Tomáš Hejduk

Bernard Williams and Ancient Greek Tragedy

I.

In the thinking of Bernard Williams we find some of the most inspirational considerations about ancient Greek tragedy. First, we will recall his general reflections on possible approaches to archaic literature. Then we will concentrate on the special meaning which Williams ascribes to the tragedy (Sophoclean) as a typical "stark fiction". Lastly, we will try to interconnect Williams' reflections about Greek antiquities and stark fictions with his considerations about politics.

Nowadays, when it comes to possible meanings of the tragedy, Williams reminds us that tragedies and their effect cannot be rightly understood without the knowledge of the context, ideas and conditions of the era when they were written and performed. It is also true that works of tragedians help us to understand a long time passed era when they were born and which they helped to form: "*The tragedy is not just a document that happens to be a drama, or a drama that happens to be in a conventional form styled*

tragic: to understand it in its historical situation involves grasping, among other things, its tragic effect. That connection, again, read in the opposite direction, may tell us something about this tragic effect itself: that its possibility was related to that same historical situation."ⁱ

(Shame and..., s. 13-15, s. 15) Understanding tragedy historically goes hand in hand with understanding history in terms of tragedy. Within this historicism, Williams emphasizes the rule to get rid of our own schemes, "'to filter out later associations".ⁱⁱ If we meet this basic condition, we will not try to explore tragedies for something which does not have any reason to be there – see e.g. Page's criticism of the tragedy because of the lack of "'acute and profound thought" –, but instead of actual political arguments we will find the then polis, the tension between created or dying ethical and political concepts of Athenians. The first meaning of Ancient Greek tragedies can be thus seen in the enlightening of goings-on in the Ancient Athenian polis (state) including roles which were then played by the tragedy itself (ideological indoctrination, criticism of the governing or opposing parties etc.).

Tragedies have thus historical and local meaning, but according to Williams it does not mean that they cannot

i Williams (1993), 13-15.

ii Ibid., 27.

be “actual”. In this sense Williams understands tragedy as a substantial affair transecting history and human societies. In this cadre, he reasons e.g. with Vernant who says that the tragic outlook is “a step in the development of the notion of action”. Williams does not accept this “evolutionary account” and argues that “our ethical concepts (for example the ideas of action, responsibility) are close to those of the ancient Greeks”.ⁱ Williams asserts that some ideas from tragedy (those which are in close relation to our own, which we share with the ancient Greeks) help us to understand ourselves. In this sense, progressivists who claim that by evolution-time we have vanquished the thinking of tragedy, are wrong. Nevertheless, Williams also refuses the opposite argument that tragedy, this ancient Athenian reality, enlightens something fundamental which evades us, which we miss and which can be enlightened only by tragedy. Williams’ approach, which affirms that tragedy is important, cannot be (thirdly) connected either with Nietzsche’s understanding of the gist or the most important value of the tragedy in its timeless aesthetical quality. Tragedy does not stand out of time.

Williams offers a solution which conserves not only the substantiality and universality of tragedy in human life, but also its local character. In comparison to Vernant, who

i Ibid., 16.

thinks that the foundation of tragedies is formed by gods and similar, say supernatural beings, which are nowadays unknown and do not have any impact on our lives, Williams argues that tragedy on the first plays informs us about the role of chance and necessity, fate or non-accidental chance in the life of an individual and society. Gods and other supernatural magnitudes are “only” representatives of universal chance, necessity and fate – thus tragedy does not have to be only a historical rarity for us, but a living experience with life and the world. To fulfill this actuality of tragedy, to make the Greek tragedy work and to make ancient fictions part of modern experience we must, according to Williams, enlarge the so called “”structural substitutions“. Thanks to them we can understand the way in which tragedy lives in contemporary society and human experience: “”*What tragedies demand is that we should look for analogies in our experiences and our sense of the world to the necessities they express.*”ⁱ The question is not whether, but how we share some of the ethical or political conceptions with the Greeks. “”*...how, and in what form, can these thoughts be part of the inheritance of Western Man when the archaic worldview certainly is not...*”ⁱⁱ The antiquity does not have to talk only about itself and to itself,

i Ibid., 19.

ii Ibid., 17-18.

but also to us and about us. However, this is not the first step in the correct approach to tragedies, as recommended by Williams – filtering our later associations, cultural assumptions and schemes – any more. In opposition, we have to change the approach and start looking for similarities among our own, contemporary experiences and practices.

