

What is Humane Philosophy and Why is it At Risk?

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1. Introduction

Let me begin with what may seem a very minor point, but one which I think reveals something about how many philosophers today conceive of their subject. During the past few decades, there has been an increasing tendency for references in philosophy books and articles to be formatted in the ‘author and date’ style (‘see Fodor (1996)’, ‘see Smith (2001)’.) A neat and economical reference system, you may think; and it certainly saves space, albeit inconveniencing readers by forcing them to flip back to the end of the chapter or book to find the title of the work being referred to. But what has made this system so popular among philosophers? A factor which I suspect exerts a strong subconscious attraction for many people is that it makes a philosophy article look very like a piece of scientific research. For if one asks where the ‘author-date’ system originated, the answer is clear: it comes from the science journals.¹ And in that context, the choice of referencing system has a very definite rationale. In the progress-driven world of science, priority is everything, and it’s vitally important for a career that a researcher is able to proclaim his work as breaking new ground. Bloggs (2005) developed a technique for cloning a certain virus; Coggs (2006) showed how certain bits of viral DNA could be spliced; and now Dobbs (2007) draws on both techniques to develop the building blocks of a new vaccine. The idea is that our knowledge-base is enhanced, month by month and year by year, in small incremental steps (perhaps with occasional major breakthroughs); and in the catalogue of advances, the date tagged to each name signals when progress was made, and by whom.

¹ Often known as the ‘Harvard’ system, author-date referencing was apparently first used by a Edward Laurens Mark, a Professor of anatomy at Harvard University, in an article published in 1881 in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*.

There's nothing whatever wrong with this in science. We have all benefited, in countless ways, from the competitive, progress-driven march of scientific research. And science, by its very nature, looks forwards rather than backwards. The dates of references in science journals seldom go back more than a decade or so. But is this method suited for the humanities? Because of the way funding mechanisms are organized, we have all, almost without being aware of it, slipped into a mind-set where we think of ourselves as doing 'research'. In funding applications we have to specify our 'research methods', and any philosopher who answers this honestly ('reading some books and thinking about some ideas') will probably have their application turned down. Above all, research, perhaps not by definition, but by common implication, is thought of as innovative, progress-oriented, competitive, forward-looking.

Are the humanities really suited to being cast in this mould? Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, J. S. Bach ... Do we really think of these names as ones that should be cited, if at all, only occasionally and accidentally – in the way in which Democritus' theory of atoms, or Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood, might appear in an incidental footnote in a science article, the authors remembered simply for antiquarian reasons, rather than as great canonical figures who deserve to be principal subjects of study in their own right? In the case of philosophy (unlike art or literature or music), some practitioners might indeed be eager to bite the bullet, and say that the only really important philosophy is that being done by the latest state-of-the-art researchers; witness the bumper-sticker reportedly seen on some campuses in the USA, 'Just say NO to the History of Philosophy'. But the majority of philosophers would surely have a few qualms about such a radically anti-historical stance; it seems significant, for example, that almost all university departments of philosophy still insist on including at least some classical and early-modern texts as an essential part of the teaching syllabus.

Nevertheless, the science-based model exerts a subtle influence. Even when the great canonical figures are referred to in modern philosophy books and articles, the increasingly popularity of the 'author-date' reference system has led to an extraordinarily cavalier way of citing them. What would we make of a literary scholar who used expressions like 'see Shakespeare (1958)', when citing a passage in *Hamlet*, or who provided no dates other than that of the edition they happened to have on their shelves? And yet countless philosophy books appearing today will casually use references like 'Kant (1962)', very often with nothing, either in the footnotes or the bibliography,

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to give even the faintest indication that Kant was not an English or American philosopher writing in the latter twentieth century. Quite apart from issues of pedagogy (we surely owe it to our students to be a little more informative), there is something unappealingly parochial about a citation method that reduces the entire sweep of Western thought to a set of modern English editions.

Instead of being proud of our intellectual heritage, and instead of reminding ourselves that our philosophical reasoning is never a neutral, ahistorical process, but has been conditioned in countless ways by the long sweep of Western culture, stretching from the Enlightenment back to the Renaissance and beyond, to the Medieval and Classical worlds, we often seem determined to situate ourselves in a narrow anglophone world that is exclusively or very largely focused on the latest 'cutting-edge' theories advanced by our contemporaries, either supposedly out of the blue, or through debate with other current theorists, or those of the recent past.

My main purpose in this paper, however, is not to mount a defence of the history of philosophy, nor to underline the need for a more nuanced historical awareness of the influences that shaped our modern understanding of the world and our place within it. Highly important though I believe these things to be, there are deeper questions at stake, which I want to address: questions about philosophy's self-conception – about the kind of subject we take ourselves to be doing when we say we are 'philosophers'.

2. Shifting conceptions of philosophy

Uncertainty about the precise nature of its subject-matter may be a sign of malaise in a philosophical culture. And it is striking that the last hundred years or so have seen an uncanny number of shifts among philosophers in their conception of what their subject is supposed to be about. To summarize very crudely and schematically, at the start of the twentieth century a somewhat baroque kind of idealism conceived of philosophy as propounding grand theories of the supposed 'ultimate' nature of reality. G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell provided an antidote to this by developing a self-consciously dry and down-to-earth style of philosophizing, devoted in large part to questions of logical analysis. Then came Logical Positivism, with its programme for the elimination of metaphysics and the reduction of all philosophical theorizing to claims capable of empirical verification. There followed, around the middle of the century, the therapeutic conception of the later Wittgenstein, according to which the

