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## **“No such thing as action”: William Godwin, the Decision, and the Secret**

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For much of its course, the history of the novel has been a history of people taking decisions. The form of the narrative of decision may, of course, vary: the relation of the decision to accidents in Henry Fielding, the consequences of the moral decision in George Eliot, the painful necessity of making a decision in the first place in Henry James. But, in general, it is the need for characters to take decisions that, at least until the twentieth century, propels the novelistic narrative forward. The question of how decisions might be taken, and the relation of the deciding subject to his or her force in the world can also be a way of thinking about the political history of narrative fiction. At certain points in the novel's history, decisions may become the subject of anxious and critical attention. The forces of social and biological determinism in nineteenth-century naturalism would be one such case, and another—an example of which I discuss here—might be the post-Revolutionary novel of the 1790s.

We could perhaps argue that the problem of the decision comes into a particularly urgent focus in the novels of the Romantic period. After the 1760s, the novel turns away from the eighteenth-century picaresque, which sees the protagonist more or less cheerfully submitting to the vagaries of fate, with the reader more or less cheerfully anticipating the generic ending of lost heirs found and marriages contracted. From the 1790s the questions of what it means to decide to act in the world, what are the conditions of possibility for such decisions, and what are their social consequences, all surface in the genre. In this essay I

want to take William Godwin, novelist and philosopher, as an example of the way in which abstract ideas about the nature or force of the decision in civil society come up against the narrative demands of the novel's plot structure and ask the question: how does a subject make a sovereign decision, both in terms of its ontological structure, and within a society that throws ideas of sovereignty into conflict.? The difficulty of acting as a moral agent is a problem both for the novel and for radical politics in the 1790s. In debates about enfranchisement and representation, how was one to maintain the sovereignty and ethical value of the individual choice made by the autonomous subject, in the face of arguments such as those of Burke?:

Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit, and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature. (*Reflections*, 183)

Burke's familiar wisdom-of-the-ages argument here sets up a considerable challenge to thinkers less willing to accept the idea that it is 'prejudice' that saves us from wrong decisions. Burke proposes prejudice as a quasi-instinctual form of long-standing communal

knowledge that arises in individuals to protect them from the instantaneous moment of active decision founded on naked reason, a perilous point where one might find oneself ‘puzzled, and unresolved.’ But it is precisely this moment that persists in novels. In fact, in a political climate that proposed the possibility that rational decisions could inaugurate radical change, the relation of the decision to action—the stuff of the novel—becomes of primary importance. In a political debate where new questions must be decided, and with claims for representation in which individuals, rather than the state in its guise as an impersonal force of tradition, can take those decisions, the difficult nature of the decision itself is exposed.

This is particularly clear in novels that brush up against Calvinism like James Hogg’s later *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) as they adjust to the problem of how to act in a world where individual actions may have no final effect or where their effects cannot be easily predicted. In Hogg’s novel this is an explicitly religious problem, but in Godwin’s we can read it as a general question about the relation of decisions to actions played out in narrative form. *Caleb Williams* forms a contrast with Godwin’s philosophical exposition of the question of decision and how the subject can reach one. He claims in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that there can be no innate motivation because motives are always determined by our circumstances. According to this logic, he admits, it is absurd simply to say “I will do this” (*Political Justice* 1793, I, 310). In the strict philosophical sense, “there is no such thing as action. Man is in no case strictly speaking the beginner of any event or series of events that takes place in the universe, but only the vehicle through which certain causes operate” (*Political Justice* 1793, I, 306). He was to stress these impersonal forces in later editions by changing ‘causes’ to ‘antecedents’. But, in Godwin’s philosophical contemplation, the strict

impossibility of action need not be a problem. In an everyday sense there are visible actions in the world and they do appear to have individual causes and effects. His model is Hume's analysis of causality—we may assume that causes exist in the world, even though what we actually perceive are really just sequences: “[w]hen a ball upon a billiard board is struck by a person playing, and afterwards impinges upon a second ball, the ball which was first in motion is said to act upon the second, though it operate in the strictest conformity to the impression it received, and the motion it communicates be precisely determined by the circumstances of the case”(*Political Justice* 1793, I, 306).

