them, we need to refer to the human perspective or even to a human way of life or, at least, to a form of life which would be in many points very similar to ours. The same is not true about the latter. The reference to the human perspective or the human way of life does not play any significant role in its explanation.[8] Moreover, it is not unreasonable to presume that this kind of concept would be shared by any other possible race of rational investigators, even very alien to us, with regard to their cognitive apparatus.

Science, in principle, does not refer to concepts that are in any significant sense tied to the human perspective. Therefore, Williams claims, there are profound differences between various discourses concerning the kind of concepts they tend to deploy. This allows Williams to formulate what he calls "the absolute conception" of the world: a description of the world through concepts that are to a maximum degree independent of the human perspective. These are intended to describe the world "as it is anyway" in contrast to "as it seems to us" [*Ibid.*; 10]. A discourse that uses such concepts has a reasonable claim for at least some objectivity.

The absolute conception is in fact more substantial than that. Williams also posits that it would make sense of itself and various perspectives on the world — human, animal or alien. It would explain how they are possible and how they are related to it [16, pp. 139]. With this second feature the absolute conception becomes more ambitious and leads to some serious difficulties [2]. Leaving aside the difficulties for now, it should be asked what reasons, in Williams's view, we have to support the belief that science actually is a kind of discourse that is successfully conducted with the specific goal of reaching the description of the world "as it is anyway". Williams's general strategy is to show that scientific realism makes the most sense of certain substantial characteristics of science. Hence, it is reasonable to claim that objects and properties that science talks about do exist externally, independent of us, in the world "as it is anyway". And as such they are a part of the world in the sense

of the absolute conception [11].

Although it is not very sophisticated, one intuitive argument that we may use here is the unquestionable fact of our technical achievements. This is quite straightforward. Science would not deliver technical devices that so successfully operate in the world if their theoretical background had been wrong. Williams seems to think that this argument undermines the pragmatist approach from the beginning. But he is aware of the limits of this argument. It is counter-productive if establishing the proper grounds for a variety of intellectual authorities is our goal. In this light, of course, philosophy is doomed, but science itself seems to be less than we think it is [20, pp. 188-189].

The first serious argument refers to the level of intersubjective agreement that is reached in science. We may describe it as an argument from convergence. Williams writes:

> In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are.... [This explanation] does not turn on any difference in whether convergence will actually occur, and it is important that this is not what the argument is about [16, p. 136].

No doubt, the level of convergence in science is remarkable, at least in those fields with a rigorous methodology. However, Williams's point is not primarily about the actual level of convergence in science, or convergence that has happened in the history of science, although "[it] is quite hard to deny that that history displays a considerable degree of convergence" [*Ibid.*, p. 137]. His focus is on the reflective explanation of convergence in the realm of science. The most compelling explanation of it entails in fact the position of scientific realism. Within scientific discourse we agree on how things are, for there really are in the world objects and properties that science talks about. Our scientific beliefs are determined by cognitive contact with those objects and properties, since science is concerned with tracking the truth about them. The compelling force of this account lies in the fact that it allows us to make sense of three important characteristics of scientific theories: (1) they postulate the existence of certain objects, which is a fruitful explanatory move; (2) they deliver non-vacuous, substantial theories; (3) they open the possibility to provide a further explanation of how various perceptions based on different perspectives are possible [*Ibid.*, p. 139-140, 149-151].[9]

Consider, for instance, the scientific account of vision. Suppose we reject a realistic interpretation — the claim that vision is really about

detecting external objects and it has something to do with light, sense organs, the brain and so on, and thus different variants of vision are possible. We will find ourselves in all sorts of trouble, starting with the difficulty of thinking in concord with our non-realistic interpretation. On the other hand, if we accept the realistic interpretation of this scientific theory, then the three characteristics of scientific theories start to make sense. So the convergence in science is best explained in a way that presumes scientific realism. What explains convergence in science also justifies the whole enterprise; it indicates that science is what it seems to be, a cognitive discourse on reality [*Ibid.*, pp. 149-152].

The second argument invokes the history of science. Let me use a longer quotation to render what can be described as an argument from the error theory:

> The pursuit of science does not give any great part to its own history, and that it is a significant feature of its practice. . . . Of course, scientific concepts have a history: but on the standard view, though the history of physics may be interesting, it has no effect on the understanding of physics itself. It is merely part of the history of discovery.
> There is of course a real question of what it is for a history to be a history of discovery. One condition of its being so lies in a familiar idea, which I would put like this: the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement. I shall call an explanation which satisfies this condition *vindicatory*. In the particular case of the natural sciences, the later theory typically explains in its own terms the appearances which supported the earlier theory, and, furthermore, the earlier theory can be understood as a special or limited case of the later [20, p. 189].

This is an extension of the first argument, although it has an important new flavour. The argument is about the way we should understand the process of transition from one scientific theory to another, or about a proper understanding of the history of science in general. Compare a political transition, say, from the Russian Empire to the USSR. No doubt, advocates of both regimes supported their position with reasons. Maybe in some places there was even, at least before Bolshevik victory,

genuine discussion between the parties. But it is very unreasonable, or simply ignorant, to suggest that the former regime was replaced by the latter because both parties recognized the overall political superiority of the latter and the flaws of the former. On the contrary, many factors that do not count as reasons were involved in the process, for instance, violent acts, manipulations and pure contingencies, like the outcome of a battle. Now, the main difference between our political example and what happens in science consists in the fact that in the scientific world a change in a theory is recognized as necessary and is accepted by both parties, as both parties understand that there are cognitively relevant reasons involved in this process.