job of the philosopher was to dispel the conceptual confusions generated either by other philosophers or by the power of language to bewitch us into accepting false models of reality. ‘What is your aim in philosophy: to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle’² There followed a phase of so-called ‘ordinary language philosophy’, which in turn gave way in the final quarter of the century, to a rather different but still linguistically oriented approach to philosophy, when Michael Dummett proclaimed that ‘only with the rise of the modern logical and analytic style of philosophizing was the proper object of philosophy finally established, namely ... the analysis of the structure of *thought*, [for which] the only proper method [is] the analysis of *language*.’³ About the same time, though coming from a completely different direction, there appeared a cluster of so-called postmodern thinkers such as Richard Rorty who proclaimed nothing less than the end of philosophy as traditionally conceived – the collapse of the image of the philosopher as a kind of ‘cultural overseer’ who could pass judgement on the validity and coherence of various types of discourse.⁴ Once such pretensions were abandoned, it was argued, then philosophy would, in effect, fade away, leaving us simply with various forms of more specific inquiry – literary, political, historical or whatever – each necessarily embedded within the relativities of a given mode of discourse. To complete this strange catalogue of shifts in philosophy’s self-conception, we have seen, beginning with the work of W. V. O. Quine,⁵ and gathering speed in the last few decades, what one commentator has called a ‘naturalistic revolution’ in philosophy – the rise of a science-inspired model according to which philosophy should ‘either ... adopt and emulate the method of successful sciences, or ... operate in tandem with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch.’⁶

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 1953] (New York: Macmillan, 1953), Part I, §309.

³ ‘Can Analytic Philosophy Be Systematic?’ [1975], in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), 458.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 300ff.

⁵ For Quine’s view of philosophy as continuous with science, see his ‘Epistemology naturalized’, in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 69–90, and ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard, 1953; rev. 1961).

⁶ Brian Leiter (ed.), *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), Editor’s Introduction, 2–3.

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There is perhaps no inherent reason why there should not be many ways of practising philosophy, each with claims to be valuable in different ways. Among the writers from all the various schools so far mentioned there are many who have interesting things to say; and it is certainly no part of the purpose of this paper to run down anyone else's work. Nevertheless, we do, I think, need to be wary of many of these models, in so far as their advocates have typically been imperialistic, proclaiming a supposedly final destiny for philosophy, or some ultimate norm which is supposed to represent the only authentic way of doing the subject. In the case of the science-inspired model of philosophical inquiry that appears increasingly to be gaining ground, there is, I want to argue, serious cause for concern. It is not that much of the work done under this banner does not meet high philosophical standards of rigour and clarity, or that it is not, in many cases, worth doing. The point rather is that if philosophy gets *entirely* confined within this mould, it risks losing its very *raison d'être*.

3. Analysis

The scientifically inspired model of philosophy has strong links with the notion of 'analysis', which has been very influential in determining the shape of so much twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy. Etymologically, to 'analyse' something is of course to break it up or dissolve it into its component parts; and this explains why, in many of its uses, analysis is a scientific notion. Analytical chemistry, for example, aims to separate out substances into their constituent elements. That philosophy should be aiming at this kind of 'analysis' was a view that attracted Pierre Gassendi in the seventeenth century, and he drew on this view in attacking Descartes's definition of the mind as a *res cogitans*, or 'thinking thing':

When you say that you are a thinking thing, this was not what we were asking you to tell us. Who doubts that you are thinking? What we are unclear about, what we are looking for, is that inner substance of yours whose property is to think ... If we are asking about wine, and looking for the kind of knowledge which is superior to common knowledge, it will hardly be enough for you to say 'wine is a liquid thing, which is ... red, sweet, intoxicating,' and so on. You will have to attempt to investigate and explain its internal substance, showing how it can be seen to be manufactured from such and such ingredients in

such and such quantities and proportions . . . Similarly, it is not enough for you to announce that you are a thing that thinks and doubts and understands etc. You should carefully scrutinize yourself and conduct a kind of quasi-chemical investigation of yourself, if you are to succeed in uncovering and explaining to us your internal substance . . .⁷

Gassendi is after the kind of analysis that will offer a genuine explanatory advance, and this, he argues, cannot be provided by the Cartesian definition of the mind as a ‘thinking thing’, which merely re-introduces the *explanandum* (the phenomenon to be explained in the first place). What Gassendi demands instead is an analysis of the mind’s workings either in terms of material properties, or (as the ‘quasi’ in ‘quasi-chemical’ suggests) in terms of properties that are at least analogous to material properties.⁸ Yet in the context of his debate with Descartes, such a demand seems to be a malicious attempt to beg the question against the Cartesian view of the mind by insisting that our explanatory hunger can only be satisfied by an account which makes some reference to the material domain. Descartes (though he was happy to give physical or mechanistic accounts of many other human and animal functions)⁹ always held, of course, that the nature of thought and rationality was such as to place it entirely beyond the reach of explanation in anything remotely like material terms.

⁷ Pierre Gassendi, Fifth Set of Objections, published with Descartes’s *Meditations* [*Meditations de prima philosophiae*, 1641], AT VII 276: CSM II 193. ‘AT’ refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes by C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 vols, revised edn, Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76); ‘CSM’ refers to the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸ Gassendi himself actually seems to have held that the mind is an incorporeal substance, though he took this to be something known by faith. His empiricist view of knowledge, however, led him to insist that our understanding of the mind must be based on analogy with something perceived by the senses, and hence that the basis of the analogy will always be something corporeal. For an excellent discussion of his views in this area, see Antonia Lolordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of early Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 10, 230–1.

⁹ See J. Cottingham, ‘Cartesian Dualism’, in Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 8.

