Living with History, Learning from Youth

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Abstract

According to Bernard Williams, philosophy is a 'humanistic' discipline when it is dedicated to helping us make the best sense of our lives, and to do this philosophy must turn to history and to the development of our self-understanding over time. In this paper I follow Williams' humanistic methodology by considering another kind of history and the way it informs our present self-understanding, both as persons and as philosophers. I am concerned with youth or adolescence as a kind of history with which we must try to come to terms. Looking to the Western philosophy's origin story, of Socrates corrupting the youth, to D.W Winnicott's writings on youth, and Williams' own writing on shame, I ask: if we conceive of youth as a kind of history, what is involved in coming to terms with, and living well with the past of our youth, and how might reflection on youth be part of philosophy, humanistically conceived?

1. Introduction

How do we live with our pasts? How do we live well as beings with histories? These are among Bernard Williams' most abiding, orienting questions, animating his discussions of, for example, blame, shame, responsibility, agent regret, moral luck, his critique of moral philosophy's 'characterless self', and his reflections on tragedy, opera, and the nature of philosophy itself.

One way to try to avoid the task of living with the past is to imagine that the past is fully and simply *past*, that we have surpassed it, and more specifically *progressed beyond* it whether individually or culturally. Williams calls this a 'progressivist' conception of the past. But for Williams, living with the past presents us with a *task* precisely because the past is not fully surpassed but shapes the present: what we have done, what happened to us, where we come from, the ways we have lived and imagined ourselves, all continue to shape who and what we are now, both consciously and unconsciously.

The task of living with the past is put to us *collectively* with respect to our shared cultural pasts. It is put to us *individually* with respect to our personal pasts; hence Williams' consistent but never elaborated interest in psychoanalysis, about which more later. The task

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is also put to us as *philosophers*. Williams maintains that philosophers should cultivate a deeper, more learned, more imaginative sense of several kinds of past: the history of philosophy, the history of 'our' culture and concepts, and even our own personal pasts. Thus Williams critiques not only the austere idea of a characterless, a-historical self, but also the idea of a characterless, a-historical philosopher.

I want to take a Williamsian approach to a kind of history or past that Williams himself does not explicitly address, namely *the past of youth*: not childhood but adolescence, the age we typically are when we first encounter philosophy, the age we are when it first speaks to us (if it does), the age of those who Socrates was charged with corrupting. As we shall see, as part of its orienting origin story, Western philosophy stands in an essential relationship with youth, both with actual youths and with the idea of youth.[1] I am interested in youth as part of an individual's personal past, and also as a past with which philosophy in particular stands in an interesting, fraught, vital relationship. If we conceive of youth as a kind of history or past, and if we must face the task of living well with the past, then what is involved in living well – individually or philosophically – with the past of youth?

'Youth' or 'adolescence' now designates an age range (from the beginning of teenage years into early twenties),[2] but it has also come to represent a set of styles of living and characteristic forms of experience. For instance, contemporary psychologists speak of youth as a time of heightened risk-taking, Georg Simmel argues that youth is the time of 'adventure' (1911 [1910]), Simone de Beauvoir (2011 [1949]: 372) calls it 'the age of hope and ambition', combined with dependency, exposure, and shame (especially for girls). In this

[1] And of course, the very idea of youth as a distinctive period of human life itself has a history, informed in different periods by – for instance – religion, art and literature, industrialization, education, evolutionary psychology, advertising, war, and feminism. There are also differences between so-called modern and so-called traditional societies with respect to the understanding and significance of the age between childhood and adult. I won't be able to explore these ideas here. See Graham (2004, Ch. 2), for an overview of the history of these ideas.

[2] See the previous footnote. The term 'adolescence' is derived from the Latin *adolescere* 'to grow up' and *adultus* means 'to have grown up'. The meaning of 'adolescence' thus shifts with different cultural understandings of when one has grown up, though it seems always to have been tethered to puberty.

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paper I am interested in a tendency we have, both as adults and as philosophers, to distance ourselves from youth, to imagine youth as something to get beyond and as something that we adults have indeed gotten beyond. While this is not the only way we may conceive of and relate to youth – we might also regret losing our youth or youthfulness or feel nostalgic for that age – the tendency to distance or dissociate is pervasive, perhaps especially in philosophy, with its ideals of rationality, autonomy, and morality which are often explicitly construed as constitutive of 'maturity'.[3] If youth is regarded as the age of risk-taking, adventure, exposure, and shame, then adult instances of these experiences may be construed, dismissed, and defended against as 'youthful'. This is evidenced by our designation of certain experiences, ambitions, hopes, pleasures, *etc.* as characteristically 'youthful' or, to take some code-words: as 'romantic' or 'radical' or 'idealistic' or 'dramatic', terms which are not unequivocally negative but can be used to dismiss their object as not mature, not properly grown up.

If we must face the task of living with the past, and if *youth* represents one of our pasts, then we, as adults and as philosophers, must cultivate a deeper, more learned, more imaginative sense of our youth. As we shall see, Williams opposes what he calls a progressivist approach to history with what I will call his 'recognitive' approach, according to which we can learn from the past only to the extent that we can *recognize* ourselves in the past and recognize the past as still present with us (*cf.* SN 10). This meant that we will need to be able to recognize ourselves in youth, and recognize youth in ourselves. This should also involve and help foster deeper, more learned, and more imaginative appreciation of and relationships with the actual youths in our lives and the challenges they present to our sense of ourselves and our sense of the world.

In this essay, I pursue Williams' question *how to live well with the past* with respect to the past of youth. I consider history and youth in relation to 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', I explore philosophy's distinctive contemporary and historical relationship with youth, I then turn briefly to some remarks on adolescence by the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, and then bring these reflections to bear on some aspects of Williams' discussion of shame.

[3] See of course Kant's (1999 [1784]) 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?'. Consider also some titles of Susan Neiman's recent broadly Kantian books: *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists* (2009) and *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age* (2015).

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2. The Presence of the Past and the Need for History

'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' (hereafter PHD) is Williams' late reflection on *how philosophy should be done*. As we will see, this is both a material question of how philosophy should be written and taught, and it is an application of the broader question: *how should philosophy understand itself*? (PHD: 477). And the question of philosophy's self-understanding bears in turn on the relationship of philosophy to the broader, non-specialized, human question: *how are we to make the best sense of our life?* (PHD: 479). To the extent that philosophy understands itself as attempting to help us reflect on and answer the latter, human question, argues Williams, it is thereby a 'humanistic discipline', and as such it is just one part of a collective project, 'a shared activity' (PHD: 496), that involves collaborating with and drawing on other humanistic disciplines, especially history. I think it is not too strong to say that for Williams, humanistic thinking is by definition historical thinking.