On the one hand, then, actions are experiential and can be delimited by perceived cause and effect--they can be specific local events. But behind this lies the immutable force of necessity: ‘the idea of a universe as connected and cemented in all its parts, nothing in the boundless progress of things being capable of happening otherwise than it has actually happened’(*Political Justice*, 1793, I, 305). The model of “boundless progression”, something not restricted by space or time, is also that of Godwin's principle of reason. Reason as a law is immutable, lies beyond history, and cannot be known directly, although it provides the motives for all our actions. Although we can experience the laws of reason—as they are what motive us—we cannot know the causes of these laws. We can know the succession of events, but not why they happen. This can be articulated as a philosophical position, and perhaps also worked through in poetry, as in Shelley's ‘Mont Blanc’, much influenced by Godwin, which is a static contemplation of an epistemological problem. But the novel form brings pressing questions of change and activity—in short, of narrative structure--to bear on the problem.

The comparison of Godwin's most famous novel and his great work of philosophy is sometimes used to highlight their respective weaknesses. Either the failed philosopher is applauded for his courageous rendering of psychological oppression, or *Caleb Williams* is deemed an incomplete attempt to instantiate the philosophy. But I want to argue that the novel form's very insistence on instantiation, on the consequences of the action of the moment, or the narrative of decision, allow Godwin to explore some of the tensions *already* present in *Political Justice*, particularly those that cannot be quite accounted for in the processes of reason.

*Caleb Williams*, even allowing for its revised ending, is a largely pessimistic book that seems scarcely to bear out Godwin's hopes for perfectibility, as if the great philosophical project had proved unworkable when tested in a specific case. Yet in another sense, the novel's bleakness and its habit of running into ethical impasses are already lurking in *Political Justice*. David Collings has described Godwin's philosophy as "a uniquely violent conceptual experiment, an attempt to hurl humanity into a space beyond any historical determination"(Collings, 845). This is an important insight, and one that emerges in *Caleb Williams* as it addresses the tension between an immutable, unknowable, rational universe, and the need to take decisions according to our apprehension of precise local circumstances.

Godwin argues that an ethical decision cannot follow a prescribed notion of duty that already precludes certain choices. For him, Burke's confident belief that "[t]hrough just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature" would make no sense. But this is not quite straightforward. Godwin's own characterization of "duty" in *Political Justice* (a task he found difficult in the first and modified in subsequent editions) is a form of utilitarianism, adapted to the circumstances of the subject. He is hesitant in supplying a general definition:

“Duty is a term the use of which seems to be to describe the mode of in which any being may best be employed for the general good. It is limited in its extent by the extent of the capacity of that being” (*Political Justice* 1793, I, 101). The problem is that any articulation of duty as a general principle (it is always our duty to act for the common good) cannot account for all the applications of that principle (people have different capacities, our actions must be calculated to a set of circumstances that will be different every time as Godwin indicates in a number of test cases). We must act according to a private decision rather than to an external compulsion or arbitration. Yet no decision can have self-sufficient causes, but must rather be a consequence of antecedents. And these antecedents are ultimately part of Godwin’s impersonal, rational universe of “the boundless progress of things” that traverses and motivates individual subjects.

