Philosophy in the flow of political life: realism, moralism and community wealth building

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Debates about the relation between political philosophy and real-world political life can sometimes tend towards extreme positions. A more careful attention to the place of values in political life can help us towards a genuinely 'realistic' view of the relation of theory and practice, which avoids the lure of both a naive moralism *and* of an equally unsatisfactory anti-moralism that takes things too far in the opposite direction. Moreover, an embedded approach to 'philosophy in the flow of political life' gives us a more productive engagement with our core political values, and a better understanding of the demands of those values in their full significance and complexity.

Philosophy and the real world: 'Enactment' and the spectre of moralism

In his influential critique of 'moralism' as a way of thinking about the role of political philosophy in relation to political practice, Bernard Williams attacked what he called *'the enactment model'*, whereby 'political theory formulates principles, concepts, ideals and values; and politics (so far as it does what the theory wants) seeks to express these in political action,

through persuasion, the use of power, and so forth' (Williams, 2005). On Williams's view, the enactment model posited an imagined division of labour that might seem rather attractive to philosophers (or at least to *some* philosophers); a division of labour in which most of the important substantive content of politics is seen as settled already in the philosopher's study, or the seminar room, with the work of practical politics then relegated to a technocratic activity of implementation (performed more or less faithfully, and more or less skilfully). Fundamental philosophical work on political values and principles is imagined here as done in isolation from the practical domain of politics, even if there is some more applied work of translation and application that then has to be done in light of an assessment of circumstances. The political domain is then viewed as in some sense subservient to the domain of philosophy — a zone of translation and implementation, to be judged primarily with regard to how well it manages to bring reality into line with what philosophy would demand of it.

On this kind of 'moralist' view that he was seeking to criticise, Williams diagnosed the central error in this approach as seeing politics as a mere instrument for realising the demands that are made of the world by philosophy. According to Williams, any view that builds in the priority of morality to politics, or which sees politics as 'something like applied morality' has made a deep mistake: it has failed to register the autonomy of politics as a distinctive domain of human life. Any view that sees politics as no more than a transmission mechanism for the enactment of ideas that have already been fully worked out in the philosopher's study can thereby be seen as both implausible and hubristic. The *enactment model* fails to register the significance of politics as a distinct domain of human interaction, while also placing an unsustainable weight of significance on what Williams called the philosopher's 'panoptical view', through which the philosopher's perspective on the world is that of a semi-detached observer 'surveying it to see how it may be made better'.

Williams's paradigm case of the *enactment model* was utilitarianism; and while it is not the aim of this essay to prosecute the case against that particular way in which utilitarian philosophers often approach questions of policy, one might well take the view that there are abundant recent examples of how utilitarianism — especially in its 'longtermist' variant — has clearly put itself four-square in the way of Williams's critique. Any honest assessment of Williams's attack on the *enactment model* would have to allow that in many cases philosophers' engagement with issues in public life can display both a tin-ear for distinctively political questions, and an almost comical hubris in their abundant faith in their own panoptic vision.

Williams himself moves from a critique of ‘moralism’ to defending a more minimalist conception of the role of philosophy in political life, according to which view ideas of basic legitimacy — what Williams calls the ‘basic legitimation demand’ — should be kept at the centre of philosophical engagement with the political domain. My aim here is not to assess Williams’s brand of ‘realism’ in detail, but instead to make the case for a broader role that can and does exist for normative political philosophy, and for philosophical thinking about values and principles, seen as *part of* the public political life of our societies. My argument is in favour of a clear-eyed appreciation of the real potential for philosophy within politics, and in defence of the philosophical articulation of political values as an internal rather than external aspect of our shared political life itself. We can accept something like Williams’s critique of ‘moralism’, as applying to various forms of badly conceived and badly executed philosophical engagements with political reality — as epitomised by the cruder instances of the ‘enactment model’ — but this does not mean that a genuine appreciation of the complexities of political reality need involve too sweeping a rejection of a role for normative political philosophy. Our values and principles are a central part of our politics, and philosophy is indispensable in the development and articulation of those values.

In making this case, I want to draw a contrast between the kind of ‘enactment view’ that Williams describes (and rightly critiques) and the kind of work that many of us try to do when we bring normative political philosophy to bear on real-world issues and problems. Paying closer attention to the role of political philosophy in the real world, and moving away from the kind of schematic model with which Williams begins, allows us to vindicate a substantive and non-minimalist role within politics for philosophical work on normative values and normative principles. We can have a philosophical focus on political values, viewed as a subset of a broader set of moral values, without falling into any kind of pernicious ‘moralism’. To put things polemically, Williams’s contrast between ‘moralism’ and ‘realism’ is a false dichotomy: a genuine realism would not quickly dismiss the role of normative values in political life, and indeed it is a particularly egregious failure of engagement with politics as it is really practised, if we think of the political domain as somehow autonomous from the domain of normative values.

