

## A Realist Critique of Moralism in Politics. The Autonomy of Bernard

### Williams's Basic Legitimation Demand

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**Abstract.** In this article I aim to show that one of the criticisms that have been leveled at Williams's Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD), the one that states that it rests on a moral presupposition – that of the equal worth of persons – arises out of a misreading of his realist politics. For this purpose, I will start by sketching Williams's critique of moralism in ethics, which will serve as the basis of later analyzing his realist critique of moralism in politics. Once Williams's arguments have been laid out I will proceed to show that what has been interpreted as the moral presupposition on which he builds his whole project, is nothing more but a misreading of Williams's purposes.

**Key words:** states, legitimation, moralism, politics, realism.

The years 2000's have brought about new challenges for most of the countries worldwide. In the wake of the refugee crisis and more and more terrorist attacks in the West, many states have been shaken and weakened by waves of nationalism and even extremism. This is a direct consequence of the lack of trust in what was once the biggest guarantor of the possibility of living a fulfilling life, namely democracy. Once people grew uneasy with the promises of democracy, liberalism lost its appeal; the politics in some European countries slowly but surely made a transition towards more restrictive and authoritarian political arrangements (see Hungary, Poland<sup>1</sup>) and one of the greatest super-powers, the United States of America, is following in this trend footsteps.

The decrease of trust in democracies and its corollary politics and policies has created the premises for the apparition of governments with authoritarian tendencies that empower various security agencies to enact general surveillance on the people. This is where a vicious circle appears, as people lose trust in states and their power to assure a safe and decent life, and governments treat their citizens as potential criminals whose actions must be known in order to be prevented. As more and more civil liberties disappear (Turkey is a paradigmatic case<sup>2</sup>) and states become egotistical agents not only in the international arena, but also in the relations with their citizens, one seems compelled

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1] The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has become famous for vehemently opposing receiving immigrants in Hungary and, moreover, in his treatment of domestic political opponents one can find echoes of authoritarian tendencies. In Poland, too, the actions of the newly elected right-wing Law and Justice Party has prompted people to take the streets in defense of democracy. This state of affairs has been acknowledged even by the EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in a recent interview for the Belgian journal *Le soir* (Jurek Kuczkiewicz. Jean-Claude Juncker au «Soir»: «Il y a un sérieux problème de gouvernance en Europe». In *Le Soir*, November 11. <http://plus.lesoir.be/67351/article/2016-11-05/jean-claude-juncker-au-soir-il-y-un-serieux-probleme-de-gouvernance-en-europe> (accessed November 24, 2016).

2] According to the 2016 Freedom House Country Report (Freedom House Country Report. 2016. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/turkey>, accessed November 22, 2016)

to approach these problems from a moral standpoint. Hence, many grassroots protest movements have started demanding governors more ethical, human-rights guided international and national policies. These idealists have been accused by some of being utterly unrealistic, while others are praising them for having the courage to demand the introduction in the political environment of something that has been said to have missed for decades: morality.

The two aforementioned positions can be reduced to a pressing issue in political sciences and political philosophy: should politics be informed by morality or is it a totally different domain of thought and action? Is political moralism still viable or has its place been taken by cold-hearted pragmatism? In this article I plan to show that this question is by no means easy and that its answer should not aim at making a clear cut distinction between a politics for the people – infused with morality – and one that is almost identical to ‘real politik’, deeply pragmatic and definitely amoral. For this purpose I will use Williams’ critique of political moralism in order to point to the fact that a middle ground can be reached, one that avoids the pitfalls of the two extreme positions, i.e. either that politics should be developed within a moral framework or that politics is a totally different domain of human thought and activity that should never be informed by or accept influences from the sphere of morality. For this purpose, I will start by sketching Williams’s critique of moralism in ethics. Once William’s arguments have been laid out I will proceed to show that what has been interpreted as the moral presupposition on which he builds his whole project, is nothing more but a misreading of Williams’s purposes.

### I. THE REALIST CRITIQUE OF MORALISM

In order to fully understand Williams’s perspective on moralism in politics, one should at least have a sense of his discontents with modern ethical theory. As this subject has been approached by Williams in painstaking detail, I will only give a brief account of his criticism, one that will serve as the basis for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of his political realism.