Thus, although absolute reason is what identifies the decision, any given act of deciding must take into account specific or singular circumstances. And if squaring this circle seems possible in *Political Justice* (where these circumstances do not have to demonstrate specific social calculations), *Caleb Williams*, a novel in which characters come under the pressure of actual decisions, shows how difficult it in fact is. When Godwin comes to write the novel, the idea of duty has become very dangerous: It is Falkland’s “principle of duty”, according to Caleb, that ruins his employer’s life:

From the moment he entered upon the execution of this purpose, dictated as it probably was by an unaffected principle of duty, his misfortunes took their commencement. All I have further to state of his history is the uninterrupted persecution of a malignant destiny, a series of adventures that seemed to take their rise in various accidents, but pointing to one termination. Him they overwhelmed

with an anguish he was of all others least qualified to bear; and these waters of bitterness, extending beyond him, poured their deadly venom upon others, I being myself the most unfortunate of their victims. (*Caleb Williams*, 16)

Caleb recognises, rightly according to *Political Justice*, the problem of Falkland's duty: it is a principle, something that must be applied consistently to different situations without taking account of particular circumstances. Falkland cannot deal with specific contexts ("accidents") and his life seems to be not necessary (the result of motives) but pre-determined by "malignant destiny", a false duty that precludes a true decision. How should characters divest themselves of this false reason? According to *Political Justice*, by taking rational decisions based on a calculation of antecedents and likely results. But the course of writing the novel seems to have convinced Godwin that such a thing is far from easy, or even possible.

*Caleb Williams* appeared in May 1794, after the first, but before the second edition of *Political Justice* which was published in 1796. Between the two editions Godwin seems to have changed his mind somewhat about the possibility of a clear-cut definition of action. In the first edition of 1793, he calls upon an opposition between involuntary action, based on sensation, and voluntary action, based on the calculated decision that the effect produced by the action is a good one. Involuntary actions are based on momentary impulses and are instinctive, voluntary ones are based on calculations and are rational: 'The new-born infant foresees nothing, therefore all his motions are involuntary. A person arrived at maturity takes an extensive survey of the consequences of his actions, therefore he is eminently a voluntary and rational being.' (*Political Justice* 1793, I, 298)



But in the second edition, Godwin admits that most actions are rooted in decisions that are a good deal messier than this schema would suggest. When we make a decision, we judge by means of premises of which we are only imperfectly aware, of habits of mind which we have naturalised, and of assumptions which we only partially reason out. In this condition we cannot be sure if we have made a free decision or not, and even if we could look back to that crucial act of deciding we would find that it was not one event, but a confusion of an incalculable number of motives.

Perhaps no action of a man arrived at years of maturity is, in the sense above defined, perfectly voluntary; as there is no demonstration in the higher branches of the mathematics which contains the whole of its proof within itself, and does not depend upon former propositions, the proofs of which are not present to the mind of the learner. The subtlety of the human mind in this respect is incredible. Many single actions, if carefully analysed and traced to their remotest source, would be found to be the complex result of different motives, to the amount perhaps of some hundreds.

*(Political Justice 1796, I, 69)*

The decision has now become a problem in terms of what can be rationally known, rather than a pure exemplar of reason, which remains aloof and impersonal, like a mathematical proof whose complete premises may not be grasped in the specific moment of calculation.

Caleb is Hamlet-like in his anxiety about decisions and actions, particularly the decision that drives the narrative by eliciting Falkland's confession: Caleb's act of breaking into Falkland's trunk to find evidence of the murder of Tyrrel. But he is unable to read this act as a decision clearly taken in the past, in full possession of all the circumstances: 'The reader can with difficulty form a conception of the state to which I was now reduced. My act

was in some sort an act of insanity; but how undescrivable are the feelings with which I looked back upon it! It was an instantaneous impulse, a short-lived and passing alienation of mind' (*Caleb Williams*, 132).

Confronted with the constitutive moment of making a decision, Caleb is unable to say what it was, and also has to acknowledge that the reader, standing in here for Godwin's idea of the community as moral conscience, cannot easily help to 'form a conception' either. In fact, this central act is not a clear decision at all, but one of Godwin's "imperfectly voluntary acts", in which the speaker is only partially in control of the decision—Caleb intends to do it, has a vague sense of what he thinks might result in an ethical sense, but experiences it as a panicked moment of uncertainty in which he becomes the spectre of Burke's bad decision: 'the man hesitating in the moment of decision skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved.'