Community wealth building: Values, philosophy and local economic development

This so far no doubt sounds rather abstract, so let me make things more concrete with the aid of an example. One part of my own work in recent years has been articulating and defending an approach to local development known as 'community wealth building'. This is an approach to local economic policy in which city or regional governments, as well as locally based 'anchor institutions' such as universities, colleges, museums, hospitals, charities and so on, seek to use their social and economic power (as employers, purchasers of goods and services, stewards of land and assets etc.) to influence the development of their local economies in particular directions — in particular to make those local economies more sustainable, inclusive and collaborative.

This approach to local economic development has gained an increasing array of adherents in different parts of the world over the past 20 years, having been pioneered by the Washington DC based 'think-and-do tank', The Democracy Collaborative (Democracy Collaborative, 2024) which first put these ideas into practice in developing the 'Cleveland Model' of economic development in Cleveland, Ohio (Democracy Collaborative, 2014). My own engagement with this work has itself been thoroughly collaborative, working alongside my colleague Joe Guinan, including co-writing our book, *The Case for Community Wealth Building* (Guinan and O'Neill, 2020). Guinan is involved in these policies in a practical way as President of the Democracy Collaborative, with a long history of practical engagement and activism in cause of establishing alternative economic models, and developing a more democratic economy.

A joke that my co-author and I shared when we set out on writing about *The Case for Community Wealth Building* was that, while these policies certainly worked *in practice*, our job was to try to make them work *in theory* as well. We saw what we were doing, in writing on this approach in a way that combined philosophical and empirical analysis, as starting from a set of practices that already existed, rather than starting with a blank sheet of paper and stipulating — on the basis of some prior philosophical theory — the way in which policy should be pursued. Clearly this was an approach that was a long way from what Williams conceived as 'the enactment model'.

Nevertheless, we took it that the task in which we were engaged had a real philosophical dimension, and specifically that it involved the elaboration and defence of an account of community wealth building (CWB) in terms of an understanding of the values on which it rested, and which it sought to promote. On our analysis, the relevant values are the values of *equality and democracy*. Our view was that, despite the fact that CWB could involve a wide variety of different kinds of policies, pursued in different contexts, what united the different elements of the approach was a concern to move towards an economic settlement that is both *more democratic* and *more egalitarian*. Moreover, on our account, those values are not merely contingently related within this approach, but should instead be seen as mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing. We see the creation of an economic model that devolves more power to individuals, at the local level, as helping to realise more egalitarian social relations, of the kind that both express a conception of citizens' status as democratic citizens, and which in turn creates conducive conditions for a richer democratic culture.

One thing to emphasise here then is that this philosophical account of the foundations of CWB is not plucked from the air, but has been a product of immersion in the real-world practices under discussion. It has been developed after countless interactions and discussions with many individuals, in different parts of the world, who have been involved with CWB as a matter of practical political agency. Moreover, it is not that we looked to offer an interpretation of some separate realm of practice, but rather that discussions about values and principles have always been an important part of the overall practice of developing CWB. Those who are involved in CWB in a day-to-day way do not see philosophical discussion of the values that drive their work as something outside or alien, but simply as part of the constructive reflection on our own aims and activities that is involved with consciously pursuing any set of goals over time, and which is perhaps especially important in the political domain. Philosophical reflection and practical political activity here are closely interrelated: they are not two wholly separable domains; rather, they stand in relations of mutual support and dependence.

Clearly this kind of approach to thinking about philosophy and public political life is not a version of *enactment* on Bernard Williams's model. But neither is it about mere, inert 'normative description' of a set of political activities that would carry on in their own way anyway. Rather, there is a kind of reflexivity between theory and practice. Part of what makes this possible is that the political agents involved are themselves also concerned with political

values, and their own political activities are, in part, driven (in this case) by their affiliation with values of equality and democracy.