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Though Gassendi himself was not, in fact, a materialist about the mind, his general approach to scientific analysis (based on an Epicurean or atomistic framework) may have paved the way for the kind radical naturalistic reductionism about the mental that has attracted some later philosophers.¹⁰ This is an extreme form of scientism that need not detain us long; the arguments against it (though I cannot explore them here) seem conclusive. Of course there are, we know, physiological structures and events of various kinds that support consciousness, just as there are gastric structures and events that support digestion. And there is no reason why scientists should not investigate them, or why philosophers, like everyone else, should not be interested in the results. But if we are operating at the conceptual level, at the level of Descartes's 'thinking' (in which he included doubting, understanding, willing, affirming, denying, sensing and imagining),¹¹ then we are involved in the realm of *meaning*. And here the reductionistic demand seems to be wholly misplaced: even if the existence of a semantic domain may in some way presuppose the existence of an underlying physical domain, it seems hard to see how the relevant truths and concepts could be wholly analysed in terms applicable to the realm of physical structures or events. Spinoza's non-reductive monism (later followed in a certain fashion by Davidson) seems, as far as this particular issue goes, far more plausible: even if it is true that thinking could not occur unless it was realised in some kind of physical process, the kind of explanatory clarification we are looking for, when we ask what thought is, will be at the level of meaningful human activities, not, or certainly not exclusively, at the level of micro-processes.¹²

But supposing, in response to Gassendi's demand for a deeper explanation of the mind, a different kind of 'analysis' were offered – not a reductionistic and materialist one, but a conceptual one? Descartes explains, in another context, that he would be wary of this too:

You exist, and you know you exist, and you know this because you know you are doubting. But what are you? [Suppose you

¹⁰ See for example J. Smart, 'Sensations and Brain Processes', in V. C. Chappell (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962).

¹¹ Descartes, *Meditations*, Second Meditation (AT VII 28: CSM II 19); see further J. Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 4.

¹² Benedictus Spinoza, *Ethics* [*Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, c. 1665], Part II, prop. 7, scholium; Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

say, you are a *man*.] This reply would plunge you into difficult and complicated problems. For example, if I were to ask ... what a man is, and [you answered] that man is a 'rational animal', and if, to explain this, we were to delve into all the levels called 'metaphysical', we should be dragged into a maze from which no escape is possible. For two other questions arise. First, what is an *animal*? Second, what is *rational*? If, to the first question, one answers 'it is a living and sentient being' and that a living being is an 'animate body', and that a body is a 'corporeal substance', you see immediately that the question, like the branches of a family tree, would rapidly increase and multiply. Quite clearly, the result of all these admirable questions would be pure verbiage, which would elucidate nothing and leave us in our original state of ignorance.¹³

The implied target here is the philosophical approach Descartes learned in his youth in the philosophy classes he attended at the college of La Flèche – the standard kind of Scholastic analysis, in terms of genus and differentia. But there is something more general about Descartes's general complaint that will strike a chord for anyone who has worked through a piece of analytical philosophy, hoping to find enlightenment about some fundamental aspect of our human nature, and instead has found themselves drawn deeper and deeper into a maze of definitions and sub-definitions, each raising further philosophical puzzles. Such work can of course boast of being terribly painstaking and precise; but although such precision is often (in Bernard Williams' delightful phrase) 'rather mournfully equated' with analytic philosophy's vaunted 'rigour and clarity', it can often boil down to a specious *mimicry* of scientific procedures, where the practitioners 'persuade themselves that if they fuss around enough with qualifications and counter-examples they are conducting the philosophical equivalent of a biochemical protocol'.¹⁴

'Fussing around' is perhaps a little unfair. Breaking a concept down into its component elements can certainly on occasion be a useful exercise. But it always needs to be borne in mind that that such a process cannot take us very much further than making explicit what we intuitively grasp anyway. We start with an ordinary

¹³ René Descartes, *The Search for Truth* [*La recherche de la vérité*, ?1649], AT X 516: CSM II 410).

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline' [2000], in Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 184.

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competence in using a word, supported by basic awareness of correct and incorrect uses, grasp of paradigm cases, and so on. The philosopher then puts forward his favoured analysis, and this is then tested back against our intuitions, and the suggested definition is perhaps refined and modified until a more or less comfortable fit is achieved. But in the first place, the terms of the proposed definition will often themselves raise further problems (this is the labyrinthine worry raised by Descartes); and in the second place (which is the Williams point), it would be sheer self-deception to suppose that such definitional and conceptual work could offer the kind of explanatory enlightenment that scientific research into of a physical phenomenon can provide.

The basic disparity between the scientific case and the conceptual case is this. In the scientific case, the aim is to find some inner constitution, mechanism, or micro-structure whose workings will account for the phenomenon to be explained. Once we know the molecular structure of opium and the structure of the human nervous system, then, as John Locke envisaged, we may be able to see why opium puts someone to sleep with the same kind of transparency as we can see that a certain key will open a given lock.¹⁵ But if we wish to understand meaning-involving activities or states like consciousness, belief, knowledge, intention, desire, goal, purpose – and indeed any number of the other classic problematic concepts in the philosophy of mind – there is not, even in principle, the possibility of this kind of explanation. We may break the concepts down into their conceptual components, but however deep we go, we shall never (as we may hope to do in the scientific case) discover a simple explanatory *key* that makes us say ‘ah, *that’s* how it operates!’ The philosophical analyst may be tempted to invent such a key – invoking notions like ‘rational substance’ or, perhaps in more modern guise, ‘central processing module’ – but such notions invariably turn out to be relabellings of the phenomenon to be explained, rather than genuine generative mechanisms. What they contribute is likely to be (in Descartes’s scathing phrase) ‘verbiage’, as opposed to genuine enlightenment – ultimately of no more explanatory value than explaining the soporific qualities of opium by invoking its ‘dormitive power’.