Williams starts his critique of moralism in ethics by making a very simple, yet very profound observation: many philosophers have fallen into the trap of trying to uncover universally moral bidding principles and values that ignore real-life contexts and the human psychology. Hence, what some of the most well refined mainstream modern ethical theories lack is the conceptualization and integration in their theoretical bodies of some of the most basic human phenomena, regret and luck.

In one of the first works where Williams approaches the criticism of moralism in ethics, *Ethical Consistency* (1973), he stresses the importance of acknowledging the possibilities of agents experiencing conflicting ethical beliefs. Any theory that tries to give an account of morality that does not incorporate in its body the actual experience of inconsistencies in ‘the moral life’ that people lead is doomed to fail for a very simple reason: not having in view the actual moral psychology of people leads to an artificial

perspective of morality, one that tries to impose principles in order to mold people so that theories will succeed (Hall 2013, 32).

Inconsistencies in ethical and moral beliefs are an integral part of human life and their practical consequence, that of agent-regret (Williams 1973, 170), are central to understanding the complex and contingent phenomena of morality. Neither utilitarianism nor kantianism admit the possibility of regret in the life of moral agents; the first moral theory puts an emphasis on the consequences of actions after a calculation of the pains and pleasures generated by that particular action, thus ignoring the fact that although proceeding with a course of action might have the best outcome in terms of 'the most good', it might still involve doing something wrong, a fact that generates regret in normal human beings. Kantianism is eluding too the possibility of regret by way of promoting the categorical imperative as a universal guarantor of morally justified actions; hence, from a Kantian perspective, once an action passes the test of the categorical imperative the possibility of regret would appear as irrational (1973, 172). Williams's point is that conflict and inconsistency are deeply intertwined with human life and moreover they are an indicator of humanity, thus any theory that tries to ignore this basic characteristic of human psychology would fall into the trap and illusion of trying to build a perfectly 'elegant', complex and refined conceptual apparatus, internally coherent but still useless in the attempt of explaining or even guiding human behavior.

Although Williams's critique of moralism is very profound and complex, what I want to stress here is his insistence of using philosophy in order to give an account of how people *actually* live and not for how they *should* live. The latter perspective has been approached by most moral and ethical theories, which has led to the construction of more and more complex, detailed and technical theoretical bodies that make no appeal to the layperson, who ultimately has no interest and finds no purposes in these complex conceptual schemes. Moral and ethical life should never be analyzed *sub specie aeternitatis* (Hall 2013, 36), from a universal and eternal standpoint, regardless of historical circumstances and contingencies. Ethical and moral theories should necessarily have in their view the inconsistencies, conflicts and idiosyncrasies that populate human life; in other words, they should be embedded in practical life, always conceptualized in a bottom-up fashion, from a historical and contextual perspective that could take into account people's actual dispositions and desires (Williams 1986). Ethical and moral theories are useful in giving us shortcuts of imagining different courses of actions and life-guiding values, but they cannot give individuals a justification for following those particular precepts and principles.

Another important concept in Bernard Williams's ensemble of works is the one of moral luck, developed and refined in *Moral Luck* (1981). What Williams is interested in is to show to what extent and how moral values are influenced by luck. For this purpose the already famous example of Gauguin has been offered: the painter Gauguin has a difficult choice to make, to leave his family in order to pursue his artistic career in a more primitive society where he could more easily express himself or to remain with his family and

renounce all thoughts of fame and artistic mastery. One of the first questions that arises is whether Gauguin's project is a rationally justified one. Williams argues that one cannot answer this questions without knowing if Gauguin succeeded in his endeavor (1981, 36); if this were the case, then it is clear that Gauguin was rationally justified in doing as he did, but if he failed, then his project was unjustified. Given that the rationality of a choice can be assessed (and oftentimes people judge other people's actions this way) only by also assessing its success and given that in a certain way, success is dependent on luck, Williams argues that rational justification also depends on luck. But it is not any kind of luck that plays a role in this assessment, but only the *intrinsic* one that arises from the elements of the action considered and not from external sources (Chappell 2006). So, in Gauguin's case, if he were to be stricken by a lightning, thus unable to paint again, we would not say that his departure was rationally unjustified because this event was not in his control. But if he were to madly fall in love, never able to paint again due to being distracted, then Gauguin would experiment a case of intrinsic bad luck, which would make his entire project rationally unjustified. Williams's point is to show that in certain cases rationality and morality clash, due to the fact that a rationally justifiable action is, to a certain extent, dependent on luck and that morality (understood as a supreme value) is never dependent on luck. As in Gauguin's case, it is clear that an action can be both morally unjustified (even if Gauguin becomes the greatest painter, his leaving his family remains a morally bad, unjustified act) and rationally justified (if Gauguin succeeds, then clearly his project was justified).

