

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline

delivered as the Annual lecture of the Royal Institute of Philosophy on 16 February 2000

BERNARD WILLIAMS

1. In the formula 'humanistic discipline' both the elements are meant to carry weight. This is not a lecture about academic organisation: in speaking of philosophy as a 'humanistic' enterprise, I am not making the point that philosophy belongs with the humanities or arts subjects. The question is: what models or ideals or analogies should we look to in thinking about the ways in which philosophy should be done? It is an application to our present circumstances of a more general and traditional question, which is notoriously itself a philosophical question: how should philosophy understand itself?

Similarly with the other term in the phrase. It is not just a question of *a* discipline, as a field or area of enquiry. 'Discipline' is supposed to imply discipline. In philosophy, there had better be something that counts as getting it right, or doing it right, and I believe that this must still be associated with the aims of philosophy of offering arguments and expressing oneself clearly, aims that have been particularly emphasized by analytic philosophy, though sometimes in a perverse and one-sided manner. But offering arguments and expressing oneself clearly are not monopolies of philosophy. Other humanities subjects offer arguments and can express themselves clearly; or if they cannot, that is their problem. History, for instance, certainly has its disciplines, and they involve, among other things, both argument and clarity. I take history to be a central case of a humanistic study, and it makes no difference to this that history, or some aspects of history, are sometimes classified as a social science—that will only tell us something about how to understand the idea of a social science. History is central to my argument not just because history is central among humanistic disciplines, but because, I am going to argue, philosophy has some very special relations to it.

A certain limited relation between history and philosophy has been traditionally acknowledged to the extent that people who were going to learn some philosophy were expected to learn some history of philosophy. This traditional idea is not accepted everywhere now, and I shall come back to that point. It must be said, too, that this traditional concession to history was often rather nominal:

many of the exercises conducted in the name of the history of philosophy have borne a tenuous relation to anything that might independently be called history. The activity was identified as the 'history of philosophy' more by the names that occurred in it than by the ways in which it was conducted. Paul Grice used to say that we 'should treat great and dead philosophers as we treat great and living philosophers, as having something to say to *us*.' That is fine, so long as it is not assumed that what the dead have to say to us is much the same as what the living have to say to us. Unfortunately, this is probably what was being assumed by those who, in the heyday of confidence in what has been called the 'analytic history of philosophy', encouraged us to read something written by Plato 'as though it had come out in *Mind* last month'—an idea which, if it means anything at all, means something that destroys the main philosophical point of reading Plato at all.¹

The point is not confined to the 'analytic' style. There is an enjoyable passage by Collingwood in which he describes how 'the old gang of Oxford realists', as he called them, notably Prichard and Joseph, would insist on translating some ancient Greek expression as 'moral obligation' and then point out that Aristotle, or whoever it was, had an inadequate theory of moral obligation. It was like a nightmare, Collingwood said, in which one met a man who insisted on translating the Greek word for a trireme as 'steamship' and then complained that the Greeks had a defective conception of a steamship. But, in any case, the points I want to make about philosophy's engagement with history go a long way beyond its concern with its own history, though that is certainly part of it.

I have already started to talk about philosophy being this or that, and such and such being central to philosophy, and this may already have aroused suspicions of essentialism, as though philosophy had some entirely distinct and timeless nature from which various consequences could be drawn. So let me say at once that I do not want to fall back on any such idea. Indeed, I shall claim later that some of the deepest insights of modern philosophy, notably in the work of Wittgenstein, remain undeveloped—indeed, at the limit, they are rendered unintelligible—precisely because of an assumption that philosophy is something quite peculiar, which should not be confused with any other kind of study, and which needs no other kind

¹ The point, in particular, of making the familiar look strange, and conversely. I have said some more about this in 'Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy', in John Cottingham (ed.), *Reason, Will and Sensation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).—The reference to Collingwood is to *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 63 seq.

of study in order to understand itself. Wittgenstein in his later work influentially rejected essentialism, and spoke of family resemblances and so on, but at the same time he was obsessed—I do not think that is too strong a word—by the identity of philosophy as an enterprise which was utterly peculiar compared with other enterprises; this is so on Wittgenstein's view, whether one reads him as thinking that the compulsion to engage in it is pathological, or is part of the human condition.² It does not seem to me as peculiar as all that, and, in addition, we should recall the point which Wittgenstein invites us to recall about other things, that it is very various. What I have to say applies, I hope, to most of what is standardly regarded as philosophy, and I shall try to explain why that is so, but I shall not try to deduce it from the nature of philosophy as compared with other disciplines, or indeed deduce it from anything else. What I have to say, since it is itself a piece of philosophy, is an example of what I take philosophy to be, 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.