When I was an undergraduate, there was a great deal of discussion of the nature of moral judgements: what did it mean to say you ought not to steal? A popular view at the time was such judgements merely expressed personal *feelings* or *attitudes*; but then, since these were

¹⁵ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, [1690], (ed.) P. Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon, repr. 1984), Bk IV, ch. 3, §25.

clearly not just any old feelings, it was necessary to add ‘*moral feelings*’ or ‘*normative attitudes*’. Nowadays, the prevailing fashion has swung right the other way: moral judgements are not at all about subjective psychology but about objective *facts*. But clearly not any old kind of facts. So it is necessary to add ‘*moral facts*’ or ‘*normative facts*.’ But what kind of normativity is involved here? Answer (according to some ‘theorists’): a ‘metaphysically irreducible’ kind of normativity.¹⁶ Such labelling may give a useful indication of where someone locates him or her self in a particular academic dispute, but we should not be lulled by the theoretical-sounding terminology into supposing it does very much more than this.¹⁷

Of course there may be right or wrong answers to be had when we ask about the nature of consciousness, or of morality, and the point of these examples is not to disparage any particular piece of philosophical analysis. The doubts raised by Descartes and by Williams are of a rather different kind – not that the proposed ‘theories’ are necessarily flawed in themselves, but rather that there are limits on the kind of explanatory clarification they can provide. The very word ‘theory’, as used by analytic philosophers, often seems to indicate a very over-ambitious conception of what philosophical analysis can achieve. It is not uncommon, for example, for a philosopher to say he has produced a ‘theory’ of pleasure, or a ‘theory’ of action, when all that is being offered is an extended definitional and conceptual discussion. It is very easy to be caught up in the intricacies of analysis, and to mistake the introduction of more and more technical terms for a substantive explanatory advance. There are serious difficulties in the notion that our explanatory hunger can be satisfied by analysis, by breaking a concept down into its conceptual components. There will always be a suspicion that the path travelled will end up being circular, even though the circle may be masked for a time if the terminology introduced along the way is sufficiently technical and impressive-sounding. How might such circularity be avoided?

¹⁶ R. Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁷ What is more, the multiplication of new terminology may give the impression of real new research, or quasi-scientific progress, when what is really happening is yet another swing back and forth of a pendulum, in a continuing piece of philosophical dialogue about the objectivity (or otherwise) of morality that goes back to David Hume versus Richard Price in the eighteenth century and ultimately to Plato versus Protagoras in the fourth century BC. See David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* [1748]; Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* [1758]; Plato, *Theaetetus* [c. 370 BC], 160 D.

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One model for philosophical theory that has found much favour in the domain of ethics since the work of John Rawls in the 1970s is that of 'reflective equilibrium'. Here the basic idea is that philosophers can indeed make genuine advances by systematizing our pre-philosophical 'intuitions', subsuming them under a simple and elegant generative principle or set of principles. At first this looks very scientific: the aim, as with science is, as Hume put it, to 'reduce the principles productive of natural [or, in this case, moral] phenomena to a greater simplicity'.¹⁸ But there is a radical disparity with the descriptive or scientific case, namely that in science *all* the data have to be subsumed if the theory is to count as successful, whereas in the ethical case, as Rawls famously pointed out, some of our intuitions may need revising or discarding. The object therefore must be to systematize not all, but a sufficient number of our intuitions, either modifying the theory or setting aside some of the 'data', until we end up with principles which 'match our considered judgements duly pruned and adjusted'.¹⁹ A long-standing worry about this kind of 'theory' is that it is merely an elaborate way of trading off one intuition, or set of intuitions, against another. But there is a more serious concern, which connects with our theme of the dangers of a science-inspired model of philosophy.

Thinking of moral intuitions as a set of 'data' disguises the fact that the great moral teachers in history have characteristically called for radical *shifts* in our moral perceptions and sensibilities. This casts serious doubt on the idea that the moral philosopher's job is to construct a 'theory' that will account for prevailing intuition. A telling illustration of this is the current debate over the so-called problem of 'demandingness', where philosophers expend much energy trying to adjust their generative principles until they can reach a result that requires people to give up not too much of their wealth, or quite a lot, or more or less what they now give but perhaps a little bit more, or whatever suitably qualified amount seems 'reasonable' to 'me and my mates' (to use a phrase once coined by David Lewis). There is the obvious problem here that intuitions conflict from individual to individual or group to group. But the deeper problem arises from the fact that serious moralizing, outside the seminar room, is never a static and abstract academic exercise, but is characteristically a call for personal change and individual

¹⁸ Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sectn IV, part 1, penultimate paragraph.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) ch. 1, §4.

growth. The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, to give one famous example, sound extraordinarily demanding (to the rich young man: 'sell *all you have* and give to the poor'; to the disciple who wanted time to bury his father, 'follow me and *leave the dead to bury the dead*').²⁰ But such injunctions are also coupled with a remarkable claim: 'my yoke is *easy* and my burden *light*'.²¹ The implication is of a call not merely for certain actions, but for the kind of total interior change that will completely alter the subject's perspective about who he is and how he proposes to live.