So can a morally justified action be rationally unjustified? Through this example Williams aims to show that the Kantian approach to morality, which equates acting morally with acting rationally, is mistaken once again, because it fails to take into account people's incongruities and inconsistencies that arise out of everyday, mundane situations and contexts. More precisely, Williams shows that if morality is not the supreme value, and if it is sometimes less important than rationality, then it follows that morality can also be vulnerable to luck. Morality as a pure system, as it is commonly understood, is vulnerable to luck and this is precisely why, in Williams's view, it loses its status of the supreme and pure value, because it seems that an act is judged retrospectively, in light of the consequences of the concerned action and it does not derive its value only from the act itself (Callcut 2008, 273).

Although my sketch of Williams's critique of moralism in ethics is by no means complete, I tried to highlight the most important elements that will prove useful in understanding his brilliant critique of moralism in politics. Firstly, his wide analysis of consistency, regret and luck in the moral domain are indicators of the fact that for Williams, ethics cannot be separated from the practical, day to day life or from the empirical. Moreover, his insistence on dispositions and character shows that in order to build a theory that really speaks for the people and that aims to build a 'world for the people' one should start from the actual moral psychology of individuals and not from universal principles that have to be juxtaposed on the layperson's life. Philosophy should

be down to earth, meaning that it should always admit the contingency of the concepts, elements or tools that it employs (Chappell 2006) in the process of clarifying the world, and ethics is no different in this respect.

## II. THE 'FIRST POLITICAL QUESTION' AND THE BASIC LEGITIMATION DEMAND

Williams starts charting the relation between morality and politics by identifying the patterns that have dominated political thinking. Thus, he identifies two dominant models that served as a foundation for political theory. The first one, the *enactment* model, “formulates principles, concepts, ideals, and values; and politics (so far as it does what the theory wants) seeks to express these in political action, through persuasion, the use of power, and so forth” (Williams 2005, 1). Williams continues by stressing that the paradigmatic case of this former model is utilitarianism, a theory that is constructed with the ‘panoptical view’ in mind: society is supervised so as to see where are things not conforming to the basic demands of the theory and, afterwards, to correct these incongruities by formulating and imposing new policies that directly reflect the normative principles of utilitarianism. In the second model, the *structural* one, the aim of the theory is to “lay down moral conditions of co-existence under power, conditions in which power can be justly exercised” (2005, 1). These latter model (for which Rawls’s theory stands as a paradigm) constrains what power – and also its practical expression, politics and policies – can do, by having in view an external moral principle.

Despite the differences, both the enactment and the structural model express the “priority of the moral over the political”. And with this short statement Williams is already announcing the motives for his opposition: much of modern political theory retains a moralistic stance, by filling policies, political structures, institutions and other political principles with a moral content. Thus, in general, politics is first conceptualized from outside the political realm, and morality represents a starting point for this endeavor; this is a phenomena that transforms political theory ‘to something like applied morality’ (2005, 2). The error of such endeavors is that they constrain the thought of leaders and other political actors by imposing what they should think “not only in moral terms, but in the moral terms that belong to the political theory itself”. Further on, Williams’s explicit aim is to correct this wrong perspective of the nature of the political by developing an approach that “gives a greater autonomy to distinctively political thought” (2005, 3).

In order to achieve his aim, Williams follows Hobbes’s lines by identifying a ‘first’ political question, that of “securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation”. It is important to understand and fix the meaning of ‘first’ which does not imply that once answered, we already have settled the aims of political theory that will remain the same through and throughout, but only that in order to pose any other questions of a political nature, we have to first answer to this question. Moreover, ‘the first political question’ is not posed only once, but it demands an answer *all the time*, due to its being dependent on historical circumstances. In Williams’s words, answering this

question is a necessary condition for the state's existence, but it is by no means a sufficient one. Admitting that 'the first political question' may have several answers, that translate into different political arrangements, raises the question of *legitimacy*. Despite many historical examples that demonstrate the plurality of answers, Williams points out that only some such political structures are legitimate, namely those that respond to the Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) (2005, 4).