2. One definite contrast to a humanistic conception of philosophy is *scientism*. I do not mean by this simply an interest or involvement in science. Philosophy should certainly be interested in the sciences and some philosophers may well be involved in them, and nothing I say is meant to deny it. Scientism is, rather, a misunderstanding of the relations between philosophy and the natural sciences which tends to assimilate philosophy to the aims, or at least the manners, of the sciences. In line with the point I have just made about the variety of philosophy, there certainly is some work in philosophy which quite properly conducts itself as an extension of the natural or mathematical sciences, because that is what it is: work in the philosophy of quantum mechanics, for instance, or in the more technical aspects of logic. But in many other areas, the assimilation is a mistake.

I do not want to say very much about what might be called 'stylistic scientism', the pretence, for instance, that the philosophy of mind is the more theoretical and less experimentally encumbered end of neurophysiology. It may be suggested that this kind of assimilation, even if it is to some extent misguided, at least encourages a certain kind of rigour, which will help to fulfil philosophy's promise of embodying a discipline. But I doubt whether this is so. On the contrary: since the scientific philosophy of mind cannot embody the rigour which is in the first instance appropriate to neu-

² The former view was expressed, in a vulgarized form, in the literature of 'therapeutic positivism'. The latter is richly developed in the work of Stanley Cavell.

rophysiology, that of experimental procedures, the contributions of philosophers in this style are actually more likely to resemble another well-known phenomenon of the scientific culture, the discourse of scientists when they are off duty, the slap-dash programmatic remarks that scientists sometimes present in informal talks. Those remarks are often very interesting, but that is because they are the remarks of scientists, standing back from what they ordinarily do. There is not much reason to expect as much interest in the remarks of philosophers who are not taking a holiday from anything, but whose business is identified simply as making such remarks.

A question that intrigues me and to which I do not know the answer is the relation between a scientific view of philosophy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the well known and highly typical style of many texts in analytic philosophy which seeks precision by total mind control, through issuing continuous and rigid interpretative directions. In a way that will be familiar to any reader of analytic philosophy, and is only too familiar to all of us who perpetrate it, this style tries to remove in advance every conceivable misunderstanding or misinterpretation or objection, including those that would occur only to the malicious or the clinically literal-minded. This activity itself is often rather mournfully equated with the boasted clarity and rigour of analytic philosophy. Now, it is perfectly reasonable that the author should consider the objections and possible misunderstandings, or at least quite a lot of them; the odd thing is that he or she should put them into the text. One might hope that the objections and possible misunderstandings could be considered and no doubt influence the text, and then, except for the most significant, they could be removed, like the scaffolding that shapes a building but does not require you after the building is finished to climb through it in order to gain access.

There is no doubt more than one force that tends to encourage this style. One is the teaching of philosophy by eristic argument, which tends to implant in philosophers an intimidatingly nit-picking superego, a blend of their most impressive teachers and their most competitive colleagues, which guides their writing by means of constant anticipations of guilt and shame. Another is the requirements of the PhD as an academic exercise, which involves the production of a quite peculiar text, one that can be too easily mistaken for a book. There are demands of academic promotion, which can encourage one to make as many published pages as possible out of whatever modest idea one may have. Now none of these influences is necessarily connected with a scientific view of philosophy, and many people who go in for this style would certainly and correctly reject any suggestion that they had that view. Indeed, an obvious

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline

example of this is a philosopher who perhaps did more than anyone else to encourage this style, G. E. Moore. However, for all that, I do not think that we should reject too quickly the thought that, when scientism is around, this style can be co-opted in the scientistic spirit. It can serve as a mimicry of scrupulous scientific procedures. People can perhaps persuade themselves that if they fuss around enough with qualifications and counter-examples, they are conducting the philosophical equivalent of a biochemical protocol.

3. But, as I said, stylistic scientism is not really the present question. There is a much more substantive issue here. Consider the following passage by Hilary Putnam from his book of Gifford Lectures, *Renewing Philosophy*:³

Analytic philosophy has become increasingly dominated by the idea that science, and only science, describes the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective. To be sure, there are within analytic philosophy important figures who combat this scientism ... Nevertheless, the idea that science leaves no room for an independent philosophical enterprise has reached the point at which leading practitioners sometimes suggest that all that is left for philosophy is to try to anticipate what the presumed scientific solutions to all metaphysical problems will eventually look like.

It is not hard to see that there is a large *non sequitur* in this. Why should the idea that science and only science describes the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective, mean that there is no independent philosophical enterprise? That would follow only on the assumption that if there is an independent philosophical enterprise, its aim is to describe the world as it is in itself, independent of perspective. And why should we accept that? I admit to being rather sensitive to this *non sequitur*, because, in the course of Putnam's book (which contains a chapter called 'Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World'), I myself am identified as someone who 'views physics as giving us the ultimate metaphysical truth ...'.⁴ Now I have never held any such view, and I agree entirely with Putnam in rejecting it. However, I have entertained the idea that science might describe the world 'as it is in itself', that is to say, give a representation of it which is to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of enquirers, a representation of the world, as I put it, 'as it is anyway'.⁵ Such a

³ Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992: preface, p. x.

⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

⁵ *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 64.

representation I called in my jargon 'the absolute conception of the world'. Whether it is attainable or not, whether the aspiration to it is even coherent, are of course highly disputable questions.

A sign that something must have gone wrong with Putnam's argument, or with mine, if not with both, is that he supposes that the idea of an absolute conception of the world must ultimately be motivated by the contradictory and incoherent aim of describing the world without describing it: as he puts it,⁶ we cannot divide language into two parts, 'a part that describes the world 'as it is anyway' and a part that describes our conceptual contribution.' (The ever tricky word 'our' is important, and we shall come back to it.) But my aim in introducing the notion of the absolute conception was precisely to get round the point that one cannot describe the world without describing it, and to accommodate the fundamentally Kantian insight that there simply is no conception of the world which is not conceptualized in some way or another. My idea was not that you could conceptualize the world without concepts. The idea was that when we reflect on our conceptualisation of the world, we might be able to recognize from inside it that some of our concepts and ways of representing the world are more dependent than others on our own perspective, our peculiar and local ways of apprehending things. In contrast, we might be able to identify some concepts and styles of representation which are minimally dependent on our own or any other creature's peculiar ways of apprehending the world: these would form a kind of representation that might be reached by any competent investigators of the world, even though they differed from us—that is to say, from human beings—in their sensory apparatus and, certainly, their cultural background. The objective of distinguishing such a representation of the world may possibly be incoherent, but it is certainly not motivated by the aim of transcending all description and conceptualisation.

I do not want to go further here into the question whether the idea of an absolute conception is coherent.⁷ I mention the matter because I think that Putnam's stick, although he has got the wrong end of it, may help us in locating a scientism in philosophy which he and I actually agree in rejecting. Putnam's basic argument against the idea of the absolute conception is that semantic relations are normative, and hence could not figure in any purely scientific conception. But describing the world involves deploying terms that have semantic relations to it: hence, it seems, Putnam's conclusion that the absolute conception is supposed to describe the world with-

⁶ *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 123.

⁷ An outstanding discussion is A. W. Moore, *Points of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

out describing it. Let us pass over the point that the argument seems to run together two different things: on the one hand, *using* terms that have semantic relations to the world, and, on the other, *giving an account* of those semantic relations: I shall concentrate on the latter.⁸ Let us also grant for the sake of the argument the principle, which is certainly disputable, that if semantic relations are normative, it follows that an account of them cannot itself figure in the absolute conception. It does not follow that the absolute conception is impossible. All that follows is that an account of semantic relations, in particular one given by the philosophy of language, would not be part of the absolute conception. But—going back for a moment to the purely *ad hominem* aspect of the argument—I never claimed that it would be; and in a related point, I said that, even if the absolute conception were attainable and it constituted knowledge of how the world was ‘anyway’, it was extremely doubtful that we could know that this was so.⁹

So why does Putnam assume, as he obviously does, that if there were to be an absolute conception of the world, philosophy would have to be part of it? I doubt that he was simply thrown by the Hegelian associations of the word ‘absolute’, with their implication that if there is absolute knowledge, then philosophy possesses it. What perhaps he does think is the conjunction of two things: first, that philosophy is as good as it gets, and is in no way inferior to science, and, second, that if there were an absolute conception of the world, a representation of it which was maximally independent of perspective, that would be better than more perspectival or locally conditioned representations of the world. Now the first of these assumptions is, as it were, half true: although philosophy is worse than natural science at some things, such as discovering the nature of the galaxies (or, if I was right about the absolute conception, representing the world as it is in itself), it is better than natural science at other things, for instance making sense of what we are trying to do in our intellectual activities. But the second assumption I have ascribed to Putnam, that if there were an absolute conception, it would somehow be better than more perspectival representations—that is simply false. Even if it were possible to give an account of the world that was minimally perspectival, it would not be particularly serviceable to us for many of our purposes, such as making sense of

⁸ This is the point that should be relevant to the question whether philosophy would form part of the content of the absolute conception. Moreover, if Putnam wanted to say that any statement which merely contained terms governed by normative semantic relations was itself normative, he would have to say that every statement was normative.

⁹ *Descartes*, pp. 300-303.

our intellectual or other activities, or indeed getting on with most of those activities. For those purposes—in particular, in seeking to understand ourselves—we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world. The slippery word ‘we’ here means not the inclusive ‘we’ which brings together as a purely abstract gathering any beings with whom human beings might conceivably communicate about the nature of the world. It means a contrastive ‘we’, that is to say, humans as contrasted with other possible beings; and, in the case of many human practices, it may of course mean groupings smaller than humanity as a whole.

