

Humanistic philosophy

1. Bernard Williams speaks of philosophy as “part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves” (2000, 479). Williams contrasts this conception with a scientism that assimilates philosophy to the natural sciences. The present discussion is in this spirit.

2. Much of what has been, and continues to be, central to philosophy is humanistic in respect of its focus on human nature, and especially on our capacities for thought and action. Philosophy can be humanistic in a richer sense, on account of being in large measure interpretative in that it deploys modes of understanding that are extensions of those modes in play in ordinary episodes in which people understand one another and themselves in the light of their reasons for belief or action, and how the things they say hang together.

3. Philosophy in this vein has regard to ordinary thought as well as existing philosophical thought about these things. In doing so it grapples with interpretative issues relating to how what is spoken of should be conceived.

A focus on rational agency and what it enables

4. In the philosophical tradition that has its origins in Europe the situation in which we find ourselves has been conceived as nothing less than “the universe and everything”, but at its heart has been a concern to understand our humanity, and in particular what belongs to us, and what is required of us, as rational agents. Three striking moments in the tradition are worth highlighting.

5. Plato represents Socrates as having been attracted by the idea of Anaxagoras that intelligence is the cause of everything and orders everything for the best (*Phaedo* (97b-99c)). He is disappointed to find that, when getting down to details, Anaxagoras invokes the elements of “air, aether, water and the like, and many other oddities”. Socrates comments that it is as if someone tried to explain why he is sitting there now, conversing with others, in terms of the disposition and functioning of parts of his body rather than in terms of the real explanation of his being there—to submit to the punishment of Athens. Plato recognizes (a) that to understand human action we must look beyond physiology and physiological changes to agents’ reasons for acting as they do and (b) that we need some account of how the physical world relates to rational agency. There is a high price for his response: it represents there to be no real causality in nature.

6. For Kant it was not a live option to deny genuine causality to nature, or to deny that we ourselves participate in the causal order. His response in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (4.452) is this:

... a rational being must view itself, *as an intelligence* ... , as belonging not to the world of sense, but that of understanding; and hence it has two standpoints from which it can consider itself, and recognize laws for the use of its powers, and consequently for all its actions: *first*, in so far as it belongs to the world of sense, under laws of nature (*heteronomy*), *secondly*, as belonging to the intelligible world, under laws that,

independent of nature, are not empirical, but have their foundation merely in reason. (Trans. Gregor and Timmermann, 61-62.)

The price here is also high. It is a mystery how, qua intelligences, we do not belong to the world of sense—to nature. The challenge remains: how to view ourselves as intelligences without giving up the idea that we are, without qualification, parts of nature.

7. It does not follow from our being parts of nature that how we understand each other is natural scientific (naively or otherwise). Donald Davidson (1970/1980, 207-208, and sec. II), defending the anomalousness of the mental, conceives of himself as addressing the challenge posed by Kant by proposing that mental events are part of the causal order but denying that what people think and do is to be understood by applying psychological laws. (Cf. McDowell 1994 and Hornsby 1997.)

Understanding People

8. I address the implications for method in two stages. In the first, in this section, I consider the ordinary understanding we often achieve of why people think or act as they do. This will be preliminary to a discussion of how philosophy itself can be interpretative.

9. If we want to know why somebody is planning to pursue a particular career then we need to understand that person's reasons for choosing that career as opposed to others. Whether the considerations the person gives are intelligible will depend in part on whether we can view them as good reasons or, failing that, at least as reasons that could seem good to a person in the circumstances and condition of this person. The idea that reasons can be bad takes us into the distinction between *reasons to* think or do something and *reasons for which* one thinks or does something. The former are normative in that they are constituted by considerations that at least favour or recommend thought or action, and perhaps require it. The latter are motivating reasons.

10. The considerations that constitute an agent's motivating *reason for* Φ ing are ones that, at least from the agent's perspective, are *reasons to* Φ . There are limits to what counts as a motivating reason set by what can seem to be a good reason. To understand why people Φ in terms of their motivating reasons for Φ ing we have to engage with how from their perspective certain considerations would have at least seemed to constitute a good reason to Φ . On many of the, sometimes banal, practicalities of everyday life this will be easy because the agent's reason for Φ ing is manifestly a reason for that agent to Φ , or would have been had it been constituted by a truth. The general point is that understanding here goes with evaluation of motivating reasons with respect to whether they measure up as reasons *to* think the thing or do the thing, rather than with an understanding of causal powers.

11. None of this is at odds with the idea that being moved to think something or do something, or being sustained in thinking that thing or doing that thing, in the light of some consideration, are causal matters. It does not follow that when we understand why people think something or do something, we exploit a grasp of the causal powers of the states that figure in their motivation. We have a very poor grasp of the causal powers of individual beliefs and other intentional states, and there is no reason to think we avail ourselves of a theory (in any ordinary sense) of the causal powers of a network of beliefs and other intentional states.