How does this argument support scientific realism? It seems to be the most compelling interpretative option: the transition is accepted by both parties, for there has been some real discovery, a cognitive contact with an external reality, that they both recognize. That contact reveals the limits and flaws of an older theory and, therefore, prompts everyone to replace it. We think, then, that we really do know why scientific theories are rejected. It is important to note the Popperian spirit of the argument: it is not formulated in terms of a false theory replaced by a true one, but rather in terms of a recognition of the limits and flaws of a rejected theory. Thus, it is an argument from the error theory. Once again, what explains the transition in science from one theory to another also justifies the scientific enterprise by showing that science is what it seems to be.

D. The Absolute Conception and Philosophy

Having argued for the idea of the absolute conception and the claim that science can, in principle, reach it, Williams undertakes a reflection on philosophy and the humanities. He seeks an answer to the following question: Are these discourses open to a realistic interpretation? That is, do their concepts mirror the objective world in the sense of the absolute conception? To answer this question, he analyses the possibility that the cognitive aspirations of philosophy could be supported as are those of science. Williams's own examples and arguments come from ethics and political philosophy, but he states that his considerations go further afield [*Ibid.*, pp. 190]. I take this to mean that his position, which I unpack in this and the following section, should be understood as a general account of philosophy[10] and the humanities, that is, of academic discourses other than the natural sciences. Therefore, in what follows I simply refer to philosophy.

Concerning the argument from convergence, we encounter a serious actual difference between science and philosophy. The amount of disagreement in philosophy is overwhelming. However, it goes much deeper than mere differences of opinion, since philosophy lacks convergence on methods and the status of the discipline itself. Consider, for instance, the difference between the Kantian and Aristotelian approaches to ethics or between analytical philosophers and postmodernists. Again, for Williams the problem is not so much about actual convergence or the lack of it in philosophy. Even if we enjoyed a much higher level of convergence in this field, the real issue would consist in explaining it [16, pp. 136].

An important difference between philosophical and scientific concepts comes to the fore in this context. Scientific concepts are presumed to be universal, so any fully developed human being, or arguably even a rational investigator from another species, should be able to deploy them if one is to some degree familiar with their theoretical framework. Regardless of any peculiarity he or she possesses, like cultural background, that is the case. Scientific concepts are, after all, presumed to express objective reality. The same is not true about philosophical concepts. There seems to be an intrinsic connection between the ability to deploy a particular set of philosophical concepts instead of an another and membership of a particular social world [*Ibid.*, pp. 138-150; 20, pp. 185-187]. Why is that? For each particular set of philosophical concepts we can imagine a person who would be a sympathetic observer of the people deploying them. This person would know a great deal about this group, would understand meanings, references, all the necessary conditions of utterance and the entire theoretical background, but would be unable sincerely to deploy the concepts in question himself. This sympathetic observer lacks

> [t]he capacities...involved in finding our way around in a social world, not merely the physical world, and this, crucially, means in some social world or other, since it is certain both that human beings cannot live without a culture and that there are many different cultures in which they can live, differing in their local concepts. [16, pp. 150]

Williams's idea is that philosophical concepts are not directly connected with objective reality, but are rather impinged upon by the particular culture or social world to which the subject belongs. Therefore they are local rather than universal as scientific concept are. Because cultural differences exist, the explanation for either agreement or disagreement

"will presumably have to come from the social sciences" [*Ibid.*]. This seems to mean that this explanation would not, at least primarily, involve cognitively relevant reasons. Rather, the differences or similarities between the way people are brought up or socialized would take priority. If there is a convergence, it is convergence on a shared form of social life.

Williams claims that an alternative to this way of thinking is the Aristotelian approach. It would assume that there are certain human universals that may ground a universal philosophical outlook, because regardless of our cultural differences, we all share a common human nature. The problem, however, with such an approach is that it would deliver very thin results, for human nature seems to be immensely flexible and allows human beings to develop differently under each culture and along many surprising patterns [*Ibid.*, pp. 30-53].[11] The best possible explanation, then, of either convergence (rare) or the lack of it (frequent) in philosophy entails an antirealistic understanding of the discipline.

What about the other argument? Can we read the history of philosophy in a way that supports the cognitive aspirations of philosophy? It seems, again, that this is not the case. Let me quote at length from Williams:

> Philosophy, at any rate, is thoroughly familiar with ideas which indeed, like all other ideas, have a history, but have a history which is not notably vindicatory.... If we ask why we use some concepts of this kind rather than others—rather than, say, those current in an earlier time—we may deploy arguments which claim to justify our ideas against those others: ideas of equality and equal rights, for instance, against ideas of hierarchy. Alternatively, we may reflect on an historical story, of how these concepts rather than the others came to be ours: a story (simply to give it a label) of how the modern world and its special expectations came to replace the *ancien regime*. But then we reflect on the relation of this story to the arguments that we deploy against the earlier conceptions, and we realize that the story is the history of those forms of argument themselves: the forms of argument, call them liberal forms of argument, are a central part of the outlook that we accept.
>
> If we consider how these forms of argument came to prevail, we can indeed see them as having won, but not necessarily as having won an argument. For liberal ideas to have won an argument, the representatives of the *ancien regime* would

have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a concep-
tion of something that the argument was about, and not just
in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the
way to order society. They would have had to agree that
there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which
liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better
expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as
radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at
least until late in the process. The relevant ideas of freedom,
reason, and so on were themselves involved in the change.
If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then
the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail—that is to
say, among other things, how these came to be our ideas—are
not vindicatory [20, pp. 190-191].