What is for sure, e.g. right in case of supernatural necessities in Homer and all ancient Greek tragedy, gods, daemons and similar magnitudes might be replaced by politics. When we did it, *"the interaction of character or individual project with forces, structures, or circumstances that can destroy them can retain its significance without the presence of gods or oracles."*ⁱ However, such a substitution of the then realities (e.g. ancient supernatural forms for politics) is according to Williams only the first step on the road to the relation or connection of our experience and life to the ancient one. What has to follow is the work on better, correct understanding of the meaning of these magnitudes which are once labeled a chance and necessity and then "politics". As historians and philosophers we have to enlarge and elaborate such structural substitutions. (It is not accurate to speak about "substitution" or to expound this activity as strictly creative. It is rather an ability to see one

i Ibid., 165.

invariant in different realities:" "...there is not one idea of responsibility to be found in every society, but rather a range of notions that vary between them. These notions interpret the materials in different ways, and give them very different emphases in relation to one another."ⁱ) In case of the substitution by "politics" it mainly means to involve ourselves in the actual political practices or processes proceeding in our society and try to understand and reflect "the uncomfortable tragic facts" in terms of these "our own" political activities. In opposition to some critics saying that Williams himself did not follow this program, I dare to argue that at least he proposed such an elaboration by his effort to specify e.g. the hereinbefore mentioned substitution of supernatural necessity for politics. He puts it more precisely that it does not mean "that impersonal political reality can take on the strongly purposive aspect, encouraging to fatalism, that the world sometimes displays under the conventions of Sophoclean tragedy"; on the base of Williams' previous extended description of "the supernatural power's lack of style" it means "a significant analogy" with "the fact that social reality can act to crush a worthwhile, significant, character or project without displaying either the lively individual purposes of a pagan

i Williams (2006a), 68.

*god or the world-historical significance of a Judaic, a Christian, or a Marxist teleology“.*ⁱ

In other words, in this grasp of the universal and cultureally variable or local, Williams aims to *”a philosophical description of a historical reality.“* Williams describes ethical ideas of the Greeks (in case of the book *Shame and Necessity*, i.e. the study of Homer and tragedies, he describes *”in particular, ideas of responsible action, justice, and the motivations that lead people to do things that are admired and respected“*).ⁱⁱ In this description Williams asserts that some conceptions, ideas (ethical, psychological, political) or *”historical formations“* are basically the same as ours and nowadays we rely on them in the same way as Greeks did. As his argument, Williams especially uses the fact that these common ideas are *”so basic to the understanding and construction of human action“*, that we cannot imagine human life without them. He then specifies that *”even if we do not offer any rich body of what are claimed to be substantive universal necessities, there is, in the area of action and its ethical surroundings, a set of very basic ideas...“* In other words, *”certain materials or elements are universal; what is local and various are the ways in which the materials are*

i Williams (1993), 165.

ii Ibid., 4.

arranged, emphasized and interpreted.“ⁱ We then mainly need not only to describe antique appearances of these conceptions, ideas or materials, but also to comparatively analyze their contemporary appearances and to evaluate their operations in light of this “”comparative description“. In short, the emphasis on philosophy is due to the fact that *“it has to lay bare certain structures of thought and experience and, above all, ask questions about their value to us”*.ⁱⁱ This philosophical enterprise should bring some improvements into ethics and politics and by then also into contemporary and future human life. In other words, a philosopher following his inquiry into ancient thought should be able simultaneously to offer “an intelligible account of modern society” and an accompanying coherent hopeful politics. In this sense we must understand Williams’ thesis: *“if we find things of a special beauty and power in what has survived from that world, it is encouraging to think that we might move beyond marvelling at them, to putting them, or bits of them, to modern uses.”*

i Williams (2006a), 64, 66, 68. The emphasis on “basic conceptions“ and “basic human motives“ see Williams (1993), 8-10: *“The resemblance or unity between the outlooks, the Greeks’ and our own, emerges principally at the level of basic human motives...”* Apart from the fact our concepts are the opposite to Greeks’: the reflective and the oblique in contrast to Greeks’ unreflective and straightforward. The resemblance between us lies on the level of content.

ii Williams (1993), 4.

