

# **ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY AND NARRATIVE**

## **PHILOSOPHY**

### **1. Two kinds of philosophy**

**I said in last week's lecture that philosophy had pretty much drifted off the radar screens of most intellectuals, and that this was not necessarily an occasion for regret. But there are still interesting debates going on among philosophy professors—debates that tie in with the Plato-Nietzsche opposition I described in my first lecture. One of these is about how philosophy ought to be done, and particularly about whether it can be done independently of the history of ideas. This debate usually takes place in the course of discussion of the split between “analytic” and “non-analytic” philosophy.**

**A second interesting debate is going on within the sub-area of analytic philosophy known as “philosophy of mind and language”. This is between the atomists, who think that philosophy can profitably ally itself with cognitive science, and the holists, who do not. In this lecture I**

**will briefly review both of these debates. Then I will try to show the relevance of both to the question of whether or not to retain what I last week called “the jigsaw puzzle view of things”.**

**When one attempts to describe what is going on in the worlds’ philosophy departments these days, the first distinction one needs to draw is between moral, social and political philosophy on the one hand, and philosophy of mind and language on the other. Those who work in the former area do not have much to say to those work in the latter, and conversely. Philosophy professors who write on ethics and politics usually read more books by professors of political science and of jurisprudence than books by fellow philosophers who discuss the relation between the mind and the body, or that between language and reality.**

**The difference between these two broad areas of concern is highlighted by the fact that the split between “analytic” philosophy and “non-analytic” philosophy (the kind sometimes called “Continental”) has little relevance to books about morals and politics. Those labels are largely irrelevant to such figures as John Rawls, Juergen Habermas,**

**Noberto Bobbio, Chantal Mouffe, Isaiah Berlin, and Cornelius Castoriadis. All these thinkers are concerned with the same questions as are non-philosophers like Michael Walzer, Richard Posner, Michael Ignatieff, and Ulrich Beck—questions about how we might alter our social and political institutions so as better to combine freedom with order and justice.**

**Once we bracket off moral and political philosophy, however, the analytic vs. Continental split becomes salient. I think of this split as between the philosophers who are inclined to agree with Frank Ramsey that Bertrand Russell’s theory of descriptions is a paradigm of philosophy and those who would argue that nothing Russell did compares in importance with Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* or with Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism*. It is a division between philosophers who think that you can do first-rate philosophy without knowing much intellectual history and those who think that philosophy is at its best when it takes the form of a dramatic narrative, a narrative ending with the words “Thus far has the world-spirit advanced.”**

Someone who thinks of herself as an analytic philosopher of mind and language will almost certainly be familiar with, and will probably have views about, Russell's theory. But she may never have read, and may have little ambition to read, either Hegel or Heidegger. Yet if you teach philosophy in most non-anglophone countries, you must have read and pondered both *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Letter on Humanism*, or at least pretend to have done so. Brazilian, Turkish and Polish philosophers, for example, manage to get by with only a vague idea of why their Anglophone colleagues believe Russell to have been an important figure.

In order to convey the profound contrast between the self-images of these two kinds of philosophers, I shall briefly describe the theory of descriptions. Russell designed it to answer such questions as "Given that the words used to form the subject of a sentence refer to things, and that a sentence is true if things are as the sentence says they are, how is that a true sentence containing a referring expression can become false if one substitutes another expression that refers to the same thing?" Russell's example of two such sentences were "George IV wished to know

whether Scott was the author of Waverly”, which is true, and “George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott”, which is false.

The theory of descriptions answers this question by saying that the words “the author of Waverly”, unlike the word “Scott”, do not pick out a particular individual. They do not form a referring expression. What George IV really wanted to know, Russell said, was whether there was an individual who had the property of being the author of Waverly and who was identical with Scott. Putting the matter that way, he claimed, reveals the true “logical form” of the sentence in question.

That it has this logical form can be revealed, Russell said, by making a distinction between the use of the word “is” to express identity, as in “Scott is Scott”, and to express predication, as in “Scott is the author of Waverly”. That distinction was built into the new symbolic logic developed by Russell’s master, Gottlob Frege. A knowledge of this logic is still regarded by most Anglophone philosophers as essential to philosophical competence. Many of their non-Anglophone colleagues find it optional.

**If you suspect that Russell’s theory provides a good answer to a bad question, you are in good company. You have many eminent contemporary philosophers on your side. These philosophers do not think that either the general question of the relation between language and reality, or the more particular question about when and how things in the world make sentences true, is of much interest. They take such questions to be good examples of what Berkeley called “kicking up the dust and then complaining that one cannot see”. Hegel and Heidegger, had they read Russell, would probably have had the same reaction.**

**One big difference between the kind of philosopher who admires Russell and the kind that prefers Hegel and Heidegger is that the former spell out the questions they are trying to answer. Whether or not you find the analytic philosophers’ problems of interest, at least you know what they are. The only question is why you should care about them. Analytic philosophers typically claim that their questions *should* intrigue you because certain intuitions that you yourself had before you ever opened a philosophy book are in tension with one another. It is, they say, the job of philosophy to reconcile these convictions. One such intuition is that beliefs are made true by the extra-linguistic entities that**

they are about, and the value of the theory of descriptions is that it rescues this intuition from apparent counter-examples.