We saw that if a particular discourse has a vindicatory explanation of
its history, the diachronic alteration of outlooks involved satisfies certain
conditions. Science fits this model. Unfortunately, philosophy does not.
It is rarely the case that philosophers agree on what should be rejected
as a false belief or what counts as a cognitive improvement. Consider, for
instance, that there are reasonable contemporary proponents of such an
apparently anachronic position as metaphysical dualism. Moreover, one
of the distinctive features of philosophy is its constant engagement with
its own past, an example of which is the contemporary revival of virtue
ethics. So the idea that the history of philosophy is simply progressive is
not commonly accepted. But let us comment on Williams's own exam-
ple, the actual transition from hierarchical to liberal outlook (we should
note that it was not universal), as it is very instructive. The fact that
now in some places a majority accepts the liberal outlook and rejects
the former hierarchical view is close enough to scientific diachronic con-
vergence. Is there a vindicatory history behind this? Williams's answer
is negative. This seems to be explained by the phrase "until late in the
process". I take it to mean that because of the radical disagreement
between involved parties, including the basic terms in which this discord
should be expressed, the possibility of a consensus based on reason was
excluded from the very beginning. Since reason was excluded, I read
Williams's explanation of the later convergence as meaning that first,
historical changes altered the balance, and then produced enough social,
moral and political pressure to make life according to the former view
incompatible with the life of the majority of society. In other words, the
fact that we are now liberal is primarily explained by historical contin-

gency that "has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours" [*Ibid.*, p. 193], rather than by the success of an argument. If this is a general truth of philosophical outlooks, the history of philosophy is not vindicatory. Instead of a universal recognition of cognitive flaws and the limits of former theories, which would have supported their rejection and replacement, we only have a contingent history. And clearly, that is not enough to formulate a theory of error for philosophy. Thus, Williams is claiming that we cannot really support the cognitive aspirations of this discourse.

In Williams's view, a realistic reading of philosophical discourse or philosophical theories in terms of the absolute conception is unjustified, contrary to science. It is the case with philosophy that what explains its certain substantial features also undermines our belief that philosophy is what it seems to be — a genuine, cognitive discourse, again contrary to science. With this result, Williams effectively commits himself to a position of a scientific realist. Taking into account the way he supports this position as well as his ironic remarks on a conceivable anti-naturalist view (for instance in [23, pp. 301]) I see no other way than to interpret his commitment as meaning the acceptance of metaphysical naturalism, even if Williams's own words — in his typical, dialectical style - are more concerned with naturalism as an explanatory programme [24, pp. 22-27]. But his naturalism is not by any means a crude, reductive position. He searches for a more pluralistic image of things. Science is cognitively superior, but it does not follow that it is superior in every aspect that matters to human beings. To expand this point and to say some final words on the core of Williams's philosophical project, it is necessary now to appeal to a concept that has already appeared in the previous paragraph, the concept of contingency. I take this to be an important element in the structure I aim to elucidate.

2   *Contingency and the Limits of Philosophy*

The fact that the concept of contingency plays an important role in Williams's project has not gone unnoticed by other philosophers ([3], [13]). Williams's increasing interest in contingency was perhaps determined by his increasing engagement in Nietzschean topics (for instance ([23, pp. 299-337] and [24, pp. 12-19]). Although there is no *expressis verbis* theory of contingency in his writings, there seems to be enough material there to justify the interpretative move that I advance in this section: mainly, the attribution to Williams of a certain anthropologi-

cal view as one of his key presumptions. I call this view *anthropological contingentism*. What I have in mind is that Williams interprets human beings as radically contingent creatures. Of course, this formulation requires an elaboration.

A. Some Preliminary Remarks on Williams's View on Contingency

The term "contingency" has a long history and a technical meaning in philosophy. It appears in many different contexts, including natural theology, metaphysics and (the philosophy of) logic. However, it would be more useful and also consistent with Williams's thought to use the term in a rather ordinary sense, as a generic term for phenomena that could have been different or might not have existed at all, if something in natural or actual history — or both — had not happened. In other words, I use "contingency" as a term to describe things that are mere facts. Williams was quite concerned with the historical contingency of our outlooks, practices and institutions [20, pp. 191-194]. In addition, he was very much aware that they are rooted in — and at the same time they transmute — various human capacities, which are in turn a product of a contingent process, the biological evolution of our species [23, p. 79-81]. I will now examine this view in detail.

It is helpful to begin by noting that Williams was an atheist. This is perhaps clear from his commitment to metaphysical naturalism and the way he justifies it. Furthermore, here and there Williams offers a few reasons for his rejection of Christianity. Let us discuss them briefly. First, the acceptance of Christianity entails the state of mind called "faith", which for him has quite an unintelligible form. To Williams, having faith means both to affirm an account of something — since I need to have some idea of the things I believe in — and not to affirm it, as these things are supposed to radically exceed human cognitive abilities by their nature [20, pp. 3-21]. Second, from the viewpoint of believers, religious doctrines are systems of ultimately true beliefs, for they are shaped under the influence of a divine power. However, religious beliefs in fact evolve along with historical and cultural changes as all cultural items do. Williams was convinced that they are doomed to collapse due to the substantial incoherence of these two conflicting characteristics [16, pp. 32-33]. Third, Christianity endorses — in Williams's view, at least — unrealistic and misguided moral ideas such as that of the eternal, overarching moral law or of a moral subject who is primarily a spiritual agent and thus is autonomous vis-à-vis the empirical conditions of his or

her life. These ideas fail to survive the scrutiny of psychological realism favoured by Williams [22, pp. 94-95, 103-129]. Fourth, the religious idea of an afterlife has no desirable content as seen from the perspective of a human motivational system [21, pp. 82-100]. Seen from this angle, then, Christianity is either unintelligible or inconsistent with our moral and historical experience or both. I think that something along these lines might be argued as well against other religions.