The concern I am raising here about Reflective Equilibrium methodology is not that it necessarily operates in a way that is complacently conservative of the social status quo; clearly, some of its practitioners, including Rawls himself, have advocated quite radical approaches to, for example, social justice.²² The Rawlsian method, to be sure, allows for some intuitions to be discarded in the course of the reflective process. Nevertheless, the very nature of reflective equilibrium ensures a substantial degree of match between the results of the eventually favoured theory and the content and strength of the central intuitions its proponents start with (albeit partly modified as a function of how they fare under the constraints of coherence and systematicity). By contrast, the kind of demand or 'call' invoked in the Christian morality just mentioned is precisely aimed at exposing a gulf between what we now are and what we are to become. My purpose in referring to such teachings (and they are not confined to Christianity) is not to pass judgment one way or the other on such calls for 'change of heart' or *metanoia*, but to point up a serious psychological 'thinness' in the science-based model of moral 'theorizing'. Abstract, decontextualised, psychologically jejune, detached from the drama of the human journey (the journey from complacency, through suffering, toward moral and psychological growth), the 'equilibrium' it promises seems all too abstract and intellectualised a notion to provide a proper way of addressing the deep ethical challenges of the human condition.

If reflective equilibrium is a flawed methodology,²³ and definitional and conceptual analysis cannot provide genuine explanatory

²⁰ Matthew 19:21. Luke 9:59–60.

²¹ Matthew 11:30.

²² Compare Rawls's 'maximin principle', that requires inequalities to be justified by showing that they benefit the least advantaged (*A Theory of Justice*, §11).

²³ It would take far more space than I can spare here to assess this question thoroughly. Among the extensive recent literature addressing some of

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advance, where do we go? Here it is worth stepping outside the seminar room for a moment, and remembering that in our ordinary human life and experience, the characteristic way in which we normally achieve understanding within the domain of meaning, as opposed to the domain of physical phenomena and their explanation, is not analytically but holistically: not by taking things apart but by reaching across and outwards.²⁴ The significance of thoughts and desires and beliefs and intentions is typically revealed when they are located within a wider network, connecting up, both synchronically and diachronically, with the current actions and the continuing lives both of individual human beings and of the groups of which they are necessarily a part. By appreciating the importance of the holistic dimension we can come to see why certain kinds of analytical and science-based model of the philosophical enterprise threaten a radical impoverishment of the subject. What is needed is not philosophical analysis but philosophical *synthesis* – not chopping things into parts, but linking them together.

4. Specialisation

If the direction of explanation appropriate for understanding the domain of human meaning is holistic rather than analytic, requiring us to move outwards rather than inwards, locating our thoughts and actions within a broad network of individual and social activity, then there is one extremely prominent feature of modern academic philosophy that ought immediately to sound alarm bells, namely its increasing *fragmentation* into specialised sub-disciplines. Much of the impetus for specialisation comes, once again, from the needs of science. A biochemist will rarely, if ever, attend a seminar on mathematical astronomy. For one thing, the mechanisms of nature are so

the issues involved, see especially G. Sayre-McCord, 'Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory', in W. Sinnott-Armstrong & M. Timmons (eds), *Moral Knowledge: New Readings in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137–189, and M. DePaul, *Balance and Refinement: Beyond coherence methods of moral inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁴ Compare P. F. Strawson's account of 'connective' as opposed to 'reductive' analysis in his *Analysis and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), discussed in H.-J. Glock's illuminating study *What is Analytic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 6.

exceedingly complex and intricate that it is just not humanly possible for any one individual to master the relevant theories in more than one specialised field. And for another thing, he or she would simply not understand the discussion. Anyone who doubts this should talk to a research scientist, or take a look at some recent abstracts of scientific articles. So specialised is the vocabulary used that it is no exaggeration to say that the layperson will be very lucky to understand one word in ten or fifteen. And even a highly qualified scientist may be hard put to it to understand the specific terms of the debate even in a research area which is relatively close to her own, let alone in a more distant field.

That situation has not yet quite arrived in philosophy. But it is, I think, remarkable that many philosophers now working would apparently have no objection whatever if it *did* arrive. It is already noticeable that faculty members and graduate students working on, say, the philosophy of language are often disinclined to attend seminars on, say, ethics, and vice versa. The reason for this is not, as it is in the scientific case, that the papers being delivered are impossibly hard for a non-specialist to understand: there is very little decent analytic philosophy that cannot be deciphered if you are prepared to put in the time and read the sentences enough times. The point rather, is that the debates have become so much the property of specialists who have devoted prodigious energy to devising the most intricate arguments and counter-arguments to support their views, that it is unlikely that anyone who did not have a professional or career motivation for putting in the requisite effort would willingly wade through the resulting conceptual treacle. Consider the following sentence from a recent book on ethics – and I am deliberately choosing an extract not from some philosophically dubious or pretentious piece of writing, but from a serious, high-quality publication which is a recognised contribution to current debates:

Let us define what it is for a proposition to be [practically] realizable by *A* at *t*, [that is] realizable by means of *A*'s *intentional behaviour at t*. To say a proposition *p* is practically realizable by *A* at *t* is to say that there is some way of behaving *W* such that there are possible worlds in which all the actual truths that are causally independent of whatever *A* might do or think at *t* hold, and *A* intentionally behaves in way *W* at *t*, and in all those worlds *p* is true.²⁵

²⁵ Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, p. 110.

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Extracting a passage from its surrounding context does not, of course, give a fair impression of the accessibility of the whole. But if we move away from this particular example to the general style and content of the great bulk of contemporary analytic philosophy, it is I think fair to say that the way in which most philosophy books and articles are now written has been strongly influenced by the demands of professional academic life. We learn our trade by writing doctoral dissertations, and few dissertations have been failed for being too technical or laborious, whereas a bold and transparently-stated claim to which a counter-example can be found may lead to a thesis being referred back. Or again, if a journal submission manages to work through current technical debates in a manner so impressively complex that the referee cannot easily spot any flaws, it may get the benefit of the doubt. In the fierce jungle of competition, donning heavy armour against possible attack, however exhausting, sweaty, and hampering of movement, may be the safest survival strategy.