Hegel and Heidegger, by contrast, did not care much about making contact either with common sense or with ordinary language. Their books offer to tell you something about the nature of Spirit, or the meaning of Being, but they use the terms “Spirit” and “Being” in idiosyncratic, unfamiliar, ways. They make up novel meanings for these words. Whereas Frege and Russell hoped to make things clearer, Hegel and Heidegger hoped to make things different. Russell’s admirers want to get things straight by finding perspicuous relations between your previously existing intuitions. Hegel, Heidegger, and their admirers hope to change your not only your intuitions but your sense of who you are and your notion of what it is most important for you to think about.

In the hope of getting you to change your self-image and your priorities, Hegel says such things as “the Absolute alone is true”. Heidegger says that “Human being is the being for whom being itself is always in question”. If you stop at each such sentence and pause to ask yourself whether it is true, you will never finish their books. To get through them, you must temporarily suspend disbelief, get into the

**swing of the story that is being told, pick up the jargon as you go along, and then ask yourself, after having given the entire book the most sympathetic reading you can, whether you have been given a promising new way of talking about some of the things that interest you most.**

**If you lay down their books feeling that nothing of that sort has happened, you may decide that Hegel and Heidegger are obscurantists who substitute pompous rhetoric for argument. If this is your reaction, you will be in good company. You will have many eminent contemporary philosophers on your side. Willingness to define one's terms, list one's premises, and argue in a straight line is regarded by most admirers of Russell as essential to doing good philosophy. That sort of argument requires that you be able to judge the truth of each sentence in a philosophy book independently of its surroundings. For admirers of Hegel and Heidegger, however, that sort of argumentation is all very well in its place, but relatively unimportant when it comes to philosophy. They see requests for definitions of terms and lists of premises as symptoms of unwillingness to let philosophy attempt its transformative task.**

**Given all these differences between analytic and non-analytic philosophy, one might wonder whether there is any point in treating Frege, Russell, Hegel and Heidegger as all in the same line of work—whether it is not just an historical accident that the books of all four are shelved in the same section of the library. Analytic philosophers, indeed, often describe Hegel and Heidegger as “not really doing philosophy”. Non-analytic philosophers rejoin that their analytic colleagues are intellectual cowards who do not feel safe outside a familiar professional environment. This sort of reciprocal excommunication has been going on for about fifty years, and the insults exchanged have remained much the same throughout this period.**

**My own view is that all four of the thinkers I have just mentioned are usefully grouped together. This is because they were all trying to answer questions first formulated explicitly by Plato: What makes human beings special? Why do we have that the other animals lack? Why is what we have so important? What self-image will do proper justice to this uniqueness?”**

Plato's response was that we are special because we, unlike the animals, can know how things, including ourselves, really are. He made the reality-appearance distinction central to the search for wisdom, and urged that our self-image should be that of beings capable of grasping truth. Frege and Russell thought that Plato's answer was roughly right. They thought of their own work as helping us answer the question: how is that human beings can have the knowledge that they do? How is that we attain truth? How does reality make our beliefs true?

Earlier answers to these questions were inadequate, Frege and Russell thought, because previous philosophers had not zeroed in on *language* as the medium in which human beings represent reality to themselves, and had not sufficiently reflected on the relation between language and reality. So they had not paid proper attention to logical form, nor to the questions to which Russell's theory of descriptions offers answers. You will not think discussion of the relation between George IV and Scott as silly as it seems once you have understood that Russell's and Frege's puzzles must be solved before we can understand how sentences are made true by reality.

Nietzsche, however, gave a different answer than Plato's to the question about what makes human beings special. He said it was our ability to transform ourselves into something new, rather than our ability to know what we ourselves really are or what the universe is really like. He asked us "to view science through the optic of art, and art through that of life". He mocked Plato's appearance-reality distinction, a distinction that most analytic philosophers still take for granted.

Most contemporary philosophers who take Hegel and Heidegger seriously share Nietzsche's doubts about the utility of that distinction. They tend to replace it with the distinction between the past and the present—between earlier and later stages of the world-spirit's progress. Such philosophers read both Hegel and the romantic poets as precursors of Nietzsche's revolt against the Platonic tradition. On this reading, Hegel is a John the Baptist figure. His emphasis on the way we have transformed ourselves in the course of history prepares the way for Nietzsche's claim that the point of being human is to achieve self-creation through self-redescription. The autobiography of the world-spirit that Hegel offers in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is a story about

**how Spirit comes to consciousness of itself in the course of human history.**

**Those who read Hegel in this way typically go on to read Heidegger as the first thinker to have tried to mediate the conflict between Plato's and Nietzsche's suggestions about what makes us special. So read, Heidegger's contribution to philosophy amounts to having sketched a dramatic narrative of how the high culture of the West shifted, by gradual stages, from the pursuit of self-knowledge to the pursuit of self-creation--stages associated with such names as Augustine, Descartes and Kant. The Hegelian and Heideggerian narratives of maturation are not attempts to say something about human beings in general, but rather attempts to explain how we in the modern West became the kind of people we are. Answering that question has almost nothing to do with questions about the scope and limits of human knowledge, much less with those about the logical form of sentences.**