In other words: *“The point is only that if we ask what sense the tragedies of antiquity may make to us when we consider our ethical lives and our roles, not as tragic people but simply as people, even their supernatural aspects may find some analogy in our experience. But to pursue that analogy, to spell out in detail the structural substitutions that are needed, remains a further task.”ⁱ*

II. Stark fiction

Apart from these more general rules of understanding and approach to the ancient literature, Williams accentuates the meaning of (Sophoclean or Homeric) tragedy as a typical “stark fiction”. Thus he specifies the meaning of literature for philosophy, which he hinted in *Shame and Necessity* where he affirms that philosophy (especially as an inquiry aiming at historical understanding) *“in seeking a reflective understanding of ethical life, for instance, it quite often takes examples from literature.”ⁱⁱ* In the tragedy as a stark fiction we do not deal any more (only) with an exemplar illustration of theories of thinkers, but with a memento for moral and political thinking, i.e. it

i Williams (1993), 10-11, 167, 165-6.

ii Ibid., 13.

balances the baselessly optimistic approach of thinkers from the rank of moral philosophers, it is a correction of their either-or “good news” by “bad news”. As a reaction to a new, ambiguous world where a right, exemplar action does not exist any more, the tragedy is *"a necessary supplement and a suitable limitation to the tireless aim of moral philosophy to make the world safe for well-disposed people"*,ⁱ and thus it is an essential part of real, viable ethics (and thus also politics).

In the experience, mediated by the tragedy, with the capricious chance and necessity man suffers a disagreeable, horrible reality. Williams appreciates Sophocles, because his work is "unsoftened" and "unmoralized", he has "an overwhelming sense of human helplessness..."ⁱⁱ On the opposite, moral philosophers who mainly consecrate only to man as an autonomic unity, to his judgment and abilities, do not get to (or only defectively) to the real life, i.e. the life in the world, in a concrete situation, society, epoch. As an example of such “thinkers lost for the world”, Williams repeatedly cites even more practically aimed Kantianism and consequentialism: *"Nevertheless, the situation of the rational agent intending to change the world preoccupies them both, and the very plain fact that everything that an*

i Williams (2006b), 52.

ii Williams (1993), 17.

agent most cares about typically comes from, and can be ruined by, uncontrollable necessity and chance is no part of their concerns.“ A limitation of moral thinkers consists in the fact that they are *"disconnected historically and psychologically from the rest of life ... and left as a supposedly self-contained and self-explanatory realm of value"*.ⁱ Such isolation from the outside world, time, real individual with his/her soul and body means at the end a concentration on the inside, rationale moral. Thus a moral philosopher can at most arrive at the consideration how to best think about problems of the real, “outside” world.

Nevertheless, Williams sometimes ironizes his work as a moral philosopher who takes “stark fictions” seriously: *"...our work consisted largely of reminding moral philosophers of truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings, except moral philosophers."*ⁱⁱⁱ According to Williams, does the sense of tragedy (and of similar stark fictions) consist in telling trivialities, everyday truths? Does Williams somehow specify what essentials tragedies tell us? We have already said that tragedy as a stark fiction reminds us of “uncomfortable facts of human life” and thus limits philosophers in their theorizing and moral ambitions.

i Williams (2006b), 48.

ii Williams (2005a), 52.

Political morality must start “with identifying uncomfortable facts and exploring their implications”. Generally speaking, “stark tragedy” thus says that we not only own the world, but also our lives which escape our control. This essential enlargement and limitation in one consists “*in a concentrated way to displaying the operations of chance and necessity*”.ⁱ Williams emphasizes for example the phrase “a necessary chance”, *anankaia tuché*, which appears twice in Sophocles’ *Aias*. If tragedies represent information about operations of fate, then they cannot be trivialities, even if we all somehow know the fate. Nevertheless, the first encounter of an ordinary man (let alone of a hidden moral or political thinker who evades the actions of the world, if possible) with the misery of human life can be and should be (and in antiquity it was) the very literature, theatre or film, the better from the rank of the stark fiction, respectively tragedy. Let us remind informed explanations of Aristotle and Nietzsche according to whom an individual can taste those horrors, but stay safe, “*to contemplate such things in honesty without being crushed by them*”.ⁱⁱ To this context Williams later ranks Nietzsche’s words about art thanks to which we do not perish from the truth: we do not practice art so as to escape from the truth in

i Williams (2006b), 50.