Again, this is not a piece of sniping. Much current specialist work is clearly most impressive as far as intellectual acumen is concerned, and there is nothing whatever wrong with intricate argument as such. But we do need to remember that the greatest philosophy, the kind that not merely boosts an academic career but shapes the thinking of a generation, or even inspires new ways of looking at the world, is generally not of this specialist kind. If we look at Plato, or Aquinas, or Descartes, or Spinoza, or Hume, or Kant, what is striking is the *wide reach* of their thought – the extent to which it spans a great many of what we now think of as distinct specialities or sub-specialities of philosophy. Plato, for example, has a philosophical worldview which has implications for ethics and politics, for science and mathematics, for metaphysics and aesthetics; and the stamp of his philosophical vision can be clearly seen in his writings in all these areas. Descartes too has a ‘synoptic’ vision of philosophy; indeed he famously used an organic image, that of a tree, to describe his philosophical system – metaphysics the roots, physics the trunk, with the fruit-bearing branches comprising more specific disciplines such as ethics.²⁶ In fact all the canonical figures just mentioned had a grand synoptic vision of the nature of the world, of the place of

²⁶ Preface to the 1647 French translation of the *Principles of Philosophy* [*Principia philosophiae*, 1644], AT IXB 14-15: CSM I 186. For more on Descartes’s ‘synoptic’ conception of philosophy, see Cottingham, *Cartesian Reflections*, ch 1.

humankind within it, of the extent and limits of human knowledge, and of the best way for human beings to live.

We cannot, of course, all be a Plato or a Descartes. But we can all be participants in what Bernard Williams calls the ‘wide humanistic enterprise of making sense of ourselves and of our activities’.²⁷ The kind of ‘humane’ philosophy which I want to advocate would certainly form part of this general enterprise; and some indication has already been provided of how it may be at risk from hyper-technical and overly specialised conceptions of the subject. To develop a comprehensive worldview, which would make sense of who we are and how we should live is, of course, an exceedingly ambitious aim; but I hope it is by now clear how one might move at least a little way in this direction by cultivating a more synthetic or holistic approach to philosophical inquiry.

One example which may serve to flesh out the kind of thing I have in mind is provided by the work of Charles Taylor, and in particular his critique of Derek Parfit’s account of the self. Discussing Parfit’s view that there are no ‘deep’ facts about the identity of the self, and that selfhood itself is reducible to certain relations of psychological continuity across time, which are merely matters of degree,²⁸ Taylor adopts a much wider perspective which reaches out and across, beyond the specialist confines of the sub-discipline known as ‘philosophy of mind’. Approaching the problems of selfhood from an ethical perspective, Taylor argues that to make sense of our lives, and indeed to have an identity at all, ‘we need an orientation to the good’; we need to have some sense of our lives as reaching towards moral growth and maturity. It follows from this that our lives have a *narrative* shape: as I develop, and learn from my failings and mistakes, there is always a story to be told about how I have become what I now am, and where my current journey towards improvement will take me. Just as my sense of where I am in physical space depends on how I got here and where I am going next, so it is, Taylor argues, with ‘my orientation in moral space.’

This involves a radical rejection of the ‘neutral’ and ‘bleached’ conception of personhood, which tries to abstract from the framework of moral significance which gives shape to my life as a whole. According to Taylor, ‘[A]s a being who grows and becomes I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats. My self-understanding necessarily has temporal

²⁷ Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, 197.

²⁸ See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984; repr. 1987), sections 95 and 96.

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depth and incorporates narrative.’ If Taylor is right, there is something misguided about the approach to the self that attempts to treat it simply as a topic for analysis in the philosophy of mind, as if it could be understood merely in terms of certain purely descriptive psychological or biological properties. Taylor’s conception, by contrast, sees the self as inescapably linked with evaluative notions – it is a concept that is defined in terms of values, goals, and moral standards. Human persons exist only, as Taylor puts it, ‘in a certain space of questions’ – questions about the meaning and purpose of my life as a whole.²⁹

It is not my aim here to adjudicate in the debate between Parfit and Taylor, nor indeed to criticize Parfit, who is in fact someone who makes strong connections between psychology and ethics, and who shows in some of his writings that he is interested in the kinds of large-scale inquiry which I am proposing as subject-matter for the best philosophical work.³⁰ My reason for referring to these particular remarks of Taylor is that he provides a paradigm case of a writer with a synoptic philosophical vision of the kind which seems to be becoming steadily less fashionable, and which would certainly be seriously at risk if the current process of fragmentation into specialised, quasi-scientific sub-disciplines ever became irreversible.

5. The perils of ratiocentrism

So far I have said something about what humane philosophy is, and of current analytic and/or science-based conceptions, which – whether their supporters intend it or not – are inimical to its survival. I want in this final section to turn to one further aspect of the prevailing current conception of our subject that is strikingly at odds with what I conceive to be the aims of humane philosophy, namely its suspicion of allowing into philosophical discourse any emotional, symbolic or figurative elements, or indeed anything other than plain literal language.

Philosophers have had a long-standing wariness about the emotions as potential subverters of reason – a wariness which goes

²⁹ The various phrases in this and the previous paragraph are taken from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 46–52.