For Williams, philosophy should attend to history not only for the purpose of contextualizing philosophers in their times, but because we are essentially historical animals and our thinking, especially our emotional, ethical, and political thinking, is laden with history: our present philosophical and ordinary forms of thinking and our sense of ourselves are infused and animated by past ways of thinking, and yet we often do not recognize this. Put again: it is not just that our present thinking develops out of past ways of thinking, as an oak tree develops out of an acorn, but that our present thinking is, to use Annette Baier's (1980) word, *haunted* with history, where a *haunting* suggests something powerfully present but typically unrecognized. In a spirit quite kindred to Williams, Baier suggests that the history of our emotions and the history of philosophy are analogous in this way. In neither case is the present clean of the past, and so in neither case can we expect to understand the present if we do not understand the past. She writes:

> To understand a person's current emotions one must look at what related emotion states preceded this one, just as to understand current philosophy one must look to its antecedent. Old loves live on, as old philosophical debates live on, both as remembered and referred to in the current debates, and also as echoing around them, affecting their sound and its quality even when not explicitly mentioned. (Baier, 1980: 16)

The past is not wholly past but 'lives on' in the present, sometimes remembered and recognized, sometimes 'echoing' and 'affecting' the

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present yet without conscious awareness. In the case of emotions, this means that we cannot fully understand a person's current love or shame without some grasp of her past loves and shames, and likewise we cannot understand our current philosophical positions or debates without understanding their histories (and because we can never hope to fully recuperate our histories, our self-understanding in both domains will be limited in various respects).

Again Williams opposes his recognitive approach to history to what he calls a 'progressivist account' (SN). On a progressivist approach, we study the past like 'tourists' (SN: 18) in order to discover what those human beings once were like, in contrast with what we are like now; this might involve construing the past as 'archaic' or 'primitive', something that 'we moderns' have improved on, refined, and finally left behind. But, Williams argues, to the extent that we imagine the past touristically as a stage that 'we' have transcended and no longer recognize, then while we may learn *about* the past, we cannot learn *from* it. For Williams we can learn from the past only by recognizing the ways in which it is still here. Like Baier, Williams is interested in the past insofar as it is not dead and gone but lives on and haunts the present, 'helping (often in hidden ways) to keep us alive' (*ibid*.). He argues that we can learn from the past only to the extent that we can, to some extent, *recognize* ourselves in the past and the past in us, and thereby recognize the past as *ours*. And yet, importantly, if we are to *learn* from this engagement with the past and not just confirm our preexistent self-understanding, this recognition must be in some sense unexpected, unsettling, 'unobvious' (WMPB: 213), 'untimely' (SN: 4). This is one way that engaging with the past can help us distinguish 'what we think' from 'what we merely think we think' (SN: 7). Our recognitive relationship to the past must contain a moment or dimension of *non*-recognition, of unfamiliarity or strangeness, in a way that helps us realize we are different than we thought we were.

3. Youth and Philosophy

PHD's argument for a humanistic and historical conception of philosophy begins with an excursus on *how* philosophy is done, where this involves reflection on philosophical style and a mini-sociology of academic philosophy. Williams' questions are: how do the material conditions of professional philosophy shape philosophical style – how philosophy is actually done – and how does philosophical style both inform and express philosophy's self-understanding? In this section I introduce *youth* as both part

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of the daily material reality of professional philosophy and as part of philosophy's historical self-understanding.

Style is another of Williams' most persistent, distinctive preoccupations, both in his meta-philosophical reflections on philosophy and in his ethics. Indeed, *finding one's style* is, for Williams, one of our fundamental ethical and philosophical tasks. In an interview given around the same time as PHD, Williams proclaimed that 'if there's one theme in all my work it's about authenticity and self-expression' (2002). Thirty years earlier he made the same kind of point when he cites D.H. Lawrence's dictum, *find your deepest impulse and follow that* (1972: 79). Here we must see that the task is not just to *discover* one's deepest impulse; the task also involves *interpreting* this impulse and determining *how* to follow it, where this is a 'stylistic problem, in the deepest sense of "style"' (Williams 1972: xix). Answering the fundamental ethical question of *how to live* involves determining not only *what* to do, but *how* to do it. Style is an ethical matter; it is a question 'about a manner of life' (ELP: 5).

Style is also a philosophical question. For Williams, there is no separating philosophical 'content' and 'style', or the substantive project of philosophy – making the best sense of our lives – from the task of finding the right voice or form. Taking style seriously is in fact a way of taking history seriously, since it requires reading any particular text of philosophy as composed at a particular time and place with its specific traditions and constraints, by a particular individual who crafted their sentences so that they would express what that person cared about and wanted to communicate *in the way* they wanted to communicate it.

In PHD, Williams is concerned with the material forces that conspire to produce a particular, dominant philosophical style, which he describes as the 'well-known and highly typical style of many texts in analytic philosophy which seeks precision by total mind control [and] tries to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection' (PHD: 480).[4] That is, Williams wants to specify how the professional academic world shapes how philosophy is done and so how philosophy understands itself. Here Williams performs a bit of lay sociology of philosophy. One contributing force is what he calls *scientism*, in which case

[4] Williams was writing at a time when there was more debate about the merits and differences of 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy. At the moment I am writing, analytic philosophy has itself become more heterogenous, and the particular style that concerns Williams does not exhaust the kinds of styles that so-called analytic philosophy can exhibit.

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the style is imagined 'as a mimicry of scrupulous scientific procedures' (PHD: 481).[5] But Williams considers other conditions, more relevant for this paper. He notes how the eristic method of teaching philosophy implants 'an intimidatingly nit-picking superego, a blend of [philosophers'] most impressive teachers and their most competitive colleagues, which guides their writing by means of constant anticipations of guilt and shame' (PHD: 480). Williams also considers how the requirement to produce a dissertation – a 'quite peculiar text' (*ibid*.) designed to impress a committee of superiors or *Doktorväter* – generates confusion about how to actually write and communicate to actual readers. And he describes how anxiety about philosophy's intellectual *authority* can motivate stylistic postures of technicality, mastery, and the proliferation of what Williams called '–isms' (Fricker 2020: 932).[6]

Taken together, Williams' observations suggest a posture of anxiety about authority, both about being exposed to and assessed by some authority figure, and about the status of one's own authority or standing. Williams suggests that this hyper-vigilant style responds to real anxieties and material pressures by generating an ideal of covering all one's bases, securing all one's fronts, mastering and undermining every competing view, anticipating every objection, directing readers' minds, consolidating authority. But an ideal of 'precision by total mind control' is, obviously, a fantasy, not only because it is unrealistic, but because it is motivated by a wish to avoid a kind of pain – exposure and vulnerability, guilt and shame – and where the fantasy functions by fulfilling a wish for mastery.[7]

[5] Importantly, I don't think Williams thought that this style of philosophy was an even remotely accurate mimicry of actual scientific practices or papers.