BLD appears when states need to impose order and suppress chaos, a situation that requires the use of power. But solving the problem of disorder does not necessarily imply the appearance of a justified state, because the solution to the problem might easily become part of the problem (Sleat 2010, 486). Those subject to the state's power might find themselves in a situation where their freedom is suppressed in a different manner than in the context of disorder. Hence, they will ask the rulers and implicitly the state what is price they have to pay for order, in other words they will formulate the BLD (Hawthorn 2005, xii).

The role of the state is to redeem its subjects of fear or terror and Williams acknowledged that these sentiments could also be instilled in citizens by states (for example, in authoritarian states citizens most of the times live in a constant state of fear). Hence, the aim of the BLD is to stop states from inflicting pain and terror on its citizens; more precisely the state must "offer a justification of its power to *all its subjects*" (2005, 5). In order to better understand Williams's claim, I will offer an example. The Turkish Republic is considered by almost everyone a legitimate state, its rule of power assures, despite many complaints (especially in the last couple of months), stability and its citizens can enjoy a basic framework of cooperation and safety. But, in Williams's view, Turkey is not a legitimate state, because of its long history of persecuting the Kurdish population, which, unlike any other minority on the Turkish territory, cannot be said to enjoy the same basic liberties and freedoms like the other citizens. In other words, the Kurdish population does not have its safety assured, neither in relation with external enemies, nor with the state's power; thus, for them the Turkish state is not a legitimate one, as it does not offer a justified solution to the BLD. In order for this state to become legitimate, it must incorporate this disadvantaged population, the Kurds, into the mass of its citizens, otherwise these would not have a reason to accept the Turkish state as a legitimate one, if they retain their status of 'internal enemies' and continue to be treated as such (Sleat 2010, 487). Otherwise put, for the Kurds the Turkish state is not offering a solution, but it becomes part of the problem.

But the BLD is by no means a principle belonging to the moral realm, but on the contrary "it is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics ... because it is inherent in there being a first political question" (Williams 2005, 5). Williams's point is as impressive as it is simple; the situation in which a group of people holding a monopoly on violence uses it in order to torture another group of people is by no means a political situation, it is actually the kind of situation that politics must resolve, alleviate or replace. And if a disadvantaged people must accept a state that is inflicting violence upon them, then that state must explain to them "what the difference is between the solution and the problem" without making recourse to violence or coercion. This is the

point where Williams introduces the *critical theory principle* that states “the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified” (2005, 5). Thus, people accepting a certain political arrangement out of fear does not make that state a legitimate one. And this is also where his realism emerges; the demands of legitimacy of a state are not derived from moral principles external to the realm of politics, but they come directly from the practice of politics (Sleat 2010, 488).

Are the demands of the BLD only accounted by liberalism? Not necessarily, Williams would answer, because the demands of liberalism only make sense in a particular context and although any state must pass the BLD so that it could become LEG, it must also accomplish some other secondary demands of the historical context to which it belongs. It only makes sense to us, in the particular historical circumstances we live in, that only a liberal state would pass the BLD test in order to become a legitimate one. Williams grants the fact that there were also non-liberal states that were legitimate, due to the particular specificities of the concerned epoch. Williams synthesizes this very important point through a simple and elegant equation: LEG + Modernity = Liberalism (Williams 2005, 8). Liberalism is by no means a set of moral truths, the results of ahistorical reasoning, that appeared before us and which proves that any other legitimation story before it was wrong.

To much of contemporary political science and philosophy, which sees politics as a form of applied morality, Williams contrasts a view that conceptualizes political thought that does not start from pre-political moral engagements, be they ideals, precepts or principles, but from what is specific to politics. Hence, any attempt of thinking about politics, states or legitimation must “use distinctively political concepts, such as power, and its normative relative, legitimation” (2005, 77). This endeavor is not equivalent to the realism proffered by international relations, which promotes amoralism in inter- and intra-state relationships, but to an attempt of shifting the nature of normative questions asked in political philosophy. As opposed to moralists who build their theories by placing morality first, thus outside the political realm, Williams proposes to ask normative questions and conceptualize morality in the same time as asking the ‘first political question’. Thus he does not reject the possibility of thinking about the relationship of morality to politics, but he only stresses that morality is relevant only when it is conceptualized inside the political. Politics should not take the form and should not be molded starting from an external standpoint, but it should prioritize those questions that are specific to its nature (Hall 2011, 14). The more important and deeper point is that by starting from moral principles outside politics in the attempt of conceptualizing its role, one would miss the true moral psychology of persons which includes the incongruities, conflicts and misunderstandings that are clearly part of the moral lives of individuals.