³⁰ See for example Parfit’s ‘The Puzzle of Reality’, *Times Literary Supplement*, July 3, 1992, 3–5, and ‘Why Anything, Why This?’, *London Review of Books* 20: 2 (22 January 1998), 22–5.

right back to Plato. Philosophical reason, in Plato's vision, exercises its proper role when it firmly restrains the emotions and controls the life of the individual and of the state by reference to eternal truths apprehended by abstract logical argument.³¹ In the Stoic system, itself strongly influenced by Plato, reason and philosophy are more or less identified, as the controlling power that 'sits at the helm' and steers the ship of life on its course.³² These are somewhat extreme positions by comparison with a lot of subsequent philosophizing, but there is a strong case for saying that, in varying degrees, much Western philosophy has suffered from a ratiocentric bias – the notion that calm and detached rational analysis provides the unique key to understanding ourselves and our activities.³³

At its worst, ratiocentrism involves a fantasy of command and control, as if by sufficiently careful use of reason we could gain an exhaustive understanding of the human condition, and even construct a kind of blueprint or map of the requisite ingredients for a worthwhile human life. What is remarkable is the extent to which this fantasy has persisted in current philosophy, despite the Freudian revolution which has left its mark on so many other areas of contemporary academic thought. Freud devoted large parts of his writing to exposing what he called the 'last illusion', that the rational ego is master in its own house';³⁴ but with a handful of significant exceptions, analytic philosophers have been extraordinary resistant to this, and still continue to write as if the mind was a transparent goldfish bowl within which our desires and inclinations and beliefs were all readily understandable and identifiable.

³¹ See Plato, *Republic* [c. 380 BC], Book III (376ff), Book V (474ff).

³² '[Philosophia] animam format et fabricat, vitam disponit, actiones regit, agenda et omittenda demonstrat, sedet ad gubernaculum et per ancipitia fluctuantium derigit cursum.' ('Philosophy shapes and constructs the soul, arranges life, governs conduct, shows what is to be done and what omitted, sits at the helm and directs our course as we waver amidst uncertainties.') Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* [c. AD 64], 16, 3.

³³ I explore many dimensions of ratiocentrism in *Philosophy and the Good Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁴ 'Man's craving for grandiosity is now suffering the ... most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the "ego" of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind.' Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [*Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, 1916–17], trans. J. Rivière (London: Routledge, 1922), ch. 18.

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This is not a plea for a mass conversion to Freudianism among analytic philosophers. There is much in the detail of Freud's theories, and those of his successors, that is for various reasons problematic. But leaving the detail aside, the psychoanalytic perspective on the human condition does offer one central insight which it seems to me philosophy urgently needs to take on board: namely, that the way each of us makes sense of who we are and our relation to the world is a fearsomely complex process of which our intellectualising is only the thinnest of surfaces.³⁵ At the very least this suggests the need for a certain humility about the philosophical project of 'making sense of ourselves and our activities'. We need to recognise the limitations of intellectual analysis, and the way in which insight is achieved not just by the controlling intellect, fussily classifying and cataloguing the pieces of the jigsaw, but by a process of *attunement*, whereby we allow different levels of understanding and awareness to coalesce, until a picture of the whole begins to emerge.

In facilitating this process, we need, it seems to me, to be open to the kinds of insight offered by a whole range of discourse other than the strictly cognitive and logical. The question of style is importantly relevant here, and it connects up, once more, with the technical, 'science-based' model of philosophizing that is currently so prevalent. Scientists, for perfectly sensible reasons, are aiming at results which are strictly controlled and repeatable, irrespective of the vagaries of local conditions and the individual attitudes and commitments of the researchers; and this no doubt explains the widespread convention of using an utterly neutral, impersonal and detached style ('the substance was placed in the test tube'), which as far as possible prescinds from the particularities and individual characteristics of the researcher.

Many analytic philosophers have increasingly adopted this austere scientific model of discourse, either subconsciously or deliberately cultivating a mode of writing such that any stamp of individuality is ruthlessly suppressed. Take a few sentences from any current book or article of mainstream analytic philosophy, and, I predict, it will be virtually impossible to guess anything about the personality of the writer, or indeed to distinguish author *A* from author *B*, by any cues or signatures of style. This often makes for very stodgy reading, but that is not my main complaint. The underlying worry is that that the scientific model of philosophical discourse – dry, neutral and impersonal – predisposes philosophers to neglect the

³⁵ See *Philosophy and the Good Life*, ch. 4, final section.

resources of a whole range of linguistic expression, involving for example emotional resonance, and symbolic and other figurative elements, which is often right in the foreground for their 'continental' colleagues (not to mention those working, for example, in literature departments).

Consider, for example, the role of ambiguity. This is something the scientific mentality sees reason to shun, since (as Raymond Geuss has recently pointed out) ambiguity in meaning is 'regarded as a grave defect in propositional forms of investigation and argumentation', and many disciplines 'emphasise the need to adopt the most stringent measure to eliminate [it] as completely as possible'. Yet Geuss reminds us, drawing on the famous work of William Empson, that 'some of the best lyric poetry is characterised by . . . systematic and deep ambiguity, and this gives it a density of texture that is an aesthetic virtue.'³⁶ It seems to me that the same may very well be true of the best philosophical discourse; and moreover, that the virtue involved is not merely an 'aesthetic' one (which may suggest something essentially stylistic and extraneous to questions of content), but a virtue that has deep semantic implications.³⁷ What I have in mind is not the kind of sloppy ambiguity that is mere imprecision or vacillation, nor the kind of equivocation that makes for bad argument, but rather a kind of *polyvalence* or *multiple layering*. The 'density' involved here derives from the fact that the discourse in question tends to resonate with us not just intellectually but at many different levels of awareness. And because of this it may have the power to transform our understanding in ways that the precise and colourless propositions of literal discourse are impotent to do.³⁸

Admittedly, the importance of emotional resonance and other kinds of layering at the 'ground floor' level of ethical and psychological awareness need not necessarily entail that such polyvalence is appropriate at the 'meta' level of philosophical scrutiny, where, to some extent at least, we need to stand back from our subject-matter.

