The Romantic Roots of Internalism

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Abstract. Bernard Williams's 'internal reasons thesis' makes it a necessary condition of an agent having reason to perform an action that the action stand in some non-trivial relation to the agent's own 'subjective motivations' (desires, aims, projects, etc). This thesis, if true, appears to rule out standard forms of moral realism – roughly, the claim that there are moral facts, independent of human attitudes or practices, that obligate us 'categorically', irrespective of our own particular desires. This paper attempts to explore the roots of this thesis in European intellectual history and to reveal its affiliations with the romantic tradition. We aim to reveal, first, how Williams transformed the inchoate impulses of historical forms of Romanticism by articulating their essence in a style familiar within Anglophone academic philosophy. We then aim to show that Williams's transformation of those inchoate impulses amounts not just to a translation of familiar concerns into more technical language, but rather, to a transformation of the romantic inheritance itself.

Twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy saw the emergence of various self-styled 'analytic' movements that had roots in older traditions: 'analytic Marxism' or 'analytic Thomism' come to mind. But was there ever an 'analytic Romanticism'? Romanticism is a difficult – perhaps a uniquely difficult – case. There is no one author who could be uncontroversially described as articulating 'the' romantic philosophy. Worse, Romanticism as a sensibility or temperament or orientation was never confined to written texts, still less philosophical ones. Isaiah Berlin's lectures on the subject, collected in a volume titled *The Roots of Romanticism*, despairs at the prospect of settling on a definition: how can there be one thing that is at the same time 'the exuberant sense of life of the natural man' but also 'pallor, fever, disease, decadence'? How can

it be 'the confused teeming fullness and richness of life' but also 'peace, … harmony with the natural order, … dissolution in the eternal all-containing spirit'? How can it denote 'ruins, moonlight, enchanted castles' but also 'the accustomed sights and sounds of contented, simple, rural folk'?[1] Can one term pick out what is shared by artistes as different as Wordsworth, Delacroix and Schubert?

We freely admit that the very idea of an 'analytic Romanticism' may appear a contradiction in terms. But Romanticism was (among other things and to some extent) a *philosophical* project. We find it plausible that there must be certain characteristically romantic theses that can be reconstructed in terms distinct from – maybe even foreign to – the original form of their expression, but nevertheless retaining something of their essential spirit. Berlin himself, despite his reservations about the possibility of a unifying definition, was willing to say that there was, in the years 1760 to 1830, 'a great break in European consciousness' – something that connected the followers of Victor Hugo to France to the painters and poets who read Schlegel brothers and Goethe in Germany, and those influenced by Byron and Coleridge in Britain. Berlin termed this attitude a form of 'idealism', in its everyday rather than philosophical sense: 'What people admired was wholeheartedness, sincerity, purity of soul, the ability and readiness to dedicate yourself to your ideal, no matter what it was.'[2] Elsewhere, he took the romantic outlook to consist essentially in two elements: 'the free untrammelled will and the denial of the fact that there is a nature of things'. These were, he continued, 'the deepest and in a sense the most insane elements in this extremely valuable and important movement'.[3] Berlin, of course, proceeds to elaborate and qualify this précis, but for our purposes, it will suffice as a characterisation of something we

[1] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 27–8.

[2] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 22.

[3] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 94.

shall term 'vulgar Romanticism', the form of the view from which other forms descend by dialectical evolution.

Another way to clarify (our use of) the term is to ask: what is it to *deny* Romanticism? If Berlin's two elements – the free untrammelled will and the claim that there is no 'nature of things' – are taken to be the essence of Romanticism, the opposite of Romanticism might be termed 'commonsense realism'. This outlook is expressed in its simplest form in a remark of Iris Murdoch's, who writes in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', that 'the ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and that he is capable of getting it wrong.'[4] Her formulation, with only a little strain, might be helpfully opposed to Romanticism as Berlin described it. To assert that we do not create value by our choices is to deny that there is such a thing as a 'free untrammelled will', one capable of bringing value into a valueless world by its mere exercise. And to assert that some things 'really are better than others', which brings with it the possibility of error and ignorance, is to assert what Romanticism denies, viz. that 'there is a nature of things'.