12. My view is at odds with the view that in understanding others we draw upon a theory—folk psychology—that comprises generalizations pertaining to the relations among mental states, relations between mental states and the environment, and relations between mental states and action. If this were right then the mode of understanding that should be brought to bear on understanding rational agents would be fundamentally no different from that in terms of which we are to understand the physical world.

13. There is a rough-and-ready generalization that is presupposed in our attempts to understand what people think and do: by and large people think or do what in a broad sense makes sense. From this perspective, we make sense of why an agent Φ ed in the light of considerations that either constituted reasons for the agent to Φ , or that the agent mistakenly treated as such reasons. In cases of messy rationalization, the reason would be bad even if the propositions constituting it had been true, but it is intelligible that the agent should have treated them as if they had provided a good reason (Millar 2004, ch. 2). The fact that we have to deal with agents' *motivating* reasons does not take normativity out of the picture because we don't get to a rationalizing explanation unless we discern at least a semblance of rationality in what the agent thinks or does.

14. We should expect first-personal understanding to reflect the peculiar subject matter of inter-personal understanding since the very states and activities that are the concern of the latter are also the concern of the former. Our normal relation to our beliefs and intentions is not that of the theorist monitoring causes and effects, but of agents capable of reflecting on reasons to do things and on the consequences and commitments of doing things.

Implications for method

15. Much of what has attracted philosophical interest comprises topics of ordinary common sense thought and talk. Attention to the kinds of things people say in such talk provides a way in to a better understanding of what is spoken of. Reflection on how people talk is important for *all* inquiry, since inquiry is guided by questions, and by existing theory. Those inquiring need to be mindful of what their questions and theories mean, and whether better concepts are required if progress is to be made. There is an additional reason why attention to thought and talk matter for humanistic philosophy, with its focus on our mentality. States such as beliefs and intentions makes themselves manifest in linguistic utterances that others pick up and respond to. The utterances are not merely about those states; some are expressive of them and indicative of the nature of the state.

16. Nothing guarantees that when we consider ordinary thought and talk we shall not uncover some incoherence or falsehood in our thinking, but (i) the possibility of doing so is no objection to pursuing the procedure, and (ii) in at least some of the cases we know things about the topic and know that the talk is not empty. We often know, for instance, what somebody thinks on some topic, or what somebody intends in some situation. That knowledge is a basis for reasonable expectations about the thinking and behaviour of that person.

17. The procedure I'm commending is very different from that adopted by philosophers as wide apart in time as Hume and Russell. They characterized mental states in terms that were meant to be descriptive of what appears to one when one introspects, where that is conceived as something analogous to looking inward. For Hume (*Treatise*) beliefs are ideas,

conceived as one kind of “perception of the human mind” to be distinguished from the other kind—impressions—in terms of their “degrees of force and liveliness”. A belief is “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression” Russell thinks of the content of a belief as consisting of “words only, or images only, or a mixture of the two, or of either or both together with one or more sensations” (*The Analysis of Mind*). He takes believing to be “a certain feeling or complex of sensations, attached to the content believed”.

18. It was an advance in method to reflect on whether our judgements as to what someone believes, intends, etc. are hostage to whether that person is having sensations, images, or other experiences, supposedly implicated by the state. A negative answer cries out, and the same goes for first-person judgements as to what one believes, intends, etc.

19. Following up, it seemed natural to think that it belongs to having, e.g., a belief that one has certain tendencies to, and capacities for, thought, action and feeling.

20. Our conception of the kind of state belief is should reflect how we are able to understand why people think and act as they do in the light of what they know or believe. Anything a person believes has the potential to constitute, or contribute to the constitution of, reasons for which that person believes other things or acts in some way. That is the characteristic role of beliefs so far as they bear on the intelligibility of what the believer thinks and does. Belief under this conception is a stance towards a linguistically articulable content, the character of which is not fixed by what is in the head but by what would be said by a linguistic articulation of the content. The plausibility of this claim depends on what we know by experience of interactions between people in matters of belief as well as on what we know from our experience of giving expression to our own beliefs and reflecting on those beliefs. It’s hard to imagine what reflection on the concept of belief could be if it were not informed by such experience. I cannot see a basis for supposing that such reflection is a purely a priori matter.

Anthropocentrism?

21. What about non-human animals? We can make sense of animal intelligence by drawing upon a consideration about the link between perceiving something and being orientated towards it. It is, I claim, constitutive of perceiving an object, event, or state of affairs that the perceiver is orientated towards it in ways that are directed at coping with its presence (Millar 2019, ch. 3). For an individual to be orientated towards something by perceiving it is to be installed with potentialities for activity that is responsive to the thing’s location and perceptually manifest properties, or to be prompted to such activity. What coping amounts to depends on what individual is up to.

22. We can make sense of a dog’s recognition of the significance of the sound of food being put in its food tray. It consists in the dog’s coming to be, on hearing the sound, orientated towards the sound in a way that is appropriate to its indicating that food is available there. Being thus orientated, and desiring food, it goes to the source of the sound. Since that is appropriate to the significance of the sound, given the desire for food, it acts intelligently. There is no need to posit beliefs.