It is worth noting that the rejection of theism, combined with metaphysical naturalism, excludes any profound, metaphysical or "cosmic" rationale behind the existence of human beings. Perhaps this is not a very optimistic view. We can compare it to Christian theism, in which all creatures are also understood as contingent, because God in principle could have decided not to bring them into existence. At the same time, their contingency is, so to speak, balanced by the fact that the creation happened by the agency of a being who is not contingent himself. In Williams's view, however, there is no such "staging" for our appearance and in this sense his position is radical ([18, pp. 109-110] and [3, pp. 32-38]).

B. Layers of Contingency[12]

The contingency of human beings occurs on several levels [3]. First of all, there is biological contingency. Because Williams was devoted to scientific realism and naturalism, it follows that he accepts the evolutionary explanation of our appearance due to chance and adaptation. Our capacities and adaptations could have been different or we could have not evolved at all as a species, according to this account, if our natural history had gone another way. However, this interpretative approach would not explain much, if it were all about biological contingency. The mere possibility that our natural history could have been different, or that we could have no natural history simply because we might not have appeared in the first place, is not very relevant, if our aim is to explain phenomena related to humans. After all, human beings do in fact exist as a species [*Ibid.*].[13]

Still, when we reflect on the appearance and functioning of human beings from the evolutionary perspective, some significant issues come to the fore. There is the question of whether the resources of such disciplines as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology are particularly useful in explaining more complex human practices. Williams's own answer is quite skeptical ([14, pp. 44] and [18, pp. 102-109]). It was not motivated

by any reservations about metaphysical naturalism. Rather, by questioning the usefulness of those disciplines for explaining complex human practices, Williams expresses his doubts about the reductive form of naturalism. In Williams's view, reductive naturalism is doomed to failure, because even the simplest ethological question about human beings entails the kind of reflection that exceeds a purely biological approach:

> When we get to the peculiarities of human beings, a special set of problems emerges. The huge innovation represented by *Homo sapiens* is the significance of non-genetic learning, which, with regard to both its nature and its effects, marks an overwhelming ethological difference between human beings and other animals. Every species has an ethological description, and *Homo sapiens* is no exception; but in this case, uniquely, you cannot tell the ethological story without introducing culture (consider, for instance, what is immediately involved in answering the question "In what sorts of places do they sleep?"). Consequently, the story is likely to differ significantly between groups of human beings, and in ways that typically involve history; in many cases, the human beings who are being described will also be conscious, in varying degrees, of that history. All this follows from the peculiar ethological character of this species [24, pp. 23-24].

If the reductive approach is out of question, any genuine understanding of our species necessarily involves reflection on its cultural environment. What is more, if there is a strong link between understanding our species and understanding its cultural milieux, it follows that this connection applies to understanding human history as well, for all cultures are entities that appear, exist, evolve and vanish in history, that is, not during natural history, but human history.

Having said that, we approach another level on which the contingency of human beings may be discerned, that of their cultural identity and the history that created it. To a great extent the exact form of any culture is always shaped by a variety of human undertakings, such as technical or conceptual innovations, customs laid down by extraordinary individuals or traditions, large-scale human endeavors like battles, trade policies and so on. Williams claims that if we trace the origins of cultural items, such as institutions or norms, we find out that "in the beginning was the deed" [17, pp. 23-28] — that they are contingent on human culture-creating action, i.e. the establishing of convention. This is true even if a particular cultural item is a response to a human universal, be it

limited resources or a biological need. This response, as is clear from the anthropological and historical data, could have been different ([18, pp. 79-81, 100-110] and [16, pp. 150-151]). Of course, it was moral culture that was at the center of Williams's attention, so let us move in that direction.

Williams was convinced that a moral culture inheres in the form of the moral dispositions of its members. These moral dispositions are instilled, preserved and transmitted by the processes of social upbringing and interaction, which help an individual to be a member of that culture. Moral dispositions shape the first-person perspective and imbue it with a moral content. This should not be understood as acquiring this or that set of moral beliefs. Rather, moral dispositions work one step before moral cognition, reasoning or acting. They are the necessary ground for those moral functions ([16, pp. 8-11, 20-22, 30-53, 93-119, 154-158, 185-186, 199, 201] and [20, pp. 67-75] and [6]). For instance, if I am disposed to treat a particular kind of behaviour as treacherous, it means that my moral framework conceptualizes this kind of behaviour as such. At one and the same time, my moral framework both inclines me to perceive the behavior as morally bad and triggers my emotional reaction to it. Only then do judgement, reasoning or action follow. Williams claims that moral dispositions are represented in language by so-called "thick" moral concepts, such as shame or bravery [16, pp. 8-11, 128-131, 140-155]. Thick concepts are an entanglement of description and evaluation,[14] and, being tied to moral dispositions, are culturally relative. They are contrasted with "thin" concepts, such as right or wrong, which are the product of abstract rational reflection. Without the additional context of a moral system, like Utilitarianism or Kantianism, thin concepts are hollow and cannot guide our conduct [*Ibid.*, pp. 123-131].