This paper is an attempt to bring out some ways in which an influential thesis in contemporary (meta)ethics can be seen as a form of 'analytic Romanticism': what Bernard Williams originally termed his 'internal reasons thesis' and has since come to be called 'reasons internalism' or simply, 'internalism'. The internal reasons thesis makes it a necessary condition of an agent having reason to perform an action that the action stands in some non-trivial relation to the agent's own subjective motivations (desires, aims, projects, etc). Should no such relation exist, the agent has no reason to perform that action. The thesis was the centrepiece of Williams's

[4] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 380.

larger project, a project, inspired in some measure by Nietzsche, in opposition to what he called 'the morality system': a particular development of human ethical dispositions centred around notions of guilt and blame and the existence of moral requirements that bind or obligate us, whatever our own particular motivations might happen to be.

We shall not aim to defend the internal reasons thesis, simply to explain its historical antecedents and some relatively under-remarked motivations that underlie it. Our central claim may be stated simply, in terms designed to echo a famous title of Sartre's: *internalism is a Romanticism*.[5] One part of what is distinctive about Williams's writings on this topic we have already alluded to: their bringing to the inchoate and messy impulses of the romantic tradition the rigour and clarity characteristic of modern analytic philosophy. But the converse point also holds: that one of the main points of interest in Williams's thesis is that it brings to analytic moral philosophy the passionate concerns of Romanticism.

This paper has a simple structure. We shall bring out the distinctiveness of our interpretation of Williams as a romantic by contrasting our reading with a more familiar construal of Williams's internalism as a form of naturalism (§1). We shall then aim to bring out what is missing from the naturalist reading of Williams (§2). We shall conclude with an account of how Williams transformed his romantic inheritance by bringing it into contact with the stylistic and ethical concerns of late-20th-century analytic philosophy (§3).

1. Internalism as Naturalism

We have announced our thesis as crudely expressible in a simple slogan: 'internalism is a Romanticism'. Our defence of that claim will take the following form. We begin, inevitably, with

[5] Cf Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

a sketch of the internalist thesis, and a summary of the standard arguments in its favour. We then consider a popular interpretation of the thesis as an expression or application of two Humean principles, empiricism and naturalism. We then cast doubt on this interpretation and consider an alternative. (We give the reader fair warning: the following paragraphs, which summarise the position and Williams's arguments for it, are of necessity rather dense.)

The internal reasons thesis is typically presented these days as the answer to a metaphysical question: what are reasons for actions, and what makes it the case that someone has reason to do something? In Williams's original presentation, the thesis was a semantic one: what do statements about agents' reasons for action *mean*? What are their truth conditions? In what way, if any, do our reasons depend on *psychological* facts about the agents who are supposed to have them?

The term 'reason' in this context is intended to denote what are now generally called 'normative' or 'justifying' reasons, rather than merely explanatory ones. That fact makes the answer to the question of great importance for moral philosophy, a subject that purports to reveal a significant class of reasons for action, viz. *moral* reasons. It also links Williams's rather technical inquiry to an old question in moral philosophy, one that can be traced back to Nietzsche's genealogy of morality, to Kant's account of the categorical imperative, to Hume's sceptic, and of course, to the amoralist figures in Plato's dialogues, who are united in raising in their distinctive ways the question, 'What reason have we (*if any*) to act as morality bids me?' The parenthetical phrase – raised acutely in both Plato and Nietzsche – is what gives the inquiry its special urgency and gravity.

In a recent paraphrase of Williams's view, Kate Manne summarised his position in contemporary terms as follows: 'an agent's normative reasons for action are constrained in some interesting way

by her desires or motivations'.[6] Her intentionally vague phrase, 'in some interesting way', is of course intended to designate a question that a fully spelt out theory of reasons will answer: exactly what is the relation between our reasons and our motivations? Williams's exposition begins with a rudimentary form of the view that he terms 'sub-Humean', indicating that it exists only to bring out the necessity for a less vulgar formulation.