The main thrust of Williams’s argument is that politics is autonomous in relationship with the moral realm. The pursuit of the answer to the first political question should by no means be constrained by pre-political moral imperatives, but it should rather be the other way around. Only a persuasive answer to the first political question and the creation of

a state that passes the BLD test would offer the necessary grounds for people to pursue moral and ethical behaviors.

### III. DOES THE BLD REST ON MORAL PRESUPPOSITIONS?

The BLD test seems to be, at a first view, a coherent way of settling if and why states are legitimate. This Basic Legitimation Demand is always made by citizens and the answer offered by states must be persuasive to all their subjects. But, once this claim becomes clear, a question arises that, at a first view, seems to threaten the internal coherence of Williams's argument. More precisely, how is the BLD justified? Why must it take this particular form and not any other? Why should *all* citizens, subjected to the state's power, acquiesce and agree with the BLD? In Sleat's words, "Why should we care about the plight of the tyrannized, weak and powerless?" (2010, 496). It seems that the demand that BLD be agreed upon by *all* citizens in a given territory, including the powerless, falls back on one of the central claims of liberalism, that of the equal worth of persons. The problem is that this claim is a moral one, if not one of morality's first amendments, and it rests at the basis of an attempt to emancipate politics from morality.

Sleat argues that in order for "political realism and political moralism to be distinct it has to be the case that it is possible to fully explicate politics and the necessary conditions of legitimacy without recourse to external moral conditions" (2010, 497). It is unclear how Williams manages to sustain the demand of universality implicit in the BLD without making appeal to some moral standards or principles that are from the beginning outside the political real. Moreover, this demand is a strong, normative one that draws on some equally strong normative moral assumptions. It seems that the fact that all citizens in a given territory become the subjects of the agreement to the BLD rests on the essentially moral presupposition that all these individuals are of equal worth. Because all people matter in the same way, they all need a justification of the power imposed on them. Thus it seems that universal acceptance becomes one of the necessary conditions of legitimacy of states, a condition that is clearly derived from the moral realm.

Further on, Sleat argues that Williams's Basic Legitimation Demand is, essentially, a liberal demand (2010, 495), one that has in its view the protection of the most disadvantaged from arbitrary violence because we think that even these marginals are worthy and deserving of our protection. This claim is strikingly similar to the normative core of liberalism that includes in the political body all people subject to a state's power. This similarity demonstrates, in Sleat's view, one of the weaknesses of Williams's attempt of constructing a realist political theory: more precisely, even though he claims that the BLD is derived from within the political, he does not prove it. Moreover, the demand for universality that Sleat sees as being embedded in the BLD – and which is strikingly similar to liberal commitment to the equal worth of persons – cannot be derived but from some moral demands.



For a theory that tries to emancipate itself from the moral, resting on an essentially moral presupposition is extremely problematic. It would also mean not only that Williams's attempt of constructing a realist theory of politics failed, but also that in general such a theory would be impossible. In Sleat's words: "It is very possible that Williams ended up with a view of the political not dissimilar to that of liberalism because he began with the moral assumption that all people matter and therefore deserve a justification of the use of coercive power over them" (Sleat 2010, 496). If we try to retain the notion of universal acceptance within a realist framework, which in our contemporary world would make perfect sense, then we would have to find alternative ways to derive universality from within the political. But this would of course be a difficult and almost impossible task. Thus, morality will always populate, even in a minimal way, our political theories, even the ones that have as a main task the emancipation from the moral.

Even though Sleat's criticism seems, at a first view, a strong and coherent one, it nonetheless rests on a misreading of Williams's legitimation story. The justification of the use of violence, thus the BLD, should be offered only to the citizens or political subjects of the concerned state, and not to all the individuals who happen to be subjects of the state's power. There is a very important difference between the two categories, as Williams puts it:

There can be a pure case of internal warfare, of the kind invoked in the case of the Helots. While there are no doubt reasons for stopping warfare, these are not the same reasons, or related to politics in the same way, as reasons given by a claim to authority. In terms of rights the situation is this: first, anyone over whom the state claims authority has a right to treatment justified by the claim of LEG; second, there is no right to be a member of a state, if one is not a member [...]; third, there is no claim of authority over enemies, including those in the situation of the Helots. In virtue of this last point, such people do not have a right of the kind mentioned in the first point [...] the significant cases for the present problems are those in which the radically disadvantaged are said to be subjects and the state claims authority over them. (2005, 6)