[6] To Williams' list we could add: the demand that ideas be situated in an already-established debate; citational mania and the aspiration to read everything; the expectation of a 2-minute 'elevator pitch' version for any idea or piece of work; political atmospheres that constrain and damage how, and about what, one writes, teaches, even thinks; and the impact of the personal computer and the internet.

[7] Consider the following passage from Robert Nozick (whose style Williams takes aggressive issue with in a review, see Williams 2015): 'Wouldn't it be better if philosophical arguments left the person with no possible answer at all, reducing him to impotent silence? Even then, he might sit there silently, smiling, Buddhalike. Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he dies'.

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In his mini-sociology of how professional philosophy is done and the forces – and fantasies – that shape it, in his reflection on how the academic world shapes how philosophy is done and so how philosophy understands itself, Williams does discuss teaching and learning, and he later in PHD he considers the 'young' philosopher' (I will return to this), but he does not specifically address *who*, specifically, we teach, and how this informs philosophy's self-understanding. That is, Williams does not here talk about *youth*: people in their late teens and early twenties, the age bracket of most undergraduate students, the people we teach and talk to every day, and the age most of us were when we first encountered philosophy. Moreover, as I've already indicated, 'youth' is also a kind of history that we must reckon with, another kind of past that lives on in the present. Here too, we should consider the limits and distortions of a kind of 'progressivist' approach, and we can ask whether and to what extent we are able to *recognize* ourselves in this past and learn from it. Here too we can ask how defensiveness about youth shapes philosophy's practices and self-understanding. Reflecting on the relationship between youth and philosophy thus constitutes another way of reflecting on the relationship between philosophy and history, and another way of reflecting on how the material reality of professional philosophy shapes how philosophy understands itself and how philosophy is practiced.

Philosophy also has a distinctive and pronounced disciplinary relationship with youth, as part of its history and its historical self-conception. For we don't just teach philosophy to youth, we teach philosophy to youth *by* teaching them about philosophy's original, even constitutive relationship to youth. We teach philosophy by telling its origin story, and according to that story, Western philosophy began with Socrates 'corrupting the youth'. Talking to Athens' youth about topics like virtue, justice, knowledge, shame and love, asking them what they thought about these things, was, from the state's perspective, heresy. Socrates was charged and put to death for his relationship with the youth. Western philosophy thus begins in an 'unsanctioned', 'dangerous' encounter with youth, dangerous because it destabilizes the youth's expected relationship to traditional authority (experts, parents, and also poets) by inviting the youth to question that authority, both its claims and its legitimacy. And if Plato understood Socrates and himself as critically advancing beyond Greece's Homeric worldview, then Socrates/Plato can

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be understood as attempting to draw youth out of the 'childhood' of Greek culture, into a new maturity.[8]

A particular relationship to youth is thus internal to philosophy's basic, historical self-understanding. Philosophy begins in a certain conversation with youth, and this beginning provides a kind of model. In our classrooms, we relay the event of Socrates' trial not just as an interesting fact of history and not just because Plato wrote a dialogue about it, but because 'corrupting the youth' is taken to represent one of the aims of philosophy, and perhaps also because we think this story will inspire and attract students by hinting at philosophy's danger and risk, suggesting a kind of constitutional rebelliousness.[9] In framing philosophy in this way, we present the essential posture and project of philosophy as continuous with and responsive to the questioning, critical, rebellious posture of youth (leaving aside the question whether and to what extent professionalized, institutionalized philosophy can retain any such constitutive rebelliousness). We present philosophy to youth as something that can *speak to* youth. 'The youth' are thus part of the material reality of contemporary professional philosophy, part of the origin of Western philosophy, and – given the way this origin story informs how philosophy is done, and taught, and how philosophy understands

[8] This is an instance of the kind of progressivism Williams criticizes in *Shame and Necessity*.

[9] Richard Moran pointed out to me that we also often teach the *Crito* to new students, often right after the *Apology*. There, Socrates declines the opportunity to escape, accepting his fate *because* it has been dictated by the laws of the city and because its laws should be conceived as, or on analogy with, one's own parents, who would be wronged, even destroyed, by disobedience. The laws are thus presented as both authoritarian and fragile. If Socrates is in some sense the model or embodiment of philosophy, *Crito* complicates the idea of philosophy as inherently rebellious, and it presents a different model of philosophy's relationship with authority, and perhaps a different model of youth's proper relationship to authority. As a reader and teacher of both dialogues, one feels a kind of whiplash. I couldn't possibly resolve these tensions here. I'll just note, first, that the *Apology* – the accusation and the trial – plays a more discipline-defining role for philosophy than does the *Crito*. Second, if – at least on one prominent interpretation of this period of Plato's writings – Socrates has no *positive teachings*, only methods, then it is not obvious that we should accept Socrates' conclusion in the *Crito*. Third, perhaps we could read the *Crito* as a text that demonstrates the profound difficulty of rebellion and disobedience given that we *are* indeed shaped by the laws and norms of our parents and the polis.

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itself – philosophy's relationship to youth is internal to its historical self-understanding.

The idea of youth also implicitly informs a conception of philosophy voiced in various places by Williams and stated most explicitly and famously by Stanley Cavell, namely that philosophy is the 'education of grown-ups' (1999: 125). One way to hear this is that philosophy functions by educating human beings *out of* youth *and into* adulthood, helping them complete a *telos* or realize their potential, that is, grow up. Or it might be taken to mean that philosophy educates us by getting us to speak 'grown-up to grown-up', as though philosophy's proper voice were the voice of the adult. Yet another way to hear Cavell's proposal is that by asking fundamental questions and unsettling our confidence in the answers given by traditional authorities, hence unsettling our confidence in traditional authority figures, philosophy educates us by recalling us to the condition of youth. Cavell seems committed to all three readings, and we can find evidence of the third in the following passage. He writes: 'in the face of questions posted in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau…, we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy' (*ibid.*). I would amend this and say that in the face of these philosophers we are not children but *youth*: while we may not know how to go on with these philosophers, we do come to philosophy equipped with *some* ways of going on, some inherited sensibility or form of life, some 'intuitions' about philosophy's themes, and some impulse to question, criticize, doubt, and wonder. If this is so, then philosophy is the education of grown-ups in part because it facilitates a return to the posture and spirit of youth. Here too, ideas of youth inform philosophy's own self-understanding.