I shall not treat this topic in detail.[15] It is important, however, to note that if thick concepts are tied to moral dispositions, then the ability to use them correctly depends on having a particular social history and cultural membership through which moral dispositions are acquired. To illustrate this, we can return to the idea of a sympathetic observer. Imagine the experience of a cultural anthropologist visiting feudal Japan. It is true that through the process of learning their language and extensive contact with the feudal Nipponese, our investigator would be able to understand their moral concepts. He would not, however, be able to deploy them as his concepts, at least not until he had experienced a profound social conversion and thereby greatly modified his former cultural identity. He would not be able, for instance, to perceive a particular failure

as sufficient reason to commit ritual suicide [*Ibid.*, pp. 140-145]. If this is so, the moral culture we inhabit and the moral goods we pursue, because they are recognized as goods by the culture, are contingent. They could have been different, if only we had a different social history and cultural membership.

The contingency of human beings is recognizable on yet another level, since almost all the factors that play an important role in shaping our peculiar personal identity are to a great degree contingent as well.[16] This especially includes the cultural and historical environment that we happen to live in, Williams's discussion of character and shame in ancient Greek culture is very relevant here [22, pp. 75-102]. All of this could have been different, as it is a product of contingent history [20, pp. 190-197]. Moreover, being formed this way we find ourselves committed to particular individual projects, understood by Williams as the loci of our drives and motivations ([16, pp. 54-70] and [19, pp. 5-19, 20-39, 101-113]). As is widely known, Williams eagerly embraced the idea that the contingency of human beings extends to their actions, to attempts to realize individual projects, as elaborated in his famous essay *Moral Luck* [*Ibid.*, pp. 20-39].

It might be helpful to sum up the key points of this section, following from the concept of "moral luck". Moral luck refers to the existence of factors that interfere with our moral judgements, choices and actions to the degree that they significantly change their moral character. Since these factors could have been different, the moral quality of our choices and actions is contingent, at least if the concept of "moral luck" is correct. In a text also titled "Moral Luck", Nagel distinguished among (1) constitutive, (2) circumstantial, (3) causal and (4) resultant luck [12, p. 28]. My suggestion is to introduce the concept of "anthropological luck" to express the different layers of the contingency of human beings, since our identity, environment, determinants and the actual course of our life could all have been different. Constitutive and circumstantial anthropological luck account for biological and cultural contingency, while causal and resultant luck accounts for the more individual dimension of human contingency. In this sense, anthropological contingentism refers to the basic architecture of the local human world, as opposed to the world understood in terms of the absolute conception.

C. Post-Analytical Philosophy

Having unpacked the anthropological view that I ascribe to Williams, I will close this section by providing my answer to the question of his metaphilosophical position. Recall that Williams stresses that human beings are characterized, *inter alia*, by a variety of needs. He claims that science is superior to other discourses in meeting our cognitive needs, but there are other needs of a more practical or existential kind. Arguably, satisfaction of those needs is only possible from the first-person perspective, by responding with reflection and action to questions such as "How should I live?" or "What sense can I make of things that happen in my life?"[17] Scientific tools are not much help here, or at least they are severely limited, since I need answers for *me*, that is to say, answers that fit my particular perspective on the world. As such, they would refer to many concepts that are not a part of the absolute conception, but instead have a more local character. The more local they are, the more they are entangled in peculiar contingent forces that have shaped my cultural and personal identity.

From Williams's point of view, there is a niche for philosophy here. Philosophy may help us to navigate at the level of local, contingent concepts. As abstract, conceptual reflection, it might be a useful tool "to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves" [20, p. 182]. However, Williams was honestly skeptical of the power of philosophy actually to do so [16, pp. 1-2]. One condition that he puts forth openly, if philosophy was supposed to be such a useful tool for our local concerns, is that it must be historically and culturally well-informed. In this way, philosophy would be free of scientistic illusions. It would become a humanistic discipline. Williams was content to accept the label "post-analytical philosophy" for this position [20, pp. 180-213].

Certain questions naturally follow: What state of mind will be created by a successful philosophical reflection? What will be the status of a philosophical account that truly makes sense of something important to us? Will it be knowledge? In Williams's view, it depends on the idea of knowledge that is presumed in the process. According to an objective idea of knowledge the answer is negative, because the result of philosophical reflection is entangled in local concepts. But we can instead consider a more modest model of knowledge, one that grants the status of knowledge to a belief that is true, that is believed to be true, and for which both features are nonaccidentally linked. That is, there is something in a way we acquired this belief that honestly tracks the

truth and, as a consequence, our belief would be different if the truth on the subject had been different. Such a model enables us to say that there may be knowledge under the local concepts ([16, pp. 142-155] and [14]).

However, some important details must be acknowledged. Instead of having a theoretical character, this knowledge would be about practical or social means to navigate the particular social reality one inhabits [*Ibid.*, p. 149-152]. It would help one to obtain the variety of items recognized as good in that social world. We could, perhaps, call this knowledge wisdom or prudence. It is important to remember, nevertheless, that it is intrinsic to a certain perspective. As such, it would be vulnerable to confrontation with a more detached, scientific or more abstract philosophical point of view. It would also be vulnerable to the criticism that it is dependent on prejudices or false assumptions or a particular, cultural peculiarity. This kind of knowledge would be subject to the conclusion that reflection can destroy knowledge — a conclusion that Williams was not afraid to draw [*Ibid.*, p. 148].

There is yet another question that Williams poses in this context: Do we really need philosophical knowledge? Is it desirable? His answer is, quite surprisingly, negative. We should not be too concerned with the epistemic status of our philosophical beliefs. Rather, what really matters is their helpfulness in making the best sense of our life ([18, pp. 203-211] and [16, pp. 170-171]). I take this to mean that they will be helpful if they provide us with meaning, generate hope or ward off despair, and if they are stable under critical reflection and do not force us to deceive ourselves. (Williams's expression of hope that concludes *Ethics and The Limits of Philosophy* as well as his remarks on Nietzsche's view on truth are very relevant here [*Ibid.*, pp. 198-202; 24, pp. 12-19]) Under these conditions, we are justified in putting our confidence in our philosophical beliefs.