ii Ibid., 52.

the sense of real, miserable life, but in the opposite, we practice art so as to grasp the truth of life and continue in living, i.e. to grasp it before it weighs us down as our individual fate. This can be explained in different ways, maybe most simply as an admonition against how it goes in the world and what can or cannot be done with it. According to Williams, a message of stark fictions is the very reflection, the realization of such uncompromising powers of fate or nature: the world neither was created for us, nor us for the world, our history is not a story with some aim and there is not any place outside of the history and world, from where our activities can be justified.ⁱ By this explanation Williams refuses early metaphysical Nietzsche who affirms art that metaphysically redeems life. Life full of sorrow, as artistically portrayed in the tragedy, does not supply the precariousness of our (spectator's) own life – as supposedly means very early Nietzsche. The tragedy rather enables us to experience and contemplate fictive horrors and disasters and in this “fictive experience” we adopt “attitudes we cannot take towards real horrors”, because we are either “practically engaged in them” (overwhelmed by fear, grief etc.), or “healthily inattentive to them”.ⁱⁱ In the reflection about tragedy, we are healthily engaged in them,

i Williams (1993), 166.

ii Williams (2006b), 52.

i.e. we are not engulfed by them, but we pay them full attention – for example by the distribution in time, which is not possible in the real life: first we cry and after having shed tears we have time to clearly and deeply think about these uncomfortable matters including our previous passions. In this sense, the benefit from contemplating tragedy, as described by Williams - "...some understanding of the real horrors"ⁱ –, possibly includes (in Aristotelian way) some purgation of fear from our minds. And mainly, unlike the direct hit which immobilizes us (either by apathy, or by grief), the tragedy can provoke our energy, action, political activity, the deed, which we see as the most fundamental message found by Williams: apart from the following part about "his" political philosophy see e.g. the stress on the appeal of Tekméssa who asks friends *"to stand in the way of a necessary chance"* (Aíás, 803). Williams sees the tragedy mainly as a reflection that justice is never done in our world, reflection which encourages always to stand against present force or threat.ⁱⁱ

Thus when Williams as a philosopher speaks about *"truths about human life which are very well known to virtually all adult human beings"* as about his main subject, this "all adult human's knowledge" is rather the very

i Ibid.

ii See Ahrensdorf (2009), 168-178.

knowledge of tragedies (in Athens, it was basically compulsory) or other stark fictions; today, we can count among them also stories told as real events by our friends, acquaintances, possibly even by TV or the Internet. No matter what, in his political writings Williams juxtaposes historical memories to stark fictions. Thus, tragedy goes hand in hand with history as a “reminder of the horrors of a human being’s life”. And Williams seems to appreciate tragedy (against Aristotle) not for its philosophic character, nor for its leading the soul to philosophy, but in contrast for leading man to the real life. Let us say leading a (moral) philosopher to real life.

But to meet Williams’ irony, we mainly have to complete his sentence about philosophers distributing “all adult human’s knowledge” with his own saying about the exceptionality and usefulness of philosophy: *"There are many true and obvious things to be said in the face of the world’s horrors, and many kinds of writing can and should say those things in an obvious way – but these are not usually the things that philosophy, if it is to be helpful in its special ways, has reason to say; or if it does on occasion have reason to say those obvious things, it will be its reason for saying them that will not be obvious."*ⁱ If we admit that acts of fate are obvious and platitudinous, then at least the

i Williams (2005f), 213.

reason, why the philosopher speaks about them, is not obvious or platitudinous: as we have seen – he wants to provoke the deed, and as we will see – he appeals for political activity or for an unusual effort at tracing and amending, enlarging, promoting what is approved or better in the present world. Thus Williams coheres tragedy (fiction), philosophy and politics.

III. Williams' politics

When we take a look at texts written after *Shame and Necessity*, where Williams turns to political philosophy (the core is in the posthumously published selection of texts *In the Beginning was the Deed*), we can see an articulation with reflections about antiquity, and especially we can attest Williams' words about the possibility to understand tragedy on the background of present time. Thus, the reflections about tragedy can be seen as a prologue of political reflections which attest a thesis from the *Shame and Necessity* about the usefulness of antique literary tradition in dealing with today's world, political and cultural life.