It seems that Sleat has misread Williams's justification and scope of the BLD. It is clear that there is a difference between citizens of a state, considered by the rightful authority political subjects and the external enemies (like the Helots) to whom a justification of power need not be offered (Hall 2011, 79). These latter people, which were not initially members of the concerned state (like the case of the Helots) have no right of becoming members, in Williams's view. An important specification is that the state must wish the 'integration' of these people in order for the BLD to be applied in their case as well. With regard to Williams's historical sensitive account, one might deduce the fact that there might be LEG states where there are also some persons only considered to be 'naked objects of coercion' (2011, 80), like slaves, inmates, captives and so on. This might seem surprising but this is where Williams's realism is most manifest: there is no place for morality outside the political realm, it is precisely the political that can make possible moral claims. More precisely, the state must offer a justification only to those people that are expected to show their allegiance to the state. All states must offer justification to their

citizens, but the scope of the justification and the people to which it is being offered differs in certain historical contexts.

Consequently, there are no hidden moral premises on which the BLD rests, once we realize that Williams did not have in mind the universal applicability of the justification for coercion that states must offer their subjects. It is also important to note that a state has this duty only towards those citizens that are integrated in its political body and that are rightfully believed to be political subjects; this allows for the possibility for certain individuals to be coerced without a justification being offered to them and this particular situation arises only when it also makes sense for those considered to be full citizens (more precisely, it made sense for the Spartans to inflict violence upon the Hellots because they were arch enemies; thus, the Hellots were not seen by the Spartan state as equally worthy of respect as the Spartans).

Such a view might not make sense to us because of the historical circumstances we live in. We would not go around to persecute those that do not belong in our ethnic, religious or national group, not because we would think that the political ideals forbid such a thing, but because we have grown to incorporate in our world view some moral precepts, like the equal worth of persons, regardless of their specificities. This assessment of the equality of individuals that is pervasive in Western societies has nothing to do with politics or with the political arrangements in these countries, it belongs solely to morality. But, because as Williams put it, the application of the BLD in the context of modernity has as its main outcome the birth of liberalism, it is clear why we have such a hard time distinguishing between these two areas of human thought and activity.

There is no moral presupposition that precludes Williams's argument, his only aim is that of distinguishing between political authority and morality. Nothing tells us to whom the BLD must be applied nor its scope, it all rests on the state's shoulders – when it decides who counts as a political subject and who doesn't.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Bernard Williams's aim was to bring philosophy down to earth, to make it speak for the people once again. Even though today, with the development and rise of practical and applied philosophy, his dream has actualized, we should still remember his amendments because even in these pragmatic approaches to morality and ethics there lie certain dangers:

As I say, philosophers now have taken up discussing issues directly. All the philosophical journals are full of issues about women's rights, abortion, social justice, and so on. But an awful lot of it consists of what can be called in the purely technical sense a kind of casuistry, an application of certain moral systems or principles or theories to discussing what we should think about abortion. [...] Well, there is something there, some rational process there. But it is easy for that sort of discussion to become a narrowly quasi-legalistic exercise, or else it becomes so aridly simplified that it really does not help people to think very well. (Williams 1983)

Williams's approach of political philosophy inherits some of the critiques he made of moral philosophy and applied ethics. His main point was to directly confront the purpose and meaning of bringing 'moralism' in politics, a state of affairs specific to many contemporary political theories that try to identify some moral values from which to derive all sorts of normative prescriptions. To a kind of 'applied morality' in politics, Williams contrasts a view that conceptualizes this realm from a distinctively political standard of evaluation, the Basic Legitimation Demand, stemming from 'the first political question.'

In this article I tried to show that one of the most poignant critique of Williams's attempt of building a realist theory of political philosophy, namely that it rests on a moral presupposition, is based on a misreading of Williams's legitimation story. I started by sketching Williams's critique of moralism in ethics, which served as the basis of analyzing his realist critique of moralism in politics. I then proceeded by laying out the main arguments that identify in the Basic Legitimation Demand a moral presupposition, namely that of the equal worth of persons. What I finally showed is that Williams's legitimation story is more nuanced and complex than was assumed by his critics. It seems, in the end, that there is no external moral principle premised in Williams's account namely because he stresses the fact that the state does not have to maintain political relations with all those which he coerces, but only with those whom it sees as true citizens.

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