Vulgar or sub-Humean internalism claims that we have reason to do *whatever we want to do*. Quite evidently, this won't do as an account of justifying reasons. Williams briefly explains why not. If you were to empty our water glass and then to fill it with petrol without our noticing, we might wrongly suppose that we have reason to drink what's in the glass when we am thirsty. But we would be wrong. We do not in fact have reason to drink the petrol; we would not be justified in drinking it. We only think that we do because there is something we am ignorant of – some matter of empirical fact. The possibility that one might be mistaken about one's reasons needs to be incorporated into any adequate formulation of this view.

Williams himself endorsed something like the following position: we have reason to do something if there is a 'sound deliberate route' to the motivation to do that thing from our own basic motivations. Those motivations include, of course, our desires, but also our projects, our affections, our loyalties and affiliations.[7]

The view is emphatically not meant to be a selfish one. The point is not that the we only have reason to act in our own self-interest but rather that all our reasons must stand in some relation to our own values, values that may – and for most people will – be altruistic in character. But

[6] Manne, 'Internalism about Reasons: Sad but True?', p. 89.

[7] The simplest canonical formulation appears in Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 35: 'A has a reason to ø only if he could reach the conclusion to ø by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has.'

not everything we want or value will give me a reason. We will have a genuine (normative, justifying) reason only if the relation between those wants and values and our action has passed the two *tests* that are implied by the notion of a 'sound deliberative route'. The first is the test of empirical accuracy; our desire to do something should not be based on a factual misapprehension. The second is a test of logical validity: our desire to do something should not be the consequence of an error in reasoning.

What makes this concept of a reason a recognisably normative notion is that it contains in it the idea that Murdoch thought essential to the sensible untheorized realism of the ordinary person: 'some things really are better than others and that [one] is capable of getting it wrong'. Williams has no difficult in accounting for the realist idea that we are capable of misrecognising our reasons, of supposing ourselves to have reasons we don't in fact have, and of thinking we don't have reasons we do in fact have. But the only sources of error his theory appears to recognise are, it seems, logical and empirical. We may make a faulty inference in our reasoning; we may be guilty of a factual error. But what he does not allow for is a fundamentally evaluative, or moral, error. A moral error, such as it is, only occurs when we make another sort of error: logical or empirical.

So, Williams's view requires what Murdoch called an 'idea of perfection'. What we have reason to do is, very roughly, what a better version of me would want to do. But even a better version of me must still be a version of me, not of anyone else. And that is what makes his view a distant but still recognisable descendant of Romanticism. Williams takes for granted a central idea in the Romantic tradition that Charles Taylor summarises in his book, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, as the idea that there is 'a certain way of being human that is my way'. If I fail to be myself, 'I miss

the point of my life.' The worst crime against Romanticism is not so much immorality as inauthenticity.[8]

Let us take stock: we have tried to identify the roots of the internal reasons thesis in some elements of the historical tradition of Romanticism, and identified him as a contemporary analytic representative of that tradition, one able to formulate its core conviction in the way that contemporary philosophy demands. But even in its domesticated, 'precisified', analytic form – internalism – Romanticism is capable of being as unsettling as its historical forms were to their nineteenth-century opponents.

When Williams presents his view, he is entirely open about what may strike us as its costs. A callous, abusive man who has no desire to be nicer to his wife may indeed have no reason to be nicer to her. If his motivations are what they are stipulated to be, and he is guilty of neither an empirical nor a logical error, his reasons are exactly what he understands them to be. The best we can say to him is that he may have a reason to be nicer to his wife grounded in the fact that he wants to be liked by his friends and that his friends would like him a lot better if he were nicer to his wife. And that may, in the happier cases, be true.

But suppose he were to say, honestly and with full self-awareness, that he didn't care much for the opinion of his friends, or even for having any, then the really may be nothing left to say to him – except perhaps in hope of a miracle or a conversion. All that's left is what we may say about him – that he is callous, a chauvinist, a brute. But we say that for each other, not for his ears, for he has long since stopped listening. (We shall return to this example in the next section.)