To summarize this part of the argument, there are two mistakes to hand here. One is to suppose that just because there is an uncontentious sense in which all our conceptions are ours, it simply follows from this that they are all equally local or perspectival, and that no contrast in this respect could conceivably be drawn from inside our thought between, for instance, the concepts of physics and the concepts of politics or ethics. The other mistake is to suppose that if there is such a contrast, and one set of these concepts, those of physical science, are potentially universal in their uptake and usefulness, then it follows from this that they are somehow intrinsically superior to more local conceptions which are humanly and perhaps historically grounded. The latter is a scientistic error, and it will remain one even if it is denied that the contrast can conceivably be drawn. People who deny the contrast but hold on to the error—who believe, that is to say, that there can be no absolute conception, but that if there were, it would be better than any other representation of the world—these people are counterfactually scientistic: rather as an atheist is really religious if he thinks that since God does not exist everything is permitted.

Because Putnam assumes that if there were such a thing as an absolute conception of the world, the account of semantic relations would itself have to be part of it, he also regards as scientistic the philosophical programme, which has taken various forms, of trying to give an account of semantic relations such as reference in non-normative, scientific, terms. It might be thought there was a question whether such a programme would necessarily be scientistic, independently of Putnam’s particular reasons for thinking that it would; but in fact this question seems to me to be badly posed. The issue is not whether the programme is scientistic, but whether the motivations for it are, and this itself is a less than clear question. I take it as obvious that any attempt to *reduce* semantic relations to concepts of physics is doomed. If, in reaction to that, the question

simply becomes whether our account of semantic relations is to be consistent with physics, the answer had better be 'yes'. So any interesting question in this area seems to be something like this: to what extent could the behaviour of a creature be identified as linguistic behaviour, for instance that of referring to something, without that creature's belonging to a group which had something like a culture, a general set of rules which governed itself and other creatures with which it lived? Related questions are: is language a specifically human activity, so far as terrestrial species are concerned, in the sense that it is necessarily tied up with the full human range of self-conscious cultural activities? Again, at what stage of hominid evolution might we conceive of genuine linguistic behaviour emerging? These questions seem to me perfectly interesting questions and neither they, nor their motivation, is scientistic. What would be scientistic would be an *a priori* assumption that they had to have a certain kind of answer, namely one that identified linguistic behaviour as independent of human cultural activities in general, or, alternatively, took the differently reductive line, that cultural activities are all or mostly to be explained in terms of natural selection. I shall not try to say any more about this aspect of the subject here, except to repeat yet again the platitude that it is not, in general, human cultural practices that are explained by natural selection, but rather the universal human characteristic of having cultural practices, and human beings' capacity to do so. It is precisely the fact that variations and developments in cultural practices are *not* determined at an evolutionary level that makes the human characteristic of living under culture such an extraordinary evolutionary success.

4. What are the temptations to scientism? They are various, and many of them can be left to the sociology of academic life, but I take it that the most basic motivations to it are tied up with a question of the intellectual authority of philosophy. Science seems to possess intellectual authority, and philosophy, conscious that as it is usually done it does not have scientific authority, may decide to try to share in it. Now it is a real question whether the intellectual authority of science is not tied up with its hopes of offering an absolute conception of the world as it is independently of any local or peculiar perspective on it. Many scientists think so. Some people think that this is the only intellectual authority there is. They include, counterfactually speaking, those defenders of the humanities, misguided in my view, who think that they have to show that nobody has any hope of offering such a conception, including scientists: that natural science constitutes just another part of the human conversation, so that, leaving aside the small difference that the sciences deliver refriger-

ators, weapons, medicines and so, they are in the same boat as the humanities are.¹⁰

This way of defending the humanities seems to me doubly misguided. It is politically misguided, for if the authority of the sciences is divorced from any pretensions to offer an absolute conception, their authority will merely shift to the manifest fact of their predictive and technological successes, unmediated by any issue of where those successes come from, and the humanities will once again, in that measure, be disadvantaged. The style of defence is also intellectually misguided, for the same kind of reason that we have already met, that it assumes that offering an absolute conception is the real thing, what really matters in the direction of intellectual authority. But there is simply no reason to accept that—once again, we are left with the issue of how to make the best sense of ourselves and our activities, and that issue includes the question, indeed it focuses on the question, of how the humanities can help us in doing so.

One particular question, of course, is how to make best sense of the activity of science itself. Here the issue of history begins to come to the fore. The pursuit of science does not give any great part to its own history, and that is a significant feature of its practice. (It is no surprise that scientistic philosophers want philosophy to follow it in this: that they think, as one philosopher I know has put it, that the history of philosophy is no more part of philosophy than the history of science is part of science.) Of course, scientific concepts have a history: but on the standard view, though the history of physics may be interesting, it has no effect on the understanding of physics itself. It is merely part of the history of discovery.