³⁶ R. Geuss, 'Poetry and Knowledge', *Arion* Vol. 11 no 1 (Spring/Summer 2003), 8. Cf. W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

³⁷ This paragraph draws on material from my *The Spiritual Dimension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 5.

³⁸ Metaphorical language (when the metaphors are fresh and living) provide a striking case of this polyvalence or multiple layering; precisely for this reason the full meaning of a metaphor cannot be reduced to what might be asserted by a literal paraphrase.

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Yet the idea that, at the philosophical level, we can slice off all the distracting resonances of emotion and imagination and polyvalence, and engage in pure, logically valid argumentation that will compel the assent of any rational interlocutor is probably a fantasy.³⁹ What is more, it seems to me that the scientific tendency in philosophy, with its commitment to an exclusively abstract and purely cerebral perspective for inquiry, can easily blind its practitioners to the true nature of what they are supposed to be investigating. If there is too great a gulf between the modes of awareness found at the meta-level and those found at the ground floor level, then philosophers can end up simply talking to themselves, instead of cultivating the right kind of sensitivity to the actual subject-matter of their inquiries. A notable example of this can be found in much analytic philosophy of religion, which tends to construe religious allegiance in wholly cognitive terms, as entirely concerned with the adoption of certain hypotheses about the cosmos, rather than as a life-changing moral and spiritual quest.⁴⁰ By always remaining at a safe distance, philosophers may run the risk of dismissing a certain terrain as barren desert, when, if they only got closer, they would find it teeming with life.

Does this plea for the philosopher to move beyond the confines of austere and purely literal discourse threaten to launch us into a world of purely rhetorical or poetic discourse which leaves behind the traditional goals of philosophy proper? I do not think so. Philosophy, as Pierre Hadot's work impressively reminds us, is, or should be, a *way of life* – a way of caring about how we live.⁴¹ The care involved is, of course, very largely of an intellectual kind – the kind that involves 'following the argument where it leads';⁴² and this in turn requires clarity of mind and logical precision, without which our thinking becomes aimless and unsatisfying. But the struggle to reach the truth is never a purely intellectual matter. The truth, or

³⁹ Compare Robert Nozick's critique of 'coercive' argument in philosophy, in *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), Introduction, 4ff.

⁴⁰ See *The Spiritual Dimension*, ch. 1.

⁴¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), ch. 3. Originally published as *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1987).

⁴² Plato, *Republic*, 394d. The actual phrase is: 'wherever the argument takes us, like a wind, there we must go' (*hopê an ho logos hôsper pneuma pherê, tautê iteon*). This slogan, incidentally, should not be taken to mean that the only reasonable course in philosophy is to accept the conclusions that follow from our premises; where the conclusions are silly or outrageous, it will often be better to go back and question the premises.

at least the interesting truth, involves, as Heidegger famously remarked, the disclosure of what is hidden; and what is hidden, as Freud so acutely saw, cannot be revealed by logic alone.⁴³ An illuminating philosophy lecture is seldom a just matter of the deployment of a series of arguments in which conclusions are laboriously extruded from premises. Often an image, or example, or metaphor, sometimes dropped seemingly almost by accident into the discussion, will have more power than long pages of intellectual analysis (essential though these may be); for it is by tapping into the imagination, or whatever we call that partly inaccessible creative core of ourselves, that we are suddenly able to see the vision of the world that has energised the speaker and made him or her care enough about the problem at issue to want us to share their perspective. These are the moments that make it appropriate to think of our subject not merely as another way of earning a living or advancing a career, but as what Plato first called it – the *love* of wisdom: the zeal to pursue our ideas not just because they happen to fit into some currently established academic agenda, but from a wholehearted conviction of their truth, their beauty, or their goodness.

The points I have been making connect up with a claim I have tried to advance elsewhere, namely that philosophy at its best is a way of trying to reach an integrated view of the world: in our philosophical activity, as in our lives generally, integrity has a great claim to be considered the master virtue.⁴⁴ The fragmentation of philosophical inquiry into a host of separate specialisms, and the associated development of swathes of technical jargon whose use is largely confined within hermetically sealed sub-areas, represents a disintegrated conception of philosophizing. Again, the piecemeal work may be very useful, and I am not at all saying that it should not be done. But philosophy is also equipped, as no other discipline is, to try to see how far the different parts of our conceptual scheme fit together; and the search for such understanding is one which should involve not just the intellect, but the whole of what we are. Humane philosophy, synthetic in its methods, synoptic in its scope, culturally and historically aware in its outlook, open to multiple resonances of meaning that

⁴³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §44, 262; and Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ch. 18,

⁴⁴ This theme, and that of the preceding paragraph, is developed in J. Cottingham, 'The Self, The Good Life and the Transcendent,' in N. Athanassoulis and S. Vice (eds.), *The Moral Life: Essays in Honour of John Cottingham* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 228–271.

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come from the affective as well as the cognitive domains – such a grand enterprise need not occupy all our time as professional philosophers. But unless it occupies at least some of our time, there is a risk that what we do will cease to be of interest to anyone but a narrow circle of fellow-specialists.

The ideal of ‘humane philosophy’ is no panacea. Like any enterprise it can be done well or badly, and because it is so ambitious in its scope, the risks of failure are correspondingly great. But the potential rewards are also great; for by venturing to philosophize humanely, we may perhaps manage to become more truly human.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ I am grateful for the valuable comments received from a number of friends and colleagues, especially from Peter Hacker, Brad Hooker and Javier Kalhat, and also for very helpful discussion points raised by Chris Pulman and other members of the philosophy graduate seminar at the University of Reading.