Returning to the questions posed at the start of this paper, we must now ask: if we conceive of youth as a kind of history or past, and if, following Williams, we – as persons and as philosophers – must face the task of living well with the past, then what is involved in living well with the past of youth and why might this task be difficult? As noted, youth is a kind of past from which we – as adults and as philosophers – often work to defend and distance ourselves, where this hints both at some anxiety about our status as adults and an unsettling sense of proximity to youth (unlike small children). While sometimes celebrated or idealized, ideas of 'youth' and 'youthfulness' are often invoked to denounce and to discipline certain human tendencies, hopes, demands, attractions, experiences, styles of living, *etc.*, that may be found at any age. Such 'youthful' tendencies, experiences, *etc.* might include, for

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instance: a concern with figuring out who one is or with 'authenticity and personal expression' and 'finding one's deepest impulse;' concern with style and experiments with styles; suspicion of authority; 'unrealistic' dreams and demands for something other than the *status quo*; interest in and terror of sexuality; attraction to adventure and intensity; feelings of powerlessness and feelings of intense power; vulnerability to exposure and surveillance; and in part for these reasons, susceptibility to shame. Even the experience and pursuit of *change*, of finding oneself becoming or actively wanting to be *different* than one now is, is sometimes coded as youthful.

In characterizing such tendencies, experiences, *etc.* as 'youthful' – or to recall the code-words: as 'romantic' or 'radical' or 'dramatic' or 'idealistic' – we project dimensions, possibilities, and modes of human experience onto a past phase, a particular period that should be, or should have been, overcome. Such projection allows us to dissociate ourselves from those dimensions, possibilities, and modes, and it blocks recognition. Such projection make it difficult to seek out or value such attractions, experiences, or styles of living, or to learn from them, or to explore them philosophically. It also makes it difficult to listen to and learn from actual young people.

In emphasizing projection, I am not denying that some of these tendencies, experiences, *etc.* are especially pronounced in youth, or that there are good developmental and even neurobiological reasons for that acute pronouncement. And I am not suggesting there is no such thing as maturation or growth, or no difference between adolescence and adulthood. Finally, I am not suggesting that our adult or philosophical conception of youth is exclusively negative. Rather, in calling attention to our practices of defence and projection, I mean to highlight a progressivist tendency to quarantine, code, and condemn certain human tendencies, experiences, *etc., as* 'young' or 'youthful', where this means: a phase to grow out of, to put in the past. Again such defence and projection may be especially tempting in the context of philosophy, with its ideals of rationality, autonomy, and morality, often explicitly construed as constitutive of maturity.

Williams argues that we – as persons and as philosophers – can learn from the past, and can learn about ourselves by reflecting on the past, only if are able or willing to recognize ourselves in the past and the past in our present. In the next section I consider how philosophy might begin the work of facilitating recognition of youth.

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4. Youth and the Struggle to Feel Real

In the history of philosophy, figures like Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, the Romantics, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, and more recently Cavell were interested in youth, but in contemporary philosophy there is very little work on youth and adolescence. Perhaps this is due to some assumption that philosophy should cede the topic to other, more empirical or data-driven disciplines, like psychology, neuroscience, or sociology. But of course, most subjects of philosophy are studied in different ways by other disciplines, and this need not shut down philosophical inquiry, though it does raise the question as to what philosophy in particular can do. So perhaps philosophical neglect of youth is due to some uncertainty as to what philosophers can do here.[10] What is philosophical about youth?

In *Shame and Necessity* Williams characterizes his aim and method in turning to the past and reading Greek tragedies as 'a philosophical description of an historical reality' (SN: 4). What makes the project *philosophical* is that it works to 'lay bare certain structures of thought and experience, and above all, ask questions about their value to us' (*ibid*.), where the analysis of the relevant structures and their value will proceed, as much as possible, from the inside, from the perspective of the historical agents' own self-understanding and their sense of what matters.[11] Williams' wager is that if we can and are willing to recognize ourselves – if incompletely, if uncannily – in these tragedies and their structures of understanding, then they may be able to tell us something of 'who we are' and 'who we are not: they denounce the falsity or the partiality or the limitations of our images of ourselves' (SN: 21). If we can come to recognize ourselves in *those* structures of understanding and self-understanding (the structures which progressivism assumes we had surpassed), then we are not, in fact, who we thought we were. This project depends on suspending the progressivist belief that

[10] Some of the more obvious questions and topics for philosophy: questions surrounding the status of adolescents as responsible agents, including voting rights and legal status, moral and legal responsibilities.

[11] See especially Moran (2015; 2025) for an analysis of humanistic approaches to history as proceeding 'from the inside'. As he writes, 'in understanding the historical events of another time, or considering an entire historical period, there is no avoiding the need to understand the culture, the practices, and the institutions "from the inside", from the perspective and in the vocabulary of the participants in those practices … "Seeing ourselves in them" is part of what we seek in historical understanding' (Moran 2025).

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past structures of thought and experience, including those articulated in ancient tragedy, are foreign, immature, or dead. Williams is emphatic that cultivating a recognitive relation to the past is not a matter of reviving something dead, but seeks to clarify what of the past remains alive and vital.

Williams' approach to the Greeks suggests something for philosophers to do with youth. In the following I develop one possibility.

Philosophy could reflect on the structures of thought and experience that are taken to be characteristic of youth and on their value to 'us' (as adults), in order to see what this could tell us about who we are now and who we are not, about what we think and what we think we think. Here too, this would require that we be able to recognize ourselves in these structures of understanding and experience, and recognize the way they continue to inform our present self-understanding and 'keep us alive'. Like any humanistic project in philosophy, this would require that philosophy look beyond itself to other disciplines. It would be especially helped by disciplines that articulate structures of thought and experience characteristic of youth and show how these structures persist in, animate, and destabilize our adult self-understanding, often in ways we do not acknowledge or expect.

This all suggests that philosophy should look to psychoanalysis. On several occasions Williams all but makes this suggestion himself, but he never explicitly pursued it.[12] Yet in light of his interest in the ways we are shaped by history, his idea that the past keeps us alive 'often in hidden ways', and his interest in our defensiveness about our own history and our fantasies of maturity and authority, there is a sense in which, in Williams, psychoanalysis is always just around the corner.

Here are three interrelated ways of thinking about the psychoanalysis that show its relevance to the project of this paper.