There is a certain self-consciously hard-headed 'realist' line that would chide the 'moralist' for a naive fixation on values, and for a purported failure to see that politics is in general about the exercise of *power* and the battle between different *interests*. No doubt such naivety can exist, of course; but there is also an opposite kind of mistake involved in seeing politics as about *nothing but* power and the battle of interests, which can lead to a refusal to understand or appreciate the way in which values and principles are often at the heart of what political agents are motivated to do. There is a further, related error, which falls close to constituting a patronising attitude towards those involved in practical politics, whereby no credit is given to political agents' ability to reflect critically on their own values and principles, or to change course in light of reasoned argument. Our experience in writing in a philosophical idiom about CWB, and about analysing its normative foundations, is that this is an activity that is of great interest to the political agents who are themselves involved in the practice of CWB. Critical reflection on values and principles is something in which they themselves are eager to engage; and this kind of normative engagement is, indeed, inseparable from what it is for anyone to engage seriously with any kind of political project over time.

A clearer understanding of the normative basis of a policy approach such as CWB can also help in its practical defence. A common criticism of CWB, made by publications such as *The Economist*, was that the emphasis on buying local amounted to no more than a collectively irrational form of 'municipal protectionism', where each locality engaged in 'beggar-thy-neighbour' policies that would be collectively self-defeating (The Economist, 2017). But much of the bite of that kind of criticism can be drawn away when one points out that the prioritising of 'local' spend under CWB strategies is justified not in terms of localism per se, but in virtue of the fact that the democratic and egalitarian aims that would be met by helping to develop (for example) new cooperatives or social enterprises can best be pursued with regard to local firms. Conversely, the decision by local councils or anchor institutions to move procurement away from firms with aggressive labour practices, or which engage in devious forms of tax avoidance, will often involve doing less business with certain multinational firms, in favour of working with smaller and more local suppliers. A normatively satisfying justification of the policies in question, in terms of the values at the centre of their underlying rationale, thereby provides the basis for rejecting lines of criticism that might otherwise appear persuasive.

The benefits of engaged philosophy for philosophy itself

I want to end by returning to part of what is of value in Bernard Williams's critique of moralism, and to say something about the way in which a more situated and engaged approach to political philosophy can help to avoid some of the pitfalls that Williams identifies. On the *enactment model*, we imagine a situation where we see our values and principles as calling for the world to be made some particular way — and we see the role of politics then being to bring that into reality. On such a view, we imagine that our interpretation of our political values involves seeing them calling on us simply to bring about particular kinds of outcomes, whether characterised in terms of the overall level of utility, or the pattern of distribution of resources, or whatever else. My suggestion, though, is that if we start in a more embedded way, engaging with real political practices, and the work of real political agents, we are likely to be led away from this more general and abstract account of what we take our values to demand of us.

Thinking about values of democracy and equality with regard to CWB led us, in *The Case for Community Wealth Building*, to give an account of the values in question here in terms of the way in which citizens relate to each other within economic life, and in terms of their own experiences of both their own status and their relations to their fellow workers and fellow citizens. This gives us not an instrumental account of the value of democracy simply as a means towards certain favoured outcomes, but an account that focuses on the standing and status of democratic citizens, and the value to those citizens of having more power and control over the direction of their lives in the economic and political domains. Similarly, this account involves a way of thinking about equality not in terms of the intrinsic value of some distributive pattern, but in terms of the value of citizens being able to relate as equals. This naturally leads on to considering how institutions can be shaped so that they could develop what we might think of as the 'infrastructure of social equality'. These more social or relational ways of thinking about our core normative political values have a close and plausible fit with the real-world political projects and practices that we were investigating.

Attending carefully to real-world politics is a good way of avoiding what we could think of as 'the lure of excessive abstraction'. There can be a tendency in philosophy to be dragged towards excessively abstract or austere interpretations of our values, and to lose some of the sense of reality that we retain when we stick more closely to the phenomena of political and social life. In particular, considering our values through the lens of this more embedded and engaged approach makes it much less likely that we will interpret our normative commitments

as merely striving to bring about some simply described, general overall outcome — whether that is some high-level pattern of distribution, or the maximisation of aggregate utility, or whatever it might be.

In short, objecting to Williams's 'enactment model', at least in its starker versions, is justifiable not only for methodological reasons, but also on substantive and normative grounds. If we care about citizens' status as democratic citizens, and the character of their social and economic relations, then we need to attend to the functioning of myriad institutions, at different levels and in different contexts, and not just demand that the world should enact some simple overall outcome. We can reach this conclusion, then, by the opposite route to the one taken by Williams: not by downplaying the centrality of normative values in politics, but instead by keeping those values at the centre of our attention, seeing them not as *outside* but as *within* and *essential* to the flow of our political lives. Taking our political values seriously in the full specificity of what they demand of us, and seeing those values as themselves an essential aspect of politics, can lead us to a plausible view that avoids the excesses of the starker varieties of both realism and moralism.

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