Morality, as Williams put it, has no capacity in such situations 'to get beyond merely designating the vile and recalcitrant, to transfixing them or getting inside them'. The idea that it may do so,

[8] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 28–9.

he continued, 'is only a fantasy of ressentiment, a magical project to make a wish and its words into a coercive power.'[9] In this idea is a link back to the idea of historical Romanticism articulated in Berlin's claim about the 'free untrammelled will'. The will – and our subjective motivations – are not, in any obvious sense, 'trammelled' by any hard fact outside the mind.

The argument that Williams himself gave for his position has been found by many readers to be obscure. It relies on an assumption that not all his critics grant, that justifying reasons must be in some way *explanatory*. Williams takes it for granted that if there are such things as reasons, they exist insofar as people act *for* reasons. But how can anyone act for a reason unless those reasons consist in the sort of psychological states that can motivate, and therefore explain, an action? What makes justifying reasons distinct from explanatory ones is that they explain not our actual behaviour – because we may of course fail to recognise and act on our reasons – but of our counterfactual behaviour, or the behaviour of an idealised self.

But it might be asked why we should accept this assumption. Why, if at all, must reasons be explanatory? It is here that Williams's references to Hume in the course of his exposition appear to provide an answer. Hume stands in the history of philosophy for two significant doctrines, naturalism and empiricism. Naturalism, for our purposes, can be characterised crudely as the ontological claim that everything that exists obeys the laws of nature; things that violate these laws, as revealed in our best science, do not exist. Empiricism, characterised in a similarly crude way, is the epistemological claim that the justification of our beliefs comes ultimately from the evidence of the senses.[10]

[9] Williams, 'Replies' in Altham and Harrison (eds.), *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, p. 216.

[10] For a discussion of Hume's views on this question, see Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism*.

A possible reading of the internal reading thesis is available that takes it be simply an implication of these Humean doctrines. The ultimately psychologised picture of reasons afforded by internalism appears to pass both tests: it posits the existence of no entities beyond those whose existence is demonstrated or presupposed by our best science; our knowledge of our reasons requires no mysterious faculty beyond those that give us our ordinary knowledge of our mental states. This reading is supported by the role that Hume plays in Williams's exposition of his view, and moreover, by the friendly remarks Williams has made in numerous contexts about naturalism.[11]

However, the text of the two original papers in which Williams first presented his view suggests at the least the possibility of an alternative reading, one that we shall defend in the next section.

2. Internalism as Romanticism

As is often the case in Williams's work, the dense abstraction argumentation is regularly leavened, and enlivened, by the presence of vivid and arresting examples. His influential critique of utilitarianism, which appealed to the value of integrity and concerns about alienation, is best remembered in relation to the two examples he used to illustrate his claim. The first concerned George, an anti-war chemist, who has to decide whether to accept a job offer from a factory that manufactures chemical and biological weapons.[12] The second concerned Jim, a botanist conducting fieldwork in South America, who is asked by a malevolent junta leader to shoot one indigenous person to prevent the junta leader ordering the killing of twenty.[13] Yet another example that has become famous is that of (a lightly fictionalised) Paul Gauguin, of whom

[11] See, e.g., Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, pp. 22–7 and *passim*.

[12] Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', pp. 97–8 and *passim*.

[13] Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', pp. 98–9 and *passim*.

Williams invites us to consider this question: does the justification his abandonment of his family to go to Tahiti depend on the success of his artistic projects once he gets there?[14] All these examples, while stylised, contain glimpses of human and psychological reality that go beyond what is found in most philosophical thought experiments.