First, psychoanalytic theory aims to articulate developmentally earlier forms of unconscious thinking, with an eye to understanding how they lay the ground for and persist in adult thinking, in both

[12] For example, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams (2011 [1985]) suggests that a psychological theory, 'particularly of a psychoanalytical kind … will support some ethical conceptions as necessary to human happiness' and in 'Naturalism and Morality' (1995), when spelling out his idea of a non-moralized psychology, Williams observes that 'Thucydides and (I believe) the tragedians, among the ancient writers, had such a psychology; and so, in the modern world, did Freud' (Williams 1995: 202). See Lear (2004).

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'healthy' and 'unhealthy' forms. Second, psychoanalytic theory aims to articulate the basic forms of psychic and psycho-sexual struggle in which we are engaged, consciously and unconsciously, throughout our lives: for example, the struggle to differentiate and connect inner and outer, self and other; the struggle to live with dependence and independence; the struggle of managing, elaborating, and expressing sexuality and aggression; struggles with authority, both one's own and others', both real and fantasized; the work of mourning; the struggle to feel alive. While there may be distinctive imaginative, cognitive, erotic, or social resources, and distinctive struggles, that are typical of different phases of life, psychoanalysis argues that the basic form of these struggles recurs. The third point is methodological: it is axiomatic for psychoanalysis that the lines between the so-called normal and the so-called extreme or pathological are not firmly drawn, and this is because the so-called extreme makes use of the same psychic materials as the so-called normal (Freud himself tended to use such hedging, qualifying phrasing and air quotes when discussing 'normality').[13] Because of this, studying the extreme or pathological instances is productive for shedding light on the dynamics that are also in play in the normal. In Jonathan Lear's (2017) words, there is 'wisdom won from illness'.

But in this paper, I am concerned not with infancy or childhood, but with youth. In psychoanalysis, youth is sometimes described as a 'second individuation process' in order to signal that individuation struggles of childhood recur, in new form, in this period. While there are different psychoanalytic approaches to youth and adolescence,[14] and while we should of course be cautious about essentialist statements about *youth as such*, here I consider some remarks by British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, writing about youth in mid-century Britain (he makes no presumption to speak about youth at all times and in all places).[15,16] I want to highlight a few of his observations about the struggles and needs that typify this period, though are not

[13] The view being rejected is that there are physiological or inherited traits that make neurotics different in kind from non-neurotics.

[14] See also Freud (1903) *Three Essays on Sexuality*; Blos (1962; 1967); Deutsch (1967); Erikson (1968).

[15] For other philosophical engagements with Winnicott, see: Butler (2015); Honneth (1995; 1999; 2007); Nussbaum (2003).

[16] Winnicott considers the major changes and factors that are specific to the time and place he is studying: treatment for venereal diseases, contraceptives, and the atomic bomb. Were we to go into more detail about what major changes and factors to consider in reflecting on youth now, we would have to discuss the climate crisis and the digital revolution.

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exclusive to it, which are relevant to our purposes and will prepare our discussion of shame.

In 'Adolescence: Struggling Through the Doldrums' (first given as a lecture to health care workers in 1961), Winnicott writes that what must be faced during youth is 'the problem of existing' or 'the struggle to feel real'.[17] Youth marks an amphibious period of change, with the individual no longer a child and not yet an adult. In these years, the young person is typically leaving or has left the family, with its loved and hated objects, its figures of authority, and its terms for understanding self and world, and is seeking out new loves and hates, new terms of understanding, and new sites of identification. Youth is in-between. As Winnicott puts it, youth is a time of waiting (2016 [1961]: 193).

Crucially (at least in so-called modernity), there is no one answer or solution to these problems, no one way to exist and feel real. As such, youth is a period of experiment. In this time of feeling acutely 'unreal' and trying out all sorts of ways to 'feel real', young people must also navigate their relationship to what Winnicott calls society's 'false solutions:' identities, projects, activities, lifestyles, jobs, relationships, *etc.* that are presented as solutions to the problems of existing. For Winnicott, refusing false solutions is crucial to youth, and essential for avoiding the development of a compliant or 'false' self. In this period, there is much trying without knowing what one is doing or what one wants or what one like; there is intensity of feeling and bodily transformation (hormonal, neurological, morphological); there are experiments in living and attraction to adventure; there is concern with authenticity and personal expression, and with style and appearances; there is disappointment, frustration, anger, and disgust at the world's 'false solutions;' there is so much exposure and so much surveillance, and so many occasions for guilt and shame. And there is also a lot of boredom, listlessness, restlessness, and waiting.

Here is a passage that brings Winnicott's several observations together:

[17] Some philosophers view childhood and youth as a 'predicament' insofar as children and youth lack valuable or ultimately valuable capacities (for instance, autonomy) that adults have. On this conception, youth is a predicament in the specific, privative sense of *lacking* capacities (see Hannan 2018; for a discussion see Gheaus 2021). This is not Winnicott's view. For a recent psychoanalytic discussion of the struggle and need to feel real, see Adam Phillips "Dead or Alive" (2013).

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> Young people can be seen searching for a form of identification which does not let them down in their struggle, the struggle to feel real, the struggle to establish a personal identity, not to fit into an assigned role, but to go through whatever has to be gone through. They do not know what they are going to become. They do not know where they are, and they are waiting. Because everything is in abeyance, they feel unreal, and this leads them to do certain things which feel real to them, and which are only too real in the sense that society is affected. (2016 [1961]: 192–193).

Winnicott cautions that the worst thing that 'we' – adults, caretakers, educators, society – could do is *cure* youths' struggles, either by solving their problems for them or by pushing them into a 'false maturity', each of which deprives them of 'their greatest asset: freedom to have ideas and to act on impulse' (1968: 166). These attempted 'cures' treat the struggles of youth as if they were inessential and could be skipped or short-circuited, which effectively suggests that youth itself could be skipped or short-circuited, as though it were just a phase of contingent confusion that we adults can see clearly because we adults have solved and surmounted it. Against these efforts to cure – that is, defeat – youth, the point, Winnicott insists, is to recognize that we – adults, society – are *challenged*. Thus, Winnicot writes, 'society needs to include this [challenge] as a permanent feature and to tolerate it, to react affectively to it, in fact to come to meet it, *but not to cure it*. The question is, has our society the health to do this?' (2016 [1961]: 194).