There is of course a real question of what it is for a history to be a history of discovery. One condition of its being so lies in a familiar idea, which I would put like this: the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement. I shall call an explanation which satisfies this condition *vindictory*. In the particular case of the natural sciences, the later theory typically explains in its own terms the appearances which supported the earlier theory, and, furthermore, the earlier theory can be understood as a special or limited case of the later. But—and this is an important point—the idea that the explanation of a transition from one outlook to another is ‘vindictory’ is not defined in such a way that it applies only to scientific enquiries.

¹⁰ A rather similar line was taken by some defenders of religion at the beginning of the scientific revolution.

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline

Those who are sceptical about the claims of science to be moving towards an absolute conception of the world often base their doubts on the history of science. They deny that the history is really vindictory, or, to the extent that it is, they deny that this is as significant as the standard view supposes. I shall not try to take these arguments further, though it is perhaps worth noting that those who sympathize with this scepticism need to be careful about how they express their historical conclusions. Whatever view you take of the scientific enterprise, you should resist saying, as one historian of science has incautiously said, 'the reality of quarks was the upshot of particle physicists' practice' (the 1970's is rather late for the beginning of the universe.)¹¹

5. Philosophy, at any rate, is thoroughly familiar with ideas which indeed, like all other ideas, have a history, but have a history which is not notably vindictory. I shall concentrate for this part of the discussion on ethical and political concepts, though many of the considerations go wider. If we ask why we use some concepts of this kind rather than others—rather than, say, those current in an earlier time—we may deploy arguments which claim to justify our ideas against those others: ideas of equality and equal rights, for instance, against ideas of hierarchy. Alternatively, we may reflect on an historical story, of how these concepts rather than the others came to be ours: a story (simply to give it a label) of how the modern world and its special expectations came to replace the *ancien régime*. But then we reflect on the relation of this story to the arguments that we deploy against the earlier conceptions, and we realize that the story is the history of those forms of argument themselves: the forms of argument, call them liberal forms of argument, are a central part of the outlook that we accept.

If we consider how these forms of argument came to prevail, we can indeed see them as having won, but not necessarily as having won an argument. For liberal ideas to have won an argument, the representatives of the *ancien régime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society. They would have had to agree that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas served better or of which they were a better expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the

¹¹ Andrew Pickering, *Constructing Quarks* (Edinburgh University Press, 1984). It should be said that Pickering's history does raise important questions about interpreting the 'discovery' of quarks.

process. The relevant ideas of freedom, reason, and so on were themselves involved in the change. If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail—that is to say, among other things, how these came to be our ideas—are not vindicatory.

The point can also be put like this. In the case of scientific change, it may occur through there being a crisis. If there is a crisis, it is agreed by all parties to be a crisis of explanation, and while they may indeed disagree over what will count as an explanation, to a considerable extent there has come to be agreement, at least within the limits of science since the eighteenth century, and this makes an important contribution to the history being vindicatory. But in the geographically extended and long-lasting and various process by which the old political and ethical order has changed into modernity, while it was propelled by many crises, they were not in the first instance crises of explanation. They were crises of confidence or of legitimacy, and the story of how one conception rather than another came to provide the basis of a new legitimacy is not on the face of it vindicatory.

There are indeed, or have been, stories that try to vindicate historically one or another modern conception, in terms of the unfolding of reason, or a growth in enlightenment, or a fuller realization of freedom and autonomy which is a constant human objective; and there are others. Such stories are unpopular at the moment, particularly in the wide-screen versions offered by Hegel and Marx. With philosophers in our local tradition the stories are unpopular not so much in the sense that they deny them, as that they do not mention them. They do not mention them, no doubt, in part because they do not believe them, but also because it is not part of a philosophical undertaking, as locally understood, to attend to any such history. But—and this is the point I want to stress—we *must* attend to it, if we are to know what reflective attitude to take to our own conceptions. For one thing, the answer to the question whether there is a history of our conceptions that is vindicatory (if only modestly so) makes a difference to what we are doing in saying, if we do say, that the earlier conceptions were wrong. In the absence of vindicatory explanations, while you can of course say that they were wrong—who is to stop you?—the content of this is likely to be pretty thin: it conveys only the message that the earlier outlook fails by arguments the point of which is that such outlooks should fail by them. It is a good question whether a tune as thin as this is worth whistling at all.