**2. The analytic project: finding out how mind and language work**

**So much, for now, for the split between analytic and non-analytic philosophy. I shall come back to that topic later, but now I turn to the second debate that I mentioned at the outset—the one going on within the ranks of the analytic philosophers of mind and language between the atomists and the holists. The ambition of the atomists is to explain, as they often like to put it, how the mind works and how language works. The holists doubt that this is a fruitful project, because they think it a mistake to treat mind and language as entities that have either elementary parts, or a structure, or inner workings. They doubt that there are bits called “beliefs” or “meanings” into which minds and languages can usefully be broken up. The root of this mistake, holists say, is the atomists’ failure to realize that rationality—the thing that makes us special--is a social phenomenon, not one that a human organism can exhibit all by itself.**

**Both atomists and holists agree that what makes human beings special is their possession of mind and language, and most of them agree that modern science is a spectacular example of knowledge of how things really are. They also agree that the big problem for contemporary philosophy is to explain the existence of mind and**

**language in a way that is consistent with modern science—that is, without appealing to the sort of spooky non-physical entities postulated by Plato, Augustine and Descartes. Both are physicalists, believing that, as Frank Jackson has put it, “if you duplicate our world in all physical respects and stop right there, you duplicate it in all respects.” (FME, p. 12).**

**But there the similarities end. Atomists think that by breaking mind and language down into parts we can get psychology in touch with neurology in roughly the same way that chemistry has been brought together with physics and biology with chemistry. They find it useful and important to say that the mind is, in some important sense, the brain. So they spend much of their time analyzing concepts like “belief” and “meaning” in order to show how beliefs and meanings might reside within the collection of physical particles which is the human central nervous system.**

**The holists find the identification of mind and brain thoroughly misleading. As they see it, the atomists are simply taking for granted that what worked for matter—namely, the explanation of**

**macrostructural behavior by reference to transactions between microstructural components—will work for mind. The holists agree that there is much to be discovered about how the brain works, but they doubt that even an ideal neurophysiology would tell us anything interesting about mind or language. For, they insist, the mind is no more the brain than the computer is the hardware.**

**A perfect understanding of its electrical circuits, holists point out, does very little to help you understand how your computer manages to do all the wonderful things it does. To understand that you have to know a lot about software. For the brain will run a fabulous variety of different programs while remaining indifferent to which it runs, and the same program can be run on many different sorts of hardware. According to the holists, mind and brain, culture and biology, swing as free from one another as do hardware and software. They can and should be studied independently.**

**Understanding mind and language, the holists say, is a matter of understanding the evolution of the social practices in which we presently engage. We could not, they cheerfully admit, have engaged in**

**those practices unless we had the requisite neurological equipment.**

**Cultural evolution could not begin until biological evolution had reached a certain point. But they have no use for claims of the sort made by Steven Pinker saying, in his book *How the Mind Works*. Pinker says, for example, that “The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life”. (p. 21)**

**The holists point out that explanations of human behavior that tie in either with neurology or with evolutionary biology, will tell us only about what we share with the chimpanzees. It will not tell us about what we, but not the chimpanzees, share with the organisms that painted pictures on the walls of caverns, nor with those that built the ships that sailed to Troy. We can learn about the processes that mediated between those organisms and ourselves only by constructing a narrative, telling a story about how they became us.**

**Holist philosophers of mind and language think that the best way to show that we need not postulate immaterial entities to explain our uniqueness is to tell an imaginative story about how grunts mutated**

into assertions. This is the story of how, to us Robert Brandom's terminology, sapience replaced mere sentience. To count as an assertion, and thus as a sign of sapience, on Brandom's account, a series of noises must be explicitly criticizable by reference to social norms. Such a norm is already in place when a hominid first realized that, having grunted "P", she might well be beaten with sticks if she does not grunt "Q" on appropriate occasions. But the norm only became explicit, and what Brandom calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons" only began, a few hundreds of thousands of years later. That was the period in which a descendant of the original grunter realizes that, since she has asserted "P" and also asserted "If P then Q", she will deservedly be called "irrational" if she cannot produce a good reason for refusing to assert "Q".

Whereas the holists take the social practice of criticizing assertions to be indispensable for both mentality and language, the atomists think that we had minds before we had language, and indeed that dumb brutes have minds. This is because they think that the crucial notion in this area of philosophy is "representation" rather than, as Brandom does, "inference". Atomism in philosophy of mind and

language is closely tied to the idea that cognitive science will help us see the mind as the central nervous system by linking up physiological representations of the environment, such as retinal patterns and cochlear reverberations, with psychological representations, and then with mental representations. Atomists think that to explain how human beings were able to learn the truth about how things in the physical world work we must relate the linguistic representations which make up our scientific theories to more primitive linguistic representations and, ultimately, to perceptual representations