For the purposes of this paper I am interested in the idea that youth involves confronting 'the problem of existing' and 'the struggle to feel real', where the socially-authoritative, normative, normalizing solutions to these problems are experienced as 'false'. In this period of feeling *un*real, young people seek experiences that 'feel real'. Such experiences might be, for example: intensely pleasurable or painful; distinctive, unusual, or unconventional; risky, rebellious, and adventurous; socially or politically transformative or transgressive; risky, rebellious, and adventurous; creative or destructive; they might involve feeling seen or feeling understood, whether by loved ones, peers, admired adults, or by artists and works of art, or they might involve a sense of privacy, secrecy, or unknownness; or the sheer intensity of aesthetic experience might be a way of feeling real. This is not an exhaustive list, and in some circumstances experiences that realize these qualities could make a person feel *un*real rather than real (including 'feeling seen'; Winnicott begins his paper observing that adolescents do *not* want to be understood).

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Experiences that realize these qualities will typically be directed at other particular aims and goods, for example, love and friendship, a political cause, an artistic obsession, *etc.* The latter will provide the more explicit reasons for pursuing these experiences; a person rarely cites 'to feel real' as their reason for acting. Moreover, Winnicott's emphasis on 'feeling real' must not obscure the fact that young people often have good ethical and political reasons for acting, say, transgressively or confrontationally or destructively, even as such actions *also* meet the need to feel real, and may be attractive in part for that reason. This should not be conceived as a kind of experiential addendum, but can be an essential dimension of the ethical and political actions themselves.

In fact, Susan Sontag (1966) addressed a concrete case of this kind of complexity in her essay 'What's Happening in America?'. The *Partisan Review* distributed a questionnaire asking contributors to address the pervasive anxiety in and about American life in the mid-1960s, and one of its specific prompts was: 'do you think any promise is to be found in the activities of young people today?' Sontag answers 'Yes'. She then considers the criticism that young people's 'mode of existence' – for example, the way they dress, style their hair, dance, take drugs; their 'blurring of sexual differences' (1966: 198) and their pursuit of 'sexual freedom' (1966: 200) – 'undercuts radical politics, and its moral visions, altogether' (*ibid.*). According to this criticism, young people's political commitments could not be taken seriously because they were also interested in style and experiences. As she writes, the fact that 'the same kid joins SNCC' *and* 'smokes pot and is bisexual and adores The Supremes is seen as a contradiction, a kind of ethical fraud of intellectual weak-mindedness' (*ibid.*). To which Sontag responds, frankly, that 'radicalism is as much an experience as an idea' (1966: 201) and as such 'there is no incompatibility between the exploration of inner space and the rectification of social space' (1966: 202). Sontag ends her essay with the hope that 'we' adults will start listening to young people, and this means both to their specific political arguments *and* to their capacity to integrate political commitment and the need for 'experience', or in Winnicott's words, the need to feel real.

Williams' central proposal is that in turning to the past, philosophy can work to 'lay bare certain structures of thought and experience, and above all, ask questions about their value to us', where this involves clarifying what of the past still remains 'alive' in us and 'is helping (often in hidden ways) to keep us alive'. Winnicott's reflections on youth invite us to consider how the struggle to feel real remains alive in us and is keeping us alive. Indeed,

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we could read Williams' own preoccupation with 'authenticity and self-expression' and with 'finding your deepest impulse and following it' as expressions of and continuous with the struggles of youth (and these are the very features of Williams' thought that get characterized as 'romantic'; see Fricker 2020: 927). Concern with authenticity, self-expression, and following one's deepest impulse sound like concerns to find forms of identification that do not let one down in the struggle to feel real. Or we could follow a less liberal-individualistic route and consider what kinds of communities and experiments in living allow its members to 'feel real', and assessing the 'health' of our society in terms of its capacity to meet these needs.

My aim here is not to defend these approaches, or to endorse Williams' concern with authenticity and personal expression. The point is, first, methodological: youth represents a kind of history, with some characteristic structures of thought and experience, from which we can learn but only if we are able to recognize ourselves in them and see how they keep us alive. Second, I have interpreted some characteristically 'Williamsian' ethical and philosophical preoccupations with authenticity, personal expression, and finding your deepest impulse as expressive of and responsive to the struggles characteristic of youth. Reflection on these Williamsian ethical and philosophical preoccupations would be deepened by thinking about youth and our relationship to youth.

In this paper's final section and using this interpretive lens, I want to pursue another of Williams' central preoccupations in greater detail. Experiences in which we struggle to 'feel real' are also the kinds of experience that can occasion *shame*. And shame is sometimes thought to be an emotion that is especially pronounced in youth. So, in light of Williams' proposal that philosophy needs history, in light of psychoanalysis' proposal that seemingly past struggles and strategies persist into adulthood (often unconsciously), and in light of Winnicott's particular proposals about youth – the problem of existing and the need to feel real – my question is: how can all this inform philosophical reflection on shame? How can this multiply historical framework and these particular observations contribute to Williams' analysis of shame? My remarks will be somewhat suggestive and far from comprehensive. The aim, again, is to indicate the fruitfulness of reflecting on shame through the structures of thought and experience characteristic of the past of youth.

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5. Williams' Shame

In *Shame and Necessity* Williams' wager is that recognizing the ways we emphatically respond to and understand Greek tragedies can deepen and transform how we understand ourselves. More specifically, this can help us understand a cluster of interrelated ethical concepts, including responsibility, regret, guilt, and shame. One of Williams' main objectives is to rescue the ethical significance of shame from what he takes to be an unrealistic, guilt-oriented, moralistic Kantian framework, which analyzes shame as superficial, heteronomous, egoistic, un-modern, immature (SN: 75–76). Less explicitly, Williams is also rescuing shame from another post-Homeric thinker, Aristotle, for whom shame is a learner's emotion, appropriate only in youth (NE: 1128b), which is again to say, immature.[18] Williams thus opposes progressivism not only about the Greeks, but about shame itself. I want to propose that retaining or reviving a sense of the relationship between shame and youth can deepen our understanding of both shame and Williams' distinctive account of shame. I will highlight four aspects of Williams' account of shame: a) it calls for genetic analysis, b) *contra* Aristotle, its object or occasion is not restricted to the voluntary, c) it is not a restrictively moral emotion and may even be occasioned by efforts to 'reconstruct or improve oneself' (SN: 90), and d) shame is dense and typically, to some extent, opaque.

Williams begins his account of shame claiming that 'the basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition' (SN: 78), but he qualifies this in the Appendix by proposing that the real root of shame, and so the real meaning of 'being seen' is *exposure* in the sense of inadequacy, loss of power, or being at a disadvantage.