Williams's two main papers on the internal reasons thesis also contain two striking examples. The first is a schematic rendering of the plot of a short story by Henry James, 'Owen Wingrave'; the second, to which we have already alluded in the previous section, is a less detailed account of a man who treats his wife badly. Both examples are worth quoted in full:

> OWEN WINGRAVE
>
> In James' story of Owen Wingrave, from which Britten made an opera, Owen's family urge on him the necessity and importance of his joining the army, since all his male ancestors were soldiers, and family pride requires him to do the same. Owen Wingrave has no motivation to join the army at all, and all his desires lead in another direction: he hates everything about military life and what it means. His family might have expressed themselves by saying that *there was a reason for Owen to join the army.* Knowing that there was nothing in Owen's S [sc. 'subjective motivational set'] which would lead, through deliberative reasoning, to his doing this would not make them withdraw the claim or admit that they made it under a misapprehension. They mean it in an external sense. What is that sense?[15]
>
> NASTY HUSBAND
>
> Suppose, for instance, we think someone [...] ought to be nicer to his wife. We say, 'You have a reason to be nicer to her'. He says, 'What reason?' we say, 'Because she is your wife.' He says – and he is a very hard case – 'I don't care. Don't you understand? we really do not care.' we try

[14] Williams, 'Moral Luck', pp. 22–26 and *passim*.

[15] Williams, 'Internal and External Reasons', p. 106.

> various things on him, and try to involve him in this business; and we find that he really is a hard case: there is *nothing* in his motivational set that gives him a reason to be nicer to his wife as things are. There are many things we can say about or to this man: that he is ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal, and many other disadvantageous things. We shall presumably say, whatever else we say, that it would be better if he were nicer to her. There is one specific thing the external reasons theorist wants me to say, that the man has a reason to be nicer.[16]

The first example is sometimes criticised on the grounds that Owen's family members who make the supposed 'external reasons' claim (i.e. that Owen has reason to join the army) are not very sympathetic, their claim itself very likely false, and that the example therefore does not do much to support the internal reasons thesis. But that certainly cannot be said for the second example, where the external reasons claim (i.e. the man has reason to be nicer to his wife) is likelier to strike readers as true. We do not bring up the examples to assess their argumentative force, only to provide evidence of the romantic background to Williams's arguments.

The two examples above (along with those of George, Jim and Gauguin previously mentioned) all have what we might call a 'romantic moment'. They all concern people – more specifically, men[17] – who are being asked to do something that they would rather not do. More specifically, it is being alleged that they have *reason* to do something that does not align with their own values (or, to echo Williams's own formulation, motivations they already have'). No doubt readers' reactions will differ, but it is likely that readers are likely to find the case of Owen, Jim and George (all of them with a reluctance to be even indirectly implicated in killing) extremely

[16] Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 39.

[17] Williams's 'Moral Luck', pp. 26–7 contains what may be a unique case of his discussing a female protagonist in the context of a romantic choice: Tolstoy's Anna Karenina.

sympathetic, the case of Gaugin at the very least ambiguous, and the case of (what we am calling) the nasty husband actively repellent.

But of course, the term 'romantic' is itself – in our usage, but also as a term of philosophical description – evaluatively neutral. To describe the nasty husband as a romantic figure is to say only, echoing Berlin's formulation, that he has 'the ability and readiness to dedicate [himself] to [his] ideal, no matter what it was'.[18] The fact that the ideals in question are repellent, and his dedication to them pig-headed, does not tell us that he is *not* a romantic, only that he is a romantic of a repellent and pig-headed kind.

Williams is not, we stress, committed to admiring such figures, still less of admiring them unreservedly. He states explicitly that the nasty husband is 'ungrateful, inconsiderate, hard, sexist, nasty, selfish, brutal'. The point remains that a certain kind of statement about such people – viz. that they have *reason* to act differently – is not true. The desire to go beyond saying that the man is nasty, selfish, etc, and to say that he is failing to act on reasons he (unbeknownst to himself) actually possesses, is – as we have quoted Williams saying earlier – 'only a fantasy of ressentiment, a magical project to make a wish and its words into a coercive power.'

These examples and the words just quoted can certainly be read as expressions of a Humean naturalism, of the same kind that are sometimes ascribed to Nietzsche – the figure who is evoked by the reference to ressentiment above.[19] But that sentence can equally be read as Williams making a distinctively romantic point, where the trouble with externalism is not that it violates the ontological strictures of naturalism (by appealing to entities – external reasons – whose

[18] Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 22.