Summarizing Williams's metaphilosophical position in a single descriptive term is not an easy task. Perhaps "post-analytical philosophy" or "humanistic philosophy" are apt, however vague they may be (as we have seen, Williams himself has had reasons to deploy them). Williams opts for a more practical or existential understanding of philosophy, leaving behind any pretensions to competing with other discourses on cognitive grounds, but promoting instead an engagement with culture and history, our local human peculiarities. According to his view, philosophy is not a discourse in the sense that realism entails, but he does not exclude the possibility that it could help us to acquire some knowledge

of a practical, local sort — knowledge that is still helpful for us, taking into an account what kind of creatures we human beings are.

3   The Scope of This Interpretation

According to the account proposed here, the core of Williams's philosophical project consists in the following interconnected views (WCV = Williams's core view):

(WCV1) Scientific realism

(WCV2) Metaphysical naturalism

(WCV3) Methodological pluralism

(WCV4) Anthropological contingentism

(WCV5) Post-Analytical/Humanistic understanding of philosophy

I believe that these interconnected views can explain and make sense of most of Williams's ideas and positions. To further support this interpretation and to illustrate its explanatory potential, I will apply my approach to Williams's critique of morality and ethical theory. For the sake of space I will leave out arguments aimed at particular forms of ethical theory. Instead, I will briefly sketch arguments he deploys against their common background, which is morality.

In Williams's view, morality is a particular historical paradigm of ethics. According to this paradigm, the ethical sphere is the ultimate area of human actions, strictly distinct from non-moral affairs [16, p. 7]. Emphasis is placed on the quasi-scientific approach to the field, which results in attempts to construct an ethical theory conceived as "a theoretical account of what ethical thought and practice are, which account...implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs and principles" [*Ibid.*, p. 72]. A successful ethical theory delivers a code of conduct that is rationally justified through the aforementioned test, conceptualized in terms of moral judgements, rules, duties and obligations and governed by blame. At least in principle, morality also grants each subject moral autonomy, which makes the person fully responsible for the moral dimension of his or her actions. From Williams's point of view, utilitarianism and Kantianism embodied morality ([*Ibid.*, pp. 93-119, 174-196] and [19, pp. 1-5]), although he was convinced that this

paradigm was taken for granted by many important contemporary figures in moral philosophy as well, for instance Hare, Rawls and Singer, which is at least partly explained by their commitment to the continuation of either the utilitarian or Kantian tradition of moral reflection [*Ibid.*, pp. 71-119].

What exactly is wrong with morality? Williams argues for the following faults (F):

(F1) *Reductionism*: Morality reduces rich ethical reality to a few phenomena: beliefs, rules, duties, theory and blame. Its methodological proclivity for theory ends in disregard for those ethical experiences that are not easy to reconstruct from a third-person, impartial perspective ([*Ibid.*, pp. 15-18, 93-119,174-196] and [19, pp. 1-19]).

(F2) *Narrow rationalism*: Morality presumes a simplifying, crude account of emotional life as if it were the realm of irrational and subjective forces coming from our egoistic drives. Consequently, it favours a rationalistic understanding of practical rationality. However, the nature of emotions is much more complex, and they play an important and irreplaceable role in ethical life, for instance, by constituting moral motivation [21, pp. 207-229]. This suggests that what actually matters in the ethical sphere is the development of moral dispositions, instead of searching for a rationalistic account of this sphere ([16, pp. 15-18, 35-52, 185-186, 201] and [20, pp. 67-75]).

(F3) *Personal detachment*: Morality demands that reasons for actions be justifiable from an impartial, theoretical perspective. It also implies that such reasons are practically superior and override any other kind of reasons. It follows, then, that the demands of morality override any personal commitments we may have, including concerns for our closest relationships and personal projects. Therefore it demands an abandonment of the commitments that provide the basic motivation to carry on and to engage in moral life to begin with. By following the demands of morality we put our personal integrity at risk [19, pp. 1-39; 9, pp. 110-138].

(F4) *Anti-contingentism*: Morality promises a certain secular vision of the possibility of salvation. Since you are an autonomous moral subject, you are fully responsible for what is assumed to be the ultimate dimension of your practical life, that is, whether you are

a morally good person. On the other hand, our moral life is subject to contingent forces of moral luck, which takes away at least some voluntary control over the moral dimension of our actions. If we are subject to moral luck, there is no way of guaranteeing that you can save yourself in the moral sense *via* morality ([16, pp. 176-196], [18, pp. 241-247] and [19, pp. 20-39]).

(F5) *Value monism*: If morality aims at delivering an ethical theory, the theory itself should satisfy some general conditions for theories, e.g. consistency or as few assumptions as possible. Thus it tries to exclude the possibility of conflict among rules or duties that stand for values, either by reducing different values to one or by insisting that a lack of inconsistency at the level of theory translates into the impossibility of such conflict in moral practice. One of the conflicting duties should always prevail and moral dilemmas are illusionary. However, moral experience may be inconsistent (partly because our moral sensitivity is a mixture of elements that have different social origins) and moral values seem to be resistant both to reduction to other values and to comparison. Sometimes we really do experience a conflict of values, which is marked by feeling regret for acting on what seemed to be the prevailing duty. The top-down approach of morality ignores this aspect of moral experience ([*Ibid.*, pp. 71-82] and [21, pp. 166-186]).