[18] In Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle considers various virtues and their attendant vices, and in the final chapter, he turns to shame. Breaking with the Homeric tradition, Aristotle argues that shame is actually not a virtue but an emotion, and an emotion felt properly only for voluntary actions (NE: 1128b26). Moreover, shame is not an emotion proper to adults, but only to youth. He writes: 'the feeling [of shame] is not becoming to every age, but only to youth. For we think young people should be prone to the feeling of shame because they live by feeling and therefore commit many errors, but are restrained by shame; and we praise young people who are prone to this feeling, but an older person no one would praise for being prone to the sense of disgrace, since we think he should not do anything that need cause this sense'.

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Shame is the feeling of 'unprotectedness' (SN: 220–221) *vis-à-vis* some other, whether real or imagined. Shame is thus at once a self-regarding and inter-subjective emotion, bound up with the experience or feeling of being seen (Aristotle – Rhet. 1384a18 – says 'shame dwells in the eyes'). Williams goes on to argue that early experiences or feelings of being seen are internalized (such that no actual other or observation is needed) and attach to increasingly 'ethical' content (such that shame comes to carry genuine social, ethical weight). On Williams' genetic, developmental account, proto-shame and early experiences of shame are responses to real exposure and unprotectedness *vis-à-vis* some actual, more powerful other, which relation is then internalized, at which point the imagined internal other is, so to speak, fitted out with ethical content, such that feelings of shame will track, at least in part, what is shameful in one's community or culture. Hence its role in moral development.[19]

What the psychoanalytic frame adds to Williams' genetic account of shame is the idea that the developmentally earlier structures and exemplary scenes of shame are not fully surpassed but are dragged forward and 'haunt' present, adult experiences. Hence shame's distinctively regressive feel. Feeling 'seen' and 'unprotected' in adulthood returns us to the position of youth and even childhood. This helps explain why shame's phenomenology of exposure and unprotectedness has a distinctively developmental or 'temporal' dimension: feeling inadequate or feeling seen inappropriately feels childish, youthful, immature, regressive. This is at least part of the reason that the experience of shame can itself feel shameful.[20]

If shame is occasioned by being or feeling exposed and at a disadvantage, this immediately indicates that apt occasions for shame will not be restricted to voluntary actions or omissions. Shame may also be occasioned by some perceived 'failing or defect' in one's person

[19] Williams's internalization account of the development of proto-shame, where a real other is needed, to shame proper, where no real other is needed, almost exactly mirrors Freud's account of the development of guilt proper in Chapter 7 of Civilization and its Discontents.

[20] In his discussion of Williams, Michael Stocker wonders why theorists, including Williams, focus on 'primitive' and 'florid, pathological, major shame, or the shame of troubled people', rather than the 'well-contained and limited' shame of 'mature adults' (Stocker 2009: 153). Without denying the possibility of the latter kind of shame, we can see that if adult shame recalls, at least to some extent, earlier structures and exemplary scenes of shame, then focus on 'primitive' and 'florid' shame is justified.

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(SN: 90), and by 'thoughts or desires or the reactions of others' (SN: 93). What is key is that shame involves experiencing oneself – not just what I do but 'what I am' (SN: 93) – as both exposed and inadequate in the eyes of some actual or imagined, internalized other. Moreover, the shame-occasioning sense of exposed inadequacy need not involve any narrowly *moral* failing or defect (which would be restricted to voluntary acts and omissions). For instance, recalling Max Scheler's famous example, I might feel shame when I catch the way someone else is looking at me – desirously, for example – even if moments before I felt good or confident ('adequate') about myself (or, of course, I might be thrilled, or ashamed and thrilled at once).[21] In such cases, it is not just that I am exposed to their gaze, but to their imagination (or my fantasy of their imagination). Shame thus seems to be an emotional registration of the limits to what I can control, about myself (actions, desires, thoughts) and about others' reactions.

Again, it makes sense that this emotion would be acutely or frequently felt in youth, when so much of one's life *is* out of one's control *and* when the reactions of others do matter so deeply. Further, it seems that many efforts to 'feel real' would tend to occasion shame, since such efforts are often experimental, uncertain, risky, vulnerable, exposed to the judgment of peers and adults, and where the stakes are felt to be high.

In fact Williams himself argues that 'shame may be expressed in attempts to reconstruct or improve oneself' (SN: 90), though he does not elaborate this compressed proposal. But if we recall his concern with authenticity and following your deepest impulse, and if we recall the connection between these concerns and the struggle to feel real, then we might elaborate Williams' proposal along the following lines: if one is trying to change, to reconstruct oneself, to find a way to feel real, then one will be liable to shame, that is, to feeling exposed, unprotected, inadequate. Changing or trying to change is vulnerable. Here, the imagined other might be a personification of the new ideal that is guiding one's efforts to change *or* it might be the still-authoritative personification of the norms that one is attempting to shrug off. It is also plausible that change, especially trying to change in a way that is 'authentic' or 'feels real' or that 'challenges' society, will be coded as youthful, suggesting that youth is the proper

[21] This example is a reference to Scheler's famous example of the nude model who was not ashamed of her nudity until she notices that the painter is looking at her desirously. Williams discusses this (SN: 220–222).

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time for experimentation and transformation, whereas adulthood is the time for settled character and reconciliation to society. (Thus middle-aged efforts to change may be dismissively described as a 'mid-life crisis').[22] Changing and trying to change later in life may occasion shame for this reason, from a complex feeling of exposure, inadequacy, and youthfulness. And while in one sense, we might want to say there is nothing to feel ashamed of, in another sense there *is* cause for shame, just because changing and trying to change *do* involve feelings of exposure, inadequacy, unprotectedness, even if paired with powerful feelings of vitality, rebelliousness, transgressiveness, and contempt for normative authority, that is, with feeling real. Thus shame and feeling real may be part of the same experience.

The final point from Williams to discuss here is his suggestion that while guilt is relatively clear and impersonal, shame is dense, typically opaque, and quite personal. Williams writes that

> [shame] may be a matter of discovery for the agent, and a difficult discovery, what the source of the shame is … Just because shame can be obscure in this kind of way, we can fruitfully work to make it more perspicuous, and to understand how a certain action or thought stands to ourselves, to what realistically we are and to what we can want ourselves to be. (SN: 93)

Williams begins by suggesting that shame is typically opaque because we can feel shame without quite understanding why. For instance, I might consciously, righteously believe that I have nothing to be ashamed of, and yet feel it; or I might not know why my shame is so extreme or repetitive; or I might not be able to prize my identity apart so as to neatly separate the shameful bits from the decent bits. The 'density' of shame is meant to reflect this idea that shame is not neatly tethered to just one discrete action or occasion; rather shame seems to 'pack in' much more. Thus shame, more than guilt, calls for interpretation, self-interpretation. Here too, the idea of youth is instructive. It might seem that a mature person should 'know herself', as though there were nothing to 'discover', or that an autonomous agent should not be vulnerable to shame with respect to standards she rejects. But if we allow that youth is not, or not just, a phase of life to surpass, but also comprises certain structures and struggles that remain alive in adult life, then we will be better able to

[22] Though Setiya (2017) resists the dismissive or pejorative construal of the mid-life crisis.