[19] The literature on the precise nature of Nietzsche's naturalism is vast. See, e.g., Emden, *Nietzsche's Naturalism*.

existence he denies) but that it *alienates* agents by demanding that they act for reasons they do not have.

Williams's objection to external reasons statements is not simply that agents are unable (being unaware of these putative reasons) to act on them, but that they could not *under any circumstances* act on them – not without a fundamental transformation in their psychological profiles. *Being who they are*, the characters in Williams's examples cannot have reasons other than those they currently recognise.

Internalism allows for only two ways in which an agent may be mistaken about his reasons. Owen may come to realise that he cares more for family honour than he had known. George may realise that he does not care to place his anti-war convictions – and Gauguin his artistic ambitions – above his responsibilities as a husband and father. And thus, Owen may come to join the army, George to take the laboratory job, and Gauguin to return to his stockbroking job in Paris, all of them acknowledging that they have (and always have had) reason to do so. But that would be because they had always had *internal* reasons to do those things, reasons that they failed to see the first time around because (being guilty of either an empirical or a logical mistake) they had not correctly traced the sound deliberative route from their motivations to the conclusion to act in these ways.

Williams offers two other models for situations in which the external reasons statement may succeed in persuading the recalcitrant agent that he has a reason for action he previously denied having. The first is what he terms 'optimistic' reason-giving: 'we launch them [sc. reasons statements] and hope that somewhere in the agent is some motivation that by some deliberative route might issue in the action we seek.'[20] Perhaps the nasty husband is unmoved by the

[20] Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 40.

accusation of being a 'sexist', but does not, being a refined aesthete, like the idea of being thought a 'brute'. And there may well be a 'sound deliberative route' from the motivation not to be thought a brute – via the factual belief that the most effective way not to be thought a brute is not to *be* a brute – to the motivation to treat his wife better.

The second possibility is 'prolepsis', the possibility that a reason-statement, although false when it is uttered, may engage some other psychological motivation in an agent – for instance, to have the respect of his friends. The statement may thereby effect a psychological transformation that results in a previously recalcitrant agent coming not to recognise a reason he had always had, but rather to *become* the sort of person who does *now* have that reason.[21] Williams proposes that many instances of blame may effect such a transformation; being the target of blame may bring it about that 'if he were to deliberate again and take into consideration all the reasons that might now come more vividly before him' – considerations which 'include this very blame and the concerns expressed in it' – this agent 'would come to a different conclusion.'[22]

To take stock, then, Williams offers what appears to be intended as an exhaustive list of circumstances in which an agent's reasons are other than he takes them to be:

i. The agent is ignorant or misinformed about some point of empirical fact relevant to his reasons.

ii. The agent has made an error in reasoning relevant to his reasons.

iii. The agent has some other motivation from which there is a sound deliberative route to an action he previously supposed he has no reason to perform.

[21] Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 41–2.

[22] Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame', p. 42.

iv. The agent's subjective motivations may be transformed by being the target of blame (or some other reactive attitude).

None of the items on this list make any real concession to the externalist about reasons; reasons, even in this model, remain resolutely internal. However, these are possible ways in which the internalist can capture and vindicate the elements in what the externalist says about such cases as that of the nasty husband that are intuitive and plausible.

The upshot for our present concerns is this: the externalist, of course, holds the internal reasons thesis to be false, and with it, dismisses the concerns of the romantic. If our reasons are external, 'out there', then the fact that certain reasons claims may be experienced by agents as 'alienating' or as assaults on their 'integrity' are neither here nor there. But coming at the argument from the opposite direction, the romantic may well say assert that the fact that the externalist view is necessarily alienating itself provides a reason – an *ethical* reason – to reject externalist views. And this ethical ground for rejecting externalism is quite distinct from those of the Humean naturalist we have considered earlier. Williams's grounds for rejecting externalist theories of reasons are motivated not – or not only – by the desire for a naturalistic ontology but by an ethical objection. This is a general objection to all theories that makes demands of agents that have no relation to anything they care about it – what Williams called their 'actual motivations'.