There are common patterns in Williams's arguments. First, he refers, sometimes via the concept of moral intuition, to the supposed actual moral experience of human beings [16, pp. 93-119]. Second, he is persistent in attempts to show that the more ambitious, theoretical pretensions of morality should be rejected. If we look at the background of these arguments, it seems to be clear that this critique actually flows from the views that I have reconstructed in previous sections:

(F1) Williams's critique of reductionism is anchored in his proclivity for pluralism (WCV3) and the complexities expressed by anthropological contingentism (WCV4). His skepticism about moral theory is also explained there (WCV4), as well as in his metaphilosophical views (WCV5).

(F2) Narrow rationalism is rejected because of Williams's understanding of how moral capacities are actually transmitted and how they are rooted in personal identity (WCV4) and in light of his

account of the relation between science and philosophy (WCV1 and WCV5).

(F3) Personal detachment is seen as a serious risk, because there is no stable moral point of reference beyond the moral identities that humans have as an effect of their contingent history and to which they are justly committed, since ethics rises from the first-person perspective (WCV1, WCV4 and WCV5).

(F4) The redemptive claims of morality are unreasonable in view of the actual ontology of the moral sphere and the impact of moral luck on our lives (WCV1 and WCV4).

(F5) The pluralism of values that opens the possibility of value conflict is a consequence of both the complex historical origins of our moral commitments and the plurality of needs that we have as a species (WCV3 and WCV4).

This pattern of arguments applies, in my estimation, to Williams's contributions to other areas of philosophy as well. One may find the assumptions and views described here, for instance, supporting his genealogy of truth-related virtues [24, pp. 20-40] or his political philosophy [17, pp. 18-28, 52-61]. Therefore, I think this illustration adequately supports the proposed interpretation.

Conclusion: An Authentic Pluralism?

Aspects of Williams's philosophical project have been challenged by prominent figures in the field. Since these controversies are available in the relevant literature, I hope that I am justified in closing with my own critical remarks. I shall limit myself to just one issue that seems to be crucial in Williams's project, namely, scientism.

We have seen that Williams's account of cognition, intellectual authority and objectivity is tied to his reflections on science. Science has, to use his helpful phrase, "some chance of being more or less what it seems, a systematized theoretical account of how the world really is" [16, p. 135]. The best possible explanation of important qualities of scientific enterprise, e.g. the convergence that happens in science and the mechanism through which scientific theories are replaced, implies

reference to epistemically relevant reasons. The same is not the case with philosophy, whose history is influenced by contingent factors, and in which not only is the level of convergence much smaller, but it would be explained differently if it was in fact closer to science in this respect. Williams is, therefore, eager to reject the cognitive aspirations of philosophy and replace them with more practical tasks. On the surface this looks like honest methodological pluralism, since each discourse, according to his approach, has its own distinctive area and goals, and since Williams himself is profoundly critical of methodological monism.

However, there are some issues here. It seems in particular that Williams stops halfway in his rejection of scientism. If philosophy and science are really distinct kinds of activity, then it is at least a controversial move to try to judge their cognitive pretensions according to the same standard. And this is precisely what Williams did in his metaphilosophical reflections, before he introduced his own account of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. The cognitive aspirations of philosophy were dismissed due to the negative results of its comparison to science. The conceptual tools used in Williams's reflection are borrowed from the philosophy of science; the ideas of convergence, error theory or vindicatory history (scientific progress) clearly come from this source. Isn't this a form of scientism? If philosophy and science are really distinct, shouldn't philosophy have its own standard of cognitive evaluation? It is probably valid to think that philosophy should not contradict anything science says, though if we are concerned with philosophical problems, sometimes it is hard to figure out what exactly science says on these topics, if it says anything decisive at all. But it is another thing entirely to think that both philosophy and science play on the same court and by the same rules. We may well ask why Williams puts so much effort into criticizing scientism if his own view is not far from it, especially since so much of Williams's project is connected to his view on science.

Korsgaard argues against Williams's position in a similar spirit, pointing out that to apply to ethics — and I would add, to philosophy — an idea of objectivity that is appropriate to science is to misunderstand the nature of ethics [7, pp. 310-317]. But instead of referring to Kant as Korsgaard does, I would prefer to say a few words on contemporary virtue ethics. One interesting thing about it is that it is actually a modern revival of an ancient set of concepts. Similar revivals of older ideas happen quite often in philosophy. Consider, for instance, Williams's own flirtation with history-oriented philosophy and the ethical concepts of ancient Greeks, which occurred after a period of a fierce ahistoricism

in analytic philosophy. It is difficult to see how such recurrences fit the idea of linear progress in science, which is clearly endorsed by Williams in his concept of the vindicatory explanation and which conditions his metaphilosophical position.

The rejection of the cognitive account of philosophy leads Williams to the view that philosophical claims are not and cannot be objective. He puts forth the idea that they are formulated from a perspective which is permeated by a contingent, "local" form of cultural life. They are culture-relative. But this view is correct only on the assumption that I have pointed out before, that the scientific paradigm constitutes the proper standard of evaluation for philosophy. Williams's understanding of objective cognition — a description of the world from a perspective that is to a maximum possible degree independent of the investigator's peculiarities — is quite similar to an account of knowledge that follows from what Zagzebski calls "the guiding principles of Enlightenment philosophy" [26, pp. 394-397]. According to this account, a proper candidate for knowledge, a reasonable belief, would be that which is accessible to any ordinary, intelligent person, independent of his or her peculiar beliefs. This paradigm excludes from being reasonable — and thus from possibly having the status of knowledge — beliefs that originate in authorities, traditions, testimonies or participation in a community. But what if the opposite is true?