However, this issue (the issue roughly of relativism) is not the main point. The real question concerns our philosophical attitude towards *our own* views. Even apart from questions of vindication and the consequences that this may have for comparisons of our

outlook with others, philosophers cannot altogether ignore history if they are going to understand our ethical concepts at all. One reason for this is that in many cases the content of our concepts is a contingent historical phenomenon. This is for more than one reason. To take a case on which I am presently working, the virtues associated with truthfulness, I think it is clear that while there is a universal human need for qualities such as accuracy (the dispositions to acquire true beliefs) and sincerity (the disposition to say, if anything, what one believes to be true), the form of these dispositions and of the motivations that they embody are culturally and historically various. If one is to understand our own view of such things, and to do so in terms that are on any one's view philosophical—for instance, in order to relieve puzzlement about the basis of these values and their implications—one must try to understand why they take certain forms here rather than others, and one can only do that with the help of history. Moreover, there are some such virtues, such as authenticity or integrity of a certain kind, which are as a whole a manifestly contingent cultural development; they would not have evolved at all if Western history had not taken a certain course. For both these reasons, the reflective understanding of our ideas and motivations, which I take to be by general agreement a philosophical aim, is going to involve historical understanding. Here history helps philosophical understanding, or is part of it. Philosophy has to learn the lesson that conceptual description (or, more specifically, analysis) is not self-sufficient; and that such projects as deriving our concepts *a priori* from universal conditions of human life, though they indeed have a place (a greater place in some areas of philosophy than others), are likely to leave unexplained many features that provoke philosophical enquiry.

6. There are other respects, however, in which historical understanding can seem not to help the philosophical enterprise, but to get in the way of it. If we thought that our outlook had a history which was vindictory, we might to that extent ignore it, precisely as scientists ignore the history of science. (One can glimpse here the enormous and implausible assumptions made by those who think that philosophy can ignore its own history.) But if we do not believe that the history of our outlook is vindictory, then understanding the history of our outlook may seem to interfere with our commitment to it, and in particular with a philosophical attempt to work within it and develop its arguments. If it is a contingent development that happens to obtain here and now, can we fully identify with it? Is it really *ours* except in the sense that we and it happen to be in the same place at the same time?

To some extent, this is one version of a problem that has recurred in European thought since historical self-consciousness struck deep roots in the early nineteenth century: a problem of reflection *versus* commitment, or of an external view of one's beliefs as opposed to an internal involvement with them—a problem, as it might be called, of historicist weariness and alienation. It may be a testimony to the power of this problem that so many liberal philosophers want to avoid any question of the history of their own views. It may also be significant in this connection that so much robust and influential political philosophy comes from the United States, which has no history of emerging from the *ancien régime*, since (very roughly speaking) it emerged from it by the mere act of coming into existence.

One philosopher, and indeed an American philosopher, who has raised the question within the local tradition is Richard Rorty, and he has suggested that the answer to it lies in irony:¹² that *qua* political actors we are involved in the outlook, but *qua* reflective people (for instance, as philosophers) we stand back and in a detached and rather quizzical spirit see ourselves as happening to have that attachment. The fact that '*qua*' should come so naturally into formulating this outlook shows, as almost always in philosophy, that someone is trying to separate the inseparable: in this case, the ethically inseparable, and probably the psychologically inseparable as well, unless the ironist joins the others (the outlook that Rorty calls 'common sense') and forgets about historical self-understanding altogether, in which case he can forget his irony as well, and indeed does not need it.

In fact, as it seems to me, once one goes *far enough* in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all. What we have here is very like something that we have already met in this discussion, the phenomenon of counterfactual scientism. The supposed problem comes from the idea that a vindictory history of our outlook is what we would really like to have, and the discovery that liberalism, in particular (but the same is true of any outlook), has the kind of contingent history that it does have is a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best. But, once again, why should we think that? Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and

¹² *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially chapters 3 and 4.

the formation is significantly the same. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective.

If we can get rid of that illusion, we shall see that there is no inherent conflict among three activities: first, the first-order activities of acting and arguing within the framework of our ideas; second, the philosophical activity of reflecting on those ideas at a more general level and trying to make better sense of them; and third, the historical activity of understanding where they came from. The activities are in various ways continuous with one another. This helps to define both intelligence in political action (because of the connection of the first with the second and the third), and also realism in political philosophy (because of the connection of the second with the first and the third.) If there is a difficulty in combining the third of these activities with the first two, it is the difficulty of thinking about two things at once, not a problem in consistently taking both of them seriously.