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allow that adult life, will involve occasions of opaque shame which signal there is something still to learn or discover about who one is. Shame may be a first indication that one wants to change or is already changing.

Because of this, in some cases the feeling of shame may itself be an experience that allows one to 'feel real'. This is counterintuitive, given that in shame 'one's whole being seems diminished' and the expression of shame 'is not just to hide, or hide my face, but the desire to disappear, not to be there' (SN: 89). Shame thus seems to involve feelings of annihilation, of unreality. But when shame is animated or occasioned by efforts to feel real, to change or improve, to find one's deepest impulse and follow it, and if shame and can occasion an exploratory relation to oneself as real (dense, thick with history), then the experience of shame can, potentially, be a painful way of feeling real. Shame can function as a kind of emotional proof that one is not 'characterless self' or a 'pure will' untouched by the world, but rather a particular person in time, with a particular history, within a particular world, with its own particular history, ever exposed to – which is to say *real for* – others.[23] This is one way shame can be salutary.[24,25]

This could in turn shed light on Williams' interest in tragedy. Williams reminds his reader several times that we are not tragic

[23] This is one way of articulating the significance of shame for Sartre. Shame involves consciousness of myself as an object for the other, where the other thereby mediates my relation to myself. While Sartre sometimes characterizes this as an almost disastrously alienating moment, I am suggesting that it can be construed as existentially grounding and reality-conferring.

[24] While these are not her terms, I find Cheshire Calhoun's (2015) analysis of shame aligned with this idea. Calhoun argues that we are not only vulnerable to (apt) shame in response to others' judgments that we endorse or respect. Rather, we are vulnerable to shame with respect to the responses of other co-participants in some shared practice of morality. As she writes, 'taking others seriously as co-participants in a moral practice means giving their opinions 'weight' – and thus the power to shame' (Calhoun 2015: 50). Vulnerability to shame can thus be understood as an intense affective apprehension of one's own irreducibly social, not fully autonomously formed reality. Williams makes a similar point about our irreducibly *social*, not fully autonomously formed reality when he writes that the idea that shame is 'heteronomous' 'if true at all, is true only at a much deeper level than is usually suggested' (SN: 81; see also SN: 158).

[25] This is how I read shame in the work of Annie Ernaux. See Russell (2025).

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heroes and should not model our lives on tragic heroes. He ends the text observing that if we find in Greek tragedies 'a special beauty and power', if we find them compelling, then we might learn to put them 'or bits of them, to modern uses' (SN: 167). That is, we might learn from them, and learn about ourselves. Without denying that we might learn from them, it is important not to downplay the significance of the intense, vital experience of 'beauty and power'. Tragedies both depict the awesome impact of sheer actuality, and they can make that kind of awesome impact on their audiences. This is part of the attraction of tragedy. Experiencing the sheer intensity of tragedy, its special beauty and power, can itself be a way to 'feel real' – for example riveted, spoken to – where this will involve, at the same time, a feeling of the ancient past as real for us now – riveting us, speaking to us. My hope is that by this point we can see that while *feeling real* may not be the only attraction or value of tragedy or aesthetic experience more broadly, it does meet a *real* need.

6. Conclusion

Towards the end of 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', Williams considers how a 'young' philosopher would respond to his proposal that philosophy must engage with history. Williams notes that the young philosopher will likely worry that this is asking too much, 'there is too much we need to know' (PHD: 494), and Williams admits there is truth to this. He then admits that the kind of essay that he has written – musing retrospectively on the state of the discipline, worrying about its future – is typically written by 'senior' professors, perhaps in the final years of their career, perhaps anxious to communicate what they know to the 'young'. He then quotes a passage from Nietzsche:

> It quite often happens that the old man is subject to the delusion of a great moral renewal and rebirth, and from this experience he passes judgments on the work and course of his life, as if he had only now become clear-sighted; and yet the inspiration behind this feeling of well-being and these confident judgements is not wisdom, but *weariness*. (*Daybreak*, 1997 [1888]: 542; quoted in Williams, PHD).

While cryptic – both Nietzsche's aphorism and Williams' unelaborated use of it – I take it that Williams is trying to acknowledge that 'the old man' with whom he here identifies believes or feels that his age confers clear-sightedness and wisdom, in contrast with the

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naivete of youth. The old man believes that the youth have something to learn from him, just in virtue of his older age, while he has nothing to learn from youth, since he has surpassed it. And yet Nietzsche suggests that what fosters this progressivist confidence is actually a kind of fatigue, apathy, and resignation: no more change. Williams moves on from these oracular words without comment, but his silence indicates some serious uncertainty about the authority granted by his 'seniority'.

To close this essay celebrating Williams' writing, my own experience reading Williams sometimes involves 'feeling real'. I imagine that those of us who are attracted to his philosophy are attracted both to what he says – his particular philosophical ideas and positions – and to how he says it. His writing has an impact; it is difficult, opaque, and intense, as though he were trying to stay alive to reality in its difficulty, opacity, and intensity, and to avoid false solutions. This can also make it difficult to write about, since in an effort to adequately inherit him and meet his forcefulness there is a temptation to imitate. But the spirit worth preserving in the temptation to imitate is that in trying to inherit Williams' lessons, both substantial and stylistic, we are attempting to reaffirm and respond to the challenges he posed to professional philosophy.

I have pursued one way of inheriting, while transforming, Williams' project of inheriting the past and challenging our sense of the present. If philosophy is (still) concerned with *how we are to make the best sense of our life*, and if this requires learning from history, then we should look not only to our cultural and phylogenetic pasts, but to our ontogenetic pasts insofar as they contribute to and 'haunt' our present. There are many ways of pursuing this project, and I've only indicated one direction. My hope is to have shown that recalling and recognizing youth is one way of learning from the past, and so one way of challenging, deepening, and even productively estranging our present self-understanding, including our philosophical self-understanding. I have also suggested that learning from youth as history could be part of an effort to listen to and learn from the actual youth in the world and to recognize the ways that youth could productively challenge and change philosophy.[26]

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