Williams's Enlightenment-style view may be contrasted with an aretaic approach. It weds epistemic concepts to a certain set of character traits that ideally the reliable cognitive agent has developed, such as open-mindedness or inquisitiveness. These traits are conceptualized in terms of virtues — stable, socially transmitted, cognitive-emotional dispositions aimed at a certain desirable goal, in this case, at acquiring truth. An aretaic approach would suggest that to become a competent, insightful investigator, one has to empower one's own perspective with these dispositions. So the way to truth, according to this view, would not be completely separate from local perspectives. On the contrary, it may even be argued that epistemic concepts would have the shape of that which is recognized as epistemically praiseworthy from many local perspectives by the most virtuous people in a community ([1, 8-65], [25] and [27]). With such an approach, it would be easier to avoid the temptations to scientism that Williams himself wanted to avoid (albeit with mixed results) and to construct a position that would not exclude philosophical, ethical or other peculiar varieties of knowledge. Such an account would be profoundly pluralistic.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 There is a general truth in what Joshua Gert wrote about responses to *Internal and External Reasons*: "...it is surprising how little effort is typically made to fit this paper into the large and complex context of Williams' views. It is generally treated as if it were a one-off contribution by an anonymous philosopher who emerged from the mists and disappeared again, returning at intervals only to attempt to deliver virtually the same message" [5, p. 73]. It is in my estimation true of one monograph and available collections of essays devoted to Williams's philosophy, all of which are divided into sections concerned with his contribution to different disciplines of philosophy, but mostly lack an effort to present such a large and complex image. [See, for instance, Altham, J. E. J.; Harrison, Ross (ed.). *World, Mind, and Ethics*: *Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Callcut, Daniel (ed.). *Reading Bernard Williams*. New York: Routledge, 2009; Heuer, Ulrike; Land, Gerald (eds.). *Luck, Value, and Commitment*: *Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Jenkins, p. Mark. *Bernard Williams*. Trowbridge: Cromwell Press, 2006; Thomas, Alan (ed.). *Bernard Williams*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007].

2 I do not want to say that either his epistemology or metaphysics takes priority. Williams himself endorsed a coherentionist model of philosophy or knowledge in general [16, p. 113]. However, this issue may deserve further inquiry.

3 First introduced in [15, p. 49-52 and further]. Later advanced in [16, pp. 132-155] and [20, pp. 180-199].

4 In the context of history, Williams subtly analyzed the cognitive needs of human beings in [24, especially 41-62, 233-269]; see also [4].

5 In more contemporary versions of pragmatism, PB1 is supported by or combined with Wittgensteinian philosophy of language (see: Putnam, Hilary. *Pragmatism*: *An Open Question*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 27-56). A version more oriented to the philosophy of language of PB1 would be something like: (PB1') Each human discourse or intellectual activity is a form of language game and as such has an irremovable normative character, for every language is governed by a set of rules. Then, these rules are (PB2') derivatives of the human way of life. Thus, PB3 follows. In Putnam's argument there is an another twist which is a conceptual relativity present at the level of PB1': even the basic ontological categories such as "object" are relative to the chosen language game (Putnam, Hilary. *The Many Faces of Realism*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 3-21). Therefore, the possibility of a truly objective description of the

world is excluded already at the very beginning of the process of cognition, the moment we "choose" our language.

6 As opposed to any other possible species of investigators that would have a different way of life and, therefore, different needs and goals.

7 For details of this discussion see Williams's cited work and Putnam, Hilary. *Renewing Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 80-107; Putnam, Hilary. "The Reply to Bernard Williams' 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline'". In: *Philosophy*, 76 (4/2001), pp. 605-614.

8 Another way of presenting this difference is to make a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, although that carries with it some Lockean associations [2].

9 It would be difficult for a pragmatist to formulate an alternative story, for in accord with his own assumptions no discourse should be interpreted as objectively compelling [16, p. 137-140].

10 Excluding, perhaps, those areas of philosophy that are not autonomous, because they are strongly linked to the results of science, e.g. philosophy of logic or cosmology [20, p. 182].

11 As a consequence yet another serious issue appears, at least for anyone who would like to posit a realistic understanding of philosophical claims: any reading of philosophy in this spirit seems to be under the obligation to explain why it is possible for two persons to have outlooks which are incompatible. We assume that in science every two pieces of knowledge can be accepted at the same time, while it is probably the case that it is impossible to hold at once two distinct moral or philosophical outlooks [16, p. 152].

12 In what follows I was under the influence of John Cottingham, although his account is limited to Williams's take on the ethical [3].

13 Nevertheless, this is part of what makes this position so radical, since it presumes a certain ontological dynamism (species are constantly evolving) ruled by chance and, therefore, excludes any natural teleology for our species [3].

14 Williams rejects a prescriptivist account of moral language [16, pp. 123-131, 141-145].

15 For some further reading see [6] and [14].

16 One can argue that there is a certain necessity in our biological identity. It is true that when we are conceived, our genetic code is determined by the relevant material from our parents. It is hard to make any sense, in light of this, of the idea that I could have been a member of other species or, more importantly, I could have had some other genetic material. In such a case, what is the "I" that I am referring too? It is, however, a limited argument, concerning the scope of anthropological contingentism. First, this necessity displays itself under the condition of the contingent history of evolution going one way instead of the other. In the ultimate sense, human beings are no less contingent, even if this argument is valid. Second, the whole set of environmental influences on what follows from my genetic material is still contingent in the proposed way, thus having a huge impact on my identity. For instance, even while I had the same genetic material, it would have made a big difference to my identity if my parents had left the communist regime or not.

17 Those are also the questions that gave rise to ethics as a discipline [16, pp. 1-21].

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