7. In fact, we are very unlikely to be able to make complete sense of our outlook. It will be in various ways incoherent. The history may help us to understand why this should be so: for instance, the difficulties that liberalism has at the present time with ideas of autonomy can be traced in part to Enlightenment conceptions of the individual which do not fully make sense to us now. In these circumstances, we may indeed be alienated from parts of our own outlook. If the incoherence is severe enough, it will present itself to us, who hold this outlook, as a crisis of explanation: we need to have reasons for rearranging and developing our ideas in one way rather than another. At the same time, we may perhaps see the situation as a crisis of legitimation—that there is a real question whether these ideas will survive and continue to serve us. Others who do not share the outlook can see the crisis of legitimation, too, but they cannot see it as a crisis of explanation for themselves, since they did not think that our outlook made sense of things in the first place. We, however, need reasons internal to our outlook not just to solve explanatory problems, but in relation to the crisis of legitimation as well. We need them, for one thing, to explain ourselves to people who are divided between our present outlook and some contemporary active rival. If things are bad enough, those people may include ourselves.

There may be no crisis. Or if there is, there will be some elements in our outlook which are fixed points within it. We believe, for instance, that in some sense every citizen, indeed every human being—some people, more extravagantly, would say every sentient being—deserves equal consideration. Perhaps this is less a propositional belief than the schema of various arguments. But in either case it can seem, at least in its most central and unspecific form, *unhintergebar*: there is nothing more basic in terms of which to justify it. We know that most people in the past have not shared it; we know that there are others in the world who do not share it now. But for us, it is simply there. This does not mean that we have the thought: ‘for us, it is simply there.’ It means that we have the thought: ‘it is simply there.’ (That is what it is for it to be, for us, simply there.)

With regard to these elements of our outlook, at least, a philosopher may say: the contingent history has no effect in the space of reasons (to use a fashionable phrase), so why bother about it?¹³ Let us just get on with our business of making best sense of our outlook from inside it. There are several answers to this, some implicit in what I have already said. One is that philosophers reflecting on these beliefs or modes of argument may turn back to those old devices of cognitive reassurance such as ‘intuition’. But if the epistemic claims implicit in such terms are to be taken seriously, then there are implications for history—they imply a *different* history. Again, what we think about these things affects our view of people who have different outlooks in the present, outlooks that present themselves as rivals to ours. To say simply that these people are wrong in our terms is to revert to the thin tune that we have already heard in the case of disapproval over the centuries. It matters why these people believe what they do; for instance, whether we can reasonably regard their outlook as simply archaic, an expression of an order which happens to have survived into an international environment in which it cannot last, socially or intellectually. This matters both for the persuasion of uncommitted parties, as I have already said, but also for making sense of the others in relation to ourselves—and hence of ourselves in relation to them. Even with regard to those elements of our outlook for which there are no further justifications, there can still be explanations which help to locate them in relation to their rivals.

Above all, historical understanding—perhaps I may now say,

¹³ This is (in effect) a central claim of Thomas Nagel’s book *The Last Word* (Oxford University Press, 1997). His arguments bear closely on the present discussion. I have commented on them in a review of the book, *New York Review of Books* XLV, 18 (November 19, 1998.)

more broadly, social understanding—can help with the business, which is quite certainly a philosophical business, of distinguishing between different ways in which various of our ideas and procedures can seem to be such that we cannot get beyond them, that there is no conceivable alternative. This brings us back to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein influentially and correctly insisted that there was an end to justifications, that at various points we run into the fact that ‘this is the way we go on’. But, if I may say again something that I have said rather often before,¹⁴ it makes a great difference who ‘we’ are supposed to be, and it may mean different groups in different philosophical connections. It may mean maximally, as I mentioned earlier, any creature that you and I could conceive of understanding. Or it may mean any human beings, and here universal conditions of human life, including very general psychological capacities, may be relevant. Or it may mean just those with whom you and I share much more, such as outlooks typical of modernity. Wittgenstein himself inherited from Kant a concern with the limits of understanding, from Frege and Russell an interest in the conditions of linguistic meaning, and from himself a sense of philosophy as a quite peculiar and possibly pathological enterprise. These influences guided him towards the most general questions of philosophy, and, with that, to a wide understanding of ‘we’, but they also conspired to make him think that philosophy had nothing to do with explanations—not merely scientific explanations (he was certainly the least scientific of philosophers), but any explanations at all, except philosophical explanations: and they were not like other explanations, but rather like elucidations or reminders. In this sense, his ways of doing philosophy, and indeed his doubts about it, still focussed on a conception of philosophy’s subject matter as being exclusively *a priori*. That is a conception which we have good reason to question, and so, indeed, did he.