Williams's well-known objection to utilitarian theories of ethics turns out to be a special case of a much more general line of objection to any theory that ascribes to agents reasons that they do not, and could not, themselves acknowledge – as it were 'from the inside'. That, in essence, is what we claim to be the romantic essence of Williams's philosophy.

3. Romance and Truthfulness

What, then, is 'analytic' about this Romanticism? Certainly, the answer will have something to do with the superficial style in which the internal reasons thesis is expressed. Theories about the truth conditions of statements about when an agent A has reason to ø belong to a quite different aesthetic universe than that inhabited by Shelley, Byron, Novalis or Beethoven. But the presence in Williams's writings on this subject of references to such figures as Gauguin and D. H. Lawrence is a strong suggestion that he hoped that the attentive reader would note the connection between the narrow academic concerns of his writing and the larger 'cultural' currents to which they are a response.[23] This is the feature of Williams's writing that we am inclined to call its *stylistic duality*: the leavening of technicality and formalism with literary and artistic examples not usually to be found in analytic philosophy. The stylistic duality is evidence of what one might call the works' *dialectical* duality: that they are *engaged in two conversations at once*, both with (say) Donald Davidson, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and other figures in ethics and the analytic philosophy of action, and also with the non-academic canon of European thought from the 18th century onwards.

Our use of the term 'style' in this connection is not an admission that what Williams adds to the question is merely superficial. It has been observed in Nelson Goodman's influential article on the supposed distinction between 'style' and 'subject' – that 'subject is what is said, style is how'

[23] In his less well known writings on the subject, Williams also alludes to such figures as Wagner's Tristan and Mozart's Don Giovanni as the sorts of romantic figure for whom he has such a complex and ambivalent attraction. See the essays on these figures in Williams, *On Opera*. For a critical discussion of the romantic elements in these essays, see Nussbaum, 'Moral (and Musical) Hazard'.

– that the 'formula is full of faults.'[24] As Graham Hough, whom Goodman quotes in this connection, puts it, 'is not each different way of saying in fact the saying of a different thing?'[25]

We do not, then, wish to say that Williams's internalism is just a 'different way of saying' something that was said in less prosaic and academic ways by one or other early-nineteenth-century poet. The poet Wallace Stevens is supposed to have said that a change of style is a change of subject.[26] Indeed, Williams himself wrote of the notion of style that in the deepest sense of the word, 'to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do.'[27]

The transformation of the vaunted romantic spirit into the prose of the internal reasons thesis is not just a matter of using more boring words to express the same thought. The thought itself has been transformed by its encounter with a new style, and more importantly, with a new sensibility. The essence of the analytic style, as Cohen notes when he uses it for his reconstruction of Marx's theory of history, is its 'rigour' and 'clarity'. But what becomes of a philosophy and aesthetic marked by their rejection of – or at least ambivalence about – classical ideals when those ideals reassert themselves in the reconstruction of that philosophy?

An unreconstructed romantic may complain of distortion. But Williams's internalism, as we interpret it, is precisely a *reconstructed* Romanticism. It is animated by some of the same impulses, but it has had an advantage that the Romanticism of the nineteenth century did not have: quite simply, of having lived through two more centuries of history. Those two centuries have a good deal to teach us of the risks and perils of Romanticism, most obviously of all, the appropriation

[24] Goodman, 'The Status of Style', p. 799.

[25] Hough, *Style and Stylistics*, p. 4. Quoted in Goodman, 'The Status of Style', p. 800.

[26] Whom Williams seems to have admired, as evidence by his including a long quotation from a Stevens poem as the epigraph to his most important work, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. For a detailed discussion of Williams's relation to Stevens, see Krishnan and Queloz, 'The Shaken Realist'.

[27] Williams, *Morality*, xix.

of romantic ideals that was a central feature of Germanism fascism in the twentieth century.[28] Less dramatically, we are, in the 21st century, better aware of the ethically questionable conduct of the most influential figures inspired by romantic ideals – Wagner's anti-Semitism or (as we have already mentioned) Gauguin's treatment of his wife and children. Our attitude to Romanticism – *now* – can hardly be an uncomplicated matter.