In his political reflections, BW aims at the possible program hinted in '*Shame and Necessity*': "*a politics, in the sense of a coherent set of opinions about the ways in which power should be exercised in modern societies, with what*

limitations and to what ends. If it is true that our ethical ideas have more in common with those of the Greeks than is usually believed, we have to recognise that this is not just an historical but a political truth, which affects the ways in which we should think about our actual condition.“ Mainly in drawing of such politics, Nietzsche, otherwise inspirational, did not succeed according to Williams. Nietzsche “...moved beyond the conception of the world as aesthetic phenomenon..., he did not move to any view that offered a coherent politics.”ⁱ Critics blamed Williams for the fact that he neither created a coherent politics in the *Shame and Necessity*. Nevertheless, according to us he fulfills the plan precisely in later texts, where he aims at such politics and at least he gives some hints at what such a politics would look like. Then, in our opinion, it is right and very useful to read Williams’ late, political studies also as a response to his own earlier challenge. In short, Williams’ approach to political philosophy or his approach to social-political life suggested by his political considerations seem to be the approach from the point of view of the world of the ancient Greek (Sophoclean) tragedy.

Thus, if we try to synthesize *Shame and Necessity* and political reflections, we can see that *uncomfortable facts* of human beings’ lives that Williams gives account of

i Williams (1993), 10-11.

within his analysis of ancient Greek tragedy, rank among our *fundamental beliefs* that have the status of certain (they are similar to the belief that – for example – material objects exist). In the context of the quotation from Goethe's Faust, which Williams used in the title of the reflection "In the Beginning was the Deed" , he associates basic beliefs with Wittgensteinian "*propositions that stand fast*". These beliefs, facts or propositions are not like scientific hypotheses, they are not revisable, we can not verify or falsify them, they are not used to be replaced by another belief or truth from time to time. The ancient Greek tragedy then deals with *propositions that stand fast* and it is impossible to dispute them. There is no possible discussion about these matters. And when Williams says that what he reminds political moralists of are "*platitudes about politics*", it makes sense to think that he does not mean by it anything but propositions that stand fast. That is the point: "*All these are platitudes about politics liberal political theory should shape its account of itself more realistically to what is platitudinously politics.*"ⁱ

Not because of their platitudinous character, but for the fact that they are "fast standing", these basic beliefs replace rationalistic metaphysics of morality and beliefs "*that the universe or history or the structure of human*

i Williams (1993), 13.

reason can ... yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations”,ⁱ which Williams refuses. Nevertheless, they replace them only partly, as Williams looks for “political platitudes” just because he does not accept a possibility to start from fundamental moral principles. In that sense there is a strong contradiction. They don’t replace them, if Williams’ stark fictions and their fundamental beliefs as uncomfortable facts do not offer such a sense.ⁱⁱ For no strict and universal rules of justice or human rights can be deduced from those basic beliefs. This is polemics (and Williams-liberalist takes the side of communitarian critics such as Charles Taylor) with a tendency (mainly of some important liberalists) to search for and find (define, determine) fundamental moral principles and from them then derive universal human rights, rules of justice etc. Fundamental beliefs – about how to behave, live etc. – should not be engineered and justified by theory or philosophical pondering, but must be deduced from practice (in the beginning is the deed). (That does not mean that there is no thinking included, on the contrary “practice is not just the practice of practice, so to speak, but also the practice of criticism.”)

i Williams (1993), 163.

ii Williams (1993), 163-5.

It seems that Williams does not take as unambiguous universals even the very platitudes as basic beliefs. Actually he does not accept them as such; not because they are not present all over the human world – *de facto* they are constant: it is a reason why we call them propositions that stand fast –, but because they are present in different forms which depend on an actual historical situation, that must accept the possibilities of the moment. In other words, one of these basic propositions is "history". Given such a significance of history, Williams introduces "structural substitutions" (*Shame and Necessity*) through which it is possible to solve the problem. The universality of these platitudes can be held only in terms of "structural sub-stitutions". Thus for example tragic *anankaia tuché* is universal, but it is sensible to deal with it in a concrete historical form, in the substitution which it becomes. The universality of *anankaia tuché* is a banal truth (and exactly in this sense Williams speaks about "platitude"), so much more important is a description and evaluation of its (non-universal) function in any given time and critical comparison with its function in our time. Thus moral or political scenes from tragedy must be "*made historically and socially realistic, in particular by registering it in the categories of modernity*". We then open "*a possibility of deploying some parts of it against others, and of reinterpreting what is ethically significant, so as to give a*