Political justice as a concept is constituted by the tension between a universal concept of reason, which cannot be delimited by human actions, or understood as a form of causality, and the need for a just decision to take account of singular circumstances and probable effects in the world. Both are constitutive of justice in Godwin's philosophy, but *Caleb Williams* confronts their aporetic relationship. This is the structure of the decision as outlined by Jacques Derrida, as he thinks through the necessity and but also the technical impossibility of the decision in the field of justice: "A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process" ('Force of Law', 24) That is, we can only make a true decision in the moment that we step outside prior knowledge or certainty, even at the expense of ethics. These things, Derrida argues, 'are unable to determine the leap of decision [...] without depriving it of what makes it into a sovereign and free decision—in a word, of what

makes it a decision, if there is one' (*Politics of Friendship*, 219). As in the case of Caleb, we may not even properly be able to say if we have taken a decision or not.

It is the novel form itself that brings Godwin to confront the incalculable structure of the true decision. We know that Godwin conceived of and drafted the novel back to front, giving the narrative the *telos* of volume three, in which Caleb becomes the moral hero who refuses to give in to the corruption of social and juridical forces. But, in Godwinian terms, the antecedent that motivates these acts turns into something that looks very like a moment of radical undecidability. The cause that drives the plot forward is precisely the moment where Caleb's decision is taken in a leap of faith beyond the possibility of rational knowledge.

The narrative drive of the novel form brings Godwin up against the question that he had considered relatively unimportant in *Political Justice*, that sense of 'strictly speaking' which he tends to bracket away in order to focus on the 'more simple and obvious sense' in which we can assess cause and effect. In *Caleb Williams*, the subject's responsibility for the general good cannot be simply the sum of calculable, knowable parts. If the general good is a future condition that takes its form from an immutable reason, then that good cannot be known through history, or language, or relations in any sense. It is, strictly speaking, unknowable. That is, to take another term much used by Derrida, it must be secret. Unlike *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* is haunted the unknowable. Falkland's determinate secret, his murder of Tyrrel, is easy for Caleb to discover. But Caleb's pursuit of the truth is troubled by a form of the secret that seems to threaten language itself. *Caleb Williams* is a very uncommunicative novel. Falkland asserts: "where there is mystery, there is always something at bottom that will not bear the telling" (*Caleb Williams*, 148). Caleb is "tormented by a secret of which I must never disburthen myself" (*Caleb Williams*, 138) and

a fear that “I should be blotted from the catalogue of the living, and my fate remain eternally a secret”(Caleb Williams, 151). For Caleb, the specific secret fact of Falkland’s murder of Tyrrel turns into another kind of secret, absolute rather than specific: the fear that if there is no possibility of telling his own story he himself will be removed completely from language and history. The only alternative to the overflowing textual production of the social world, with its proliferation of criminal biographies, some of which feature himself, is to imagine being “blotted from the catalogue of the living” altogether.

The novel thus stresses the necessity of the radically unknowable in the decision. We do not act for the general good by referring back to a principle, or a “duty”, because these would preclude the proper consideration of circumstances, but neither can we be fully aware of all those circumstances at the moment of decision. Every act of reasoned decision must accept that if reason itself is absolute, the process by which it has been reached cannot be known through temporal forms such as language or history. And, especially in the 1790s, it is the novel form, rather than political philosophy itself, that proposes that we must take decisions that are historically aware even if they accept—in ways that emerge much more fully in *Caleb Williams* than in *Political Justice*—that “reason” must also be structured by its apparent opposite, a move beyond the grasp of rational calculation. For Caleb, this is a frightening proposition, but it is through Caleb’s indescribable “alienation of mind” that Godwin is able to look closely at Burke’s moment of “puzzled and unresolved” decision and to draw it back into the delineation of justice.

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