The 'rigour' of an analytic Romanticism is not simply the superficial rigour of formalism. What makes the internal reasons thesis rigorous in comparison to its poetic antecedents is not the use of algebraic notation. Rather, it is the repeated pressure under which Williams places his own formulation, forcing it to confront and come clean aobut its own limitations. The principal such limitation is the temptation of Romanticism to lapse into self-deception or delusion. In his first book, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Williams memorably distinguishes two kinds of moral outlook. The first, most clearly exemplified by religious approaches to ethics, are 'transcendental', appealing to 'something outside human life'.[29] But there are also secular approaches to ethics, that he subsequently labels explicitly as romantic. Such theories –Williams's own account is well worth quoting in full –

> appeal to something *there* in human life which has to be discovered, trusted, followed, possibly in grave ignorance of the outcome. [...] What we [...] have in mind is, for instance, something indicated by a phrase of D. H. Lawrence's in his splendid commentary on the complacent moral utterances of Benjamin Franklin: 'Find your deepest impulse, and follow that.' The notion that there *is* something that is one's deepest impulse, that there is a discovery to be made here, rather than a decision; and the notion that one trusts what is so discovered, although unclear where it will lead – these, rather, are the point. The combination – discovery, trust, and risk – are central

[28] For a guide to the large literature on the relationship between Romanticism and fascism, see Wells, 'Nightmarish Romanticism: The Third Reich and the Appropriation of Romanticism'.

[29] Williams, *Morality*, p. 78.

> to this sort of outlook, as of course they are to the state of being in love. It is even tempting to find, among the many historical legacies of Protestantism to Romanticism, a parallel between this combination and the pair so important to Luther: obedience and hope. Both make an essential connection between submission and uncertainty; both, rather than offering happiness, demand authenticity.[30]

This unexpectedly lyrical passage is immediately followed – in the conventional academic way – by qualifications. Williams notes that the romantic doctrine just sketched is at least incomplete, for 'it has nothing, or not enough, to say about society [...] Perhaps even so far as it goes it rests on an illusion.'[31] The task of an analytic Romanticism must then be to distinguish what is salvageable in Romanticism from the illusions to which it is specially vulnerable.

What illusions are these? It cannot be the illusion that Williams, an atheist, would have found in religious outlooks – roughly, that the God whose existence those outlooks presuppose does not exist. The illusions will rather be psychological, social and political. Even if we adopt the secular Lawrentian motto – 'Find your deepest impulse, and follow that' – a life devoted to that project is fraught with risks: that one will mistake a superficial impulse for something deeper; that one's deepest impulse may be something terrible, and at any rate, incompatible with an ordinary life with other people in society; that in following what one believes to be one's deepest impulse, one betrays other things or people one values; that out of sheer chance, one may be unable to follow one's impulse where it leads.[32] The case of Gauguin is of interest because of how richly it illustrates several of these risks. But the existence and gravity of these risks does not

[30] Williams, *Morality*, p. 79.

[31] Williams, *Morality*, pp. 79–80.

[32] For a more detailed discussion of these risks, see Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, pp. 199–205.

itself imply that the romantic view is false, only – as has already been admitted – that it is risky. And the greatest risk of all is the danger that the romantic deceives himself about those very risks.

It is, then, no coincidence, that the qualifying phrases in the internal reasons thesis have something to do with truth and truthfulness – the two phrases that gave Williams the title of the last of his books to be published in his lifetime. In that book, Williams identifies two dispositions that are at the core of what is informally termed 'truthfulness': Sincerity and Accuracy (the terms are capitalised to indicate their use as terms of art). The first is a matter, roughly, of saying what one really thinks and feels; the second is a matter of getting things right. The enemies of Sincerity are deceit and dishonesty; the enemies of Accuracy include laziness, unclarity and imprecision. Romanticism in its vulgar form may be thought a commitment to Sincerity without the disciplining effects of Accuracy. A reconstructed Romanticism is a *chastened* Romanticism, a Romanticism committed to Accuracy as well as Sincerity; in short, a *truthful* Romanticism.

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