critique of existing institutions, conceptions, prejudices, and powers“.ⁱ

We have to stress that by this we move to the next level: by history Williams means mainly a distribution of power in the society, politics. He does not choose tragedy or “stark fictions” from antiquity accidentally – it is as literature, the core of which is composed of political matters, it is a fiction about the experience of substantial connection of everything which is essential for the human being with politics. In contrast to many other thinkers (especially liberal), Williams does not belittle the value of politics. Thus, as an individual living in the 20th century, he presents *“political philosophy which does not attempt to downplay the problems presented by value pluralism under conditions of disenchantment”*.ⁱⁱ Summarily, to do politics and accept the possibilities of the moment implies one another. The particular version of political philosophy, which Williams supports in this respect of acknowledgment of history and politics altogether, is very close to Judith Shklar’s liberalism of fear. This kind of liberalism according to Williams just *“...does not displace politics ... but in a contrasting sense, it serves to remind ... of the existence of politics. ... it takes seriously power and the*

i Williams (1993), 37, 61.

ii Lassman (2005), 10.

surrounding distributions and limitations on power in any given situation.” We can cite from Williams and read what he says about his favorite liberalism as if it was said about ancient Greek tragedy: *“The liberalism of fear can be taken as having a different and much wider set of listeners: basically, everybody. ... It speaks to humanity. And it has a right to do this, a unique right, I think, because its materials are the only certainly universal materials of politics: power, powerlessness, fear, cruelty, a universalism of negative capacities. What it offers or suggests in any given situation depends on that situation: it depends, in particular, on the politics of that situation. The liberalism of fear, once more like its natural counterpart, The Prince, does not displace politics, but is understood only in the presence of politics ...”*ⁱ These characteristics Williams envisages as missing in almost every academic, moral and political theorizing. Moreover, regular references to these “universal materials of politics” specify Williams’ understanding of what he calls “uncomfortable facts” in the case of tragedy: these are the issues which we deal with in our time: power, powerlessness, fear and cruelty; in this cadre we can even nowadays understand tragedy very well: *“Our distance from Greek attitudes to slaves and to women ... is properly measured not by the standards of some new structural*

i Williams (2005a), 59.

conception called "morality", but by considerations that can themselves be traced to the Greek world – considerations of power, fortune, and very elementary forms of justice."ⁱ

The liberalism of fear as well as ancient Greek tragedy "... can only be understood by presupposing politics".ⁱⁱ Politics as an actual distribution of power is primary: *"Instead of trying to reach the politics of liberalism from a moral assumption that concerns toleration, we should rather consider first the politics of liberalism, including its practices of toleration, and then ask what, if any, kinds of moral assumption are related to that."*ⁱⁱⁱ "The philosophy of democracy follows from democracy, and not the other way around."^{iv} In this sense, Williams as a political philosopher accentuates the so called Basic Legitimation Demand (BLD) – the acceptable solution to the first political question, the question of *"the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation"*.^v According to Williams, we

i Williams (1993), 8.

ii Lassman (2005), 10.

iii Williams (2005b), 135.

iv Koopman (2008), 21.

v Williams (2005c), 3.

cannot get to the BLD by offering and advocating some well thought theory, by "the establishment of foundational principles", by creating and holding some "set of general moral principles", but it must spring from the actual historical situation and create itself "all the time in ever-shifting circumstances", and thus to be a "never-ending task of political life": *"a solution to the first question being required all the time, it is affected by historical circumstances; it is not a matter of arriving at a solution to the first question at the level of state-of-nature theory and then going on to the rest of the agenda."*ⁱ According to Williams, a political philosopher must develop his conceptions "in conversation with the real political practices arising out of actual political history".ⁱⁱ

In short, Williams *thinks politically* and it links him necessarily with ancient Greek tragedy. For Williams, to *think politically* means (in our opinion mainly) not to neglect tragic realities of the world, which are identical with basic realities of politics. If we do not forget that tragedies were highly political matters, we can even say that "the tragic" corresponds to "the political" or tragedy to politics. Williams' favorite liberalism of fear is based upon the idea of a *summum malum* (cruelty and the fear of cruelty,

i Ibid.

ii Koopman (2008), 14.