Once we give up that assumption, we can take a legitimate philosophical interest in what is agreed to be a more local ‘us’. But it may be said that when it is specifically this more restricted group that is in question, it cannot be that there are no conceivable alternatives. Surely the history I have been going on about is a history of alternatives? But that is a misunderstanding of what, in this context, is being said to be inconceivable. History presents alternatives only in terms of a wider ‘us’: it presents alternative ways, that is to say various ways, in which human beings have lived and hence can live. Indeed, in those terms we may be able to conceive, if only schemati-

¹⁴ See e.g. ‘Wittgenstein and Idealism’, reprinted in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981). The question of idealism is not relevant in the present context.

cally and with difficulty, other ways in which human beings might live in the future. But that is not the point. What in this connection seem to be simply there, to carry no alternative with them, are elements of our ethical and political outlook, and in those terms there are no alternatives for us. Those elements are indeed *unhintergebar*, in a sense that indeed involves time, but in a way special to this kind of case. We can explore them on this side, in relation to their past, and explain them, and (if, as I have already said, we abandon scientific illusions) we can identify with the process that led to our outlook because we can identify with its outcome. But we cannot in our thought go beyond our outlook into the future and remain identified with the result: that is to say, we cannot overcome our outlook. If a possible future that figures in those shadowy speculations does not embody some interpretation of these central elements of our outlook, then it may make empirical sense to us—we can see how someone could get there—but it makes no ethical sense to us, except as a scene of retrogression, or desolation, or loss.

It is connected with this that modern ethical and political conceptions typically do not allow for a future beyond themselves. Marxism predicted a future which was supposed to make ethical sense, but it notoriously came to an end in a static Utopia. Many liberals in their own way follow the same pattern; they go on, in this respect as with respect to the past, as though liberalism were timeless.¹⁵ It is not a reproach to these liberals that they cannot see beyond the outer limits of what they find acceptable: no-one can do that. But it is more of a reproach that they are not interested enough in why this is so, in why their most basic convictions should seem to be, as I put it, simply there. It is part and parcel of a philosophical attitude that makes them equally uninterested in how those convictions got there.

8. I have argued that philosophy should get rid of scientific illusions, that it should not try to behave like an extension of the natural sciences (except in the special cases where that is what it is), that it should think of itself as part of a wider humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and of our activities, and that in order to answer many of its questions it needs to attend to other parts of that enterprise, in particular to history.

But someone, perhaps a young philosopher, may say: that is all very well, but even if I accept it all, doesn't it mean that there is too much that we need to know, that one can only do philosophy by

¹⁵ This needs qualification with regard to the more recent work of Rawls, which displays a stronger sense of historical contingency than was present in *A Theory of Justice*.

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline

being an amateur of altogether too much? Can't we just get on with it?

To him or her I can only say: I entirely see your, that is to say our, problem. I accept that analytic philosophy owes many of its successes to the principle that small and good is better than broad and bad. I accept that this involves a division of labour. I accept that you want to get on with it. I also admit something else, that it is typically senior philosophers who, like senior scientists, tend to muse in these expansive ways about the nature of their subject. As Nietzsche says in a marvellous passage about the philosopher and age:¹⁶

It quite often happens that the old man is subject to the delusion of a great moral renewal and rebirth, and from this experience he passes judgments on the work and course of his life, as if he had only now become clear-sighted; and yet the inspiration behind this feeling of well-being and these confident judgements is not wisdom, but *weariness*.

However, there are things to be said about how one might accept the view of philosophy that I am offering, and yet get on with it. Let me end by mentioning very briefly one or two of them. One thing we need to do is not to abandon the division of labour but to reconsider it. It tends to be modelled too easily on that of the sciences, as dividing one field or area of theorising from another, but we can divide the subject up in other ways—by thinking of one given ethical idea, for instance, and the various considerations that might help one to understand it. Again, while it is certainly true that we all need to know more than we can hope to know—and that is true of philosophers who work near the sciences, or indeed in them, as well—it makes a difference what it is that you know you do not know. One may not see very far outside one's own house, but it can be very important which direction one is looking in.

Moreover, it is not only a matter of research or philosophical writing. There is the question of what impression one gives of the subject in teaching it. Most students have no interest in becoming professional philosophers. They often take away an image of philosophy as a self-contained technical subject, and this can admittedly have its own charm as something complicated which can be well or badly done, and that is not to be despised. It also in some ways makes the subject easier to teach, since it less involves trying to find out how much or how little the students know about anything else. But if we believe that philosophy might play an important part in making people think about what they are doing, then philosophy

¹⁶ *Daybreak*, sec. 542.

Bernard Williams

should acknowledge its connections with other ways of understanding ourselves, and if it insists on not doing so, it may seem to the student in every sense quite peculiar.

We run the risk, in fact, that the whole humanistic enterprise of trying to understand ourselves is coming to seem peculiar. For various reasons, education is being driven towards an increasing concentration on the technical and the commercial, to a point at which any more reflective enquiry may come to seem unnecessary and archaic, something that at best is preserved as part of the heritage industry. If that is how it is preserved, it will not be the passionate and intelligent activity that it needs to be. We all have an interest in the life of that activity—not just a shared interest, but an interest in a shared activity.

All Souls College, Oxford