coercion, pain, torture, humiliation, suffering, death), in contrast to the idea of a common good, *summum bonum*. It means that we at first must still deal with BLD, that there is no possibility to live in a post-political order, a possibility that is sometimes so popular among political theoreticians whose thinking takes place just in post-political order. The never ending continuance in the field of politics is caused by the same magnitudes which remind us of tragedy and which are part of our everyday experiences. Politics can not then be answered as some technical question or theory-puzzle, once solved forever settled.ⁱ Williams does not work with or believe in any ideal of a universal solution of political questions (such as ordering of society etc.). Political philosophizing based on concrete situations is “entirely non-utopian”.ⁱⁱ Williams affirms that the ordinary political reality is the base of the activity of political

i With regards to BLD, Williams also talks about “a minimum basis” (2005b, 56), against which there are basic human rights, whereas we do not need any theory or justification to know about them and to accept them without saying a word against them (2005d, 19). All these fundamental or basic magnitudes of politics are self-evident, they do not need any theory or “elaborate philosophical distinction” that should build them up. We can see these in different forms all over the world all the time. Moreover, there are very agreeable consequences of the fact that human rights are defined only as a counter balance of these basic materials of politics: they do not stem from any special theory (as mostly from moral principles of liberals). So “the practice of morality” (Rawls etc.) is not the only option as many liberals tend to think.

ii Williams (2005a), 55.

philosophers, e.g. the acceptance of possibilities of the moment (possibilities inherent in a concrete historical situation) is a crucial and decisive matter when it comes to aims and forms of political thinking. Even liberalism is not “at any absolutely general level of principle, better off” than any other outlook. *“It may possibly, and for historical reasons, be rather better off now. But it will have a chance of being so only if it accepts, that like any other outlook, it cannot escape starting from what is at hand, from the kinds of life among which it finds itself. Like everyone else, it must accept the truth that in the beginning was the deed.”* Any political philosophy can make sense “only by virtue of the historical situation in which it is presented”.ⁱ In this sense Williams also thinks about the value of the tragedy: we cannot graft a social critic on to it or be inspired by it as if it was some sort of ideal, but it must be taken as a concrete political-historical reality analogue to our reality. Thus, a contingent historical perspective is for Williams more important than all ideas or Utopias. For Williams as a political philosopher, tragedy is not worth being studied because it is full of (absolutely valid) ideas, but foremost as a part of historical and social realities. Because of the resemblance of ancient Greek and our realities, the tragedy

i Williams (2005d), 23-24, 25.

still exists and represents reality which is internal to our own situation, especially as a resource of effective critique. Otherwise said, against the moral model (political moralism) Williams sets – in the context of his tragic outlook – a political model (political realism). The first one is based on ideals of the individual autonomy, the second one, more skeptical, on the understanding of contingent historical circumstances; whereas the first is theoretical and comes from an intrinsic insight, the second rests upon description and evaluation of the actual life in which the human being is situated. Williams' political realism considers as a fundamental situation of an individual and society which must be resolved, the BLD already mentioned, i.e. *"the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation"*: that is exactly the problem which treats, say Oidipus the Tyrant: not who I am but how to secure the order of polis: Oidipus himself is self-contented, there is no problem in his own life and autonomy, but his poverty will show in terms of these basic political demands.

In this sense (political philosophizing relies on history and politics, or on a struggle) Williams rejects philosophers (deliberative democrats) like Habermas believing in salvation through free rational dialogue, believing in free rational dialog as an all-powerful means. He cites from Judith Shklar: *"For this liberalism, the basic units of*

political life are not discursive and reflective persons, nor friends and enemies, nor patriotic soldier-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful. And the freedom it wishes to secure is freedom from the abuse of power and the intimidation of the defenseless that this difference invites.”ⁱ The fact of pluralism, value pluralism that we can see to proliferate just in the time of ancient Greek tragedies (it might be viewed even as a core of these tragedies) presents similar moral, social and political problems that we are compelled to solve in our epoch. These problems coming out from the becoming pluralism and disenchantment are rationally unsettable. Williams will absolutely agree with Weber saying that “*the different value systems of the world stand in conflict with one another...the different gods struggle with each other and will do for all time. It is just like in the ancient world, which was not yet disenchanted with its gods and demons, but in another sense. Just as Hellenic man sacrificed on this occasion to Aphrodite and on another to Apollo, and above all as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city - things are still the same today, but disenchanted and divested of the mythical but inwardly genuine flexibility of those customs*”.ⁱⁱ The base for Williams’ conception and practice of political

i Shklar (1989), 27. Williams (2005a), 54.

ii Weber (1994), 16.

thought is not any moral theory etc., but exactly the "unsettled quarrel" being underlain with the chance and necessity (*anangkaia tuche*) described by ancient Greek tragedy, and so the fate of making constant compromises. Political institutions and actions can not legitimate themselves by any given set of values or moral principles which they represent, but only by everyday struggle on the field of value pluralism, which at first means *"the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation"*,ⁱ they must rely on the *"irreconcilable death-struggle"* (Weber) that is the basic characteristic of human tragic or stark world. In this respect political consequences of value pluralism according to Williams are not mainly liberalism (as for example his friend Berlin says) but liberalism of fear or political realism, i. e. realism and fear. In other words, primary and fundamental is the "political" (reining power, cruelty etc.), and in this cadre we cannot at first advance by means of a dialogue, cruelty and power cannot be reined by dialogue, but by stark politics, because on the other side, there is not a partner, but an opponent, an adversary: *"But remembering the points about the historical conditions, we should not think that what we have to do is simply to argue with those who disagree: treating them as opponents can, oddly enough, show more respect*

i Williams (2005c), 3.

for them as political actors than treating them simply as arguers – whether as arguers who are simply mistaken, or as fellow seekers after truth.”ⁱ

The boldest expression of the negativity of this approach or of its “entirely non-utopian” character we can find in the quotation which Williams borrowed from Shklar: it “concentrates on damage control”.ⁱⁱ Is not such a “moderation” a message of tragedies, i.e. to count with horrors and to concentrate on the containment of damages connected with chance and necessity?! A more moderate version of a general message of tragedies in the context of Williams’ philosophy is to focus on the differences between better and worse, actual or potential, political or cultural practices and to help the better one to prevail (proliferate). Anyhow, Williams as a political philosopher not only describes “the actual empirical development of practices”, but describes it “in terms which enable us to philosophically reflect on their value”.ⁱⁱⁱ Philosophy is then a very practical matter: it searches things and activities that are in a morally good order and tries to develop, improve or extend them at the expense of morally bad matters; it does everything

i Williams (2005c), 13; see Williams (2005d), 21.

ii Williams (2005a), 55.

iii Koopman (2008), 16.

within the limits of our existing historical realities. It has a simple reason: *“historical and social realities are sufficiently complex ... that we can deploy the better parts of these situations against their worse parts, and we can do so both justly and effectively”*; *“the situations in which we find ourselves already contain the resources for their own improvement and so we need not transcend these situations with abstractions in order to develop the political conceptions we need for achieving justice, equality, and liberty.”*ⁱ So Williams’ confidence includes not only “damage control” but some improvement, progress or betterment as well in relation to our fate, to *anangkaiatuché*. Shklar’s damage control Williams explains as a possible kind of improvement: *“...it is very importantly the party of memory. But it can be, in good times, the politics of hope, as well.”*ⁱⁱ Thus Williams – in opposition to e.g. Nussbaum – discovers, together with antique tragedy, history and philosophy, the necessity which he accepts and acts conformably with it – in this sense he obeys it or is careful in dealing with it (in philosophy, the necessity represents thinking, in history - facts and their meaning, in tragedy – imagination).ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense he also limits the

i Koopman (2008), 18-20; Williams (2005e), 37.

ii Williams (2005a), 61.

iii See Nussbaum (2001).

reason, which is important in dealing with these matters of chance and necessity or political contention, but it is not able to solve them outright. In this respect Williams' approach is the same as Sophocles' "sombre reserve",ⁱ and we could maybe say that it is "an austere resignation", which nevertheless is not a pessimism, but rather getting rid of aiming at impossible things (world without wars, immortality, the theory of justice) and attending to achievable things (securing of order, protection, safety, trust; the damage control). At the same time we can look for parallels in Nietzsche's "pessimism of strength" in the sense of the possibility to wrest a noble life right in the ability to live in the world of these titanic powers which transcend us and antagonize themselves (to live in the struggle with them or to live in the shadow of their struggle).

i For such an explanation of Sophocles's stance see Ahrens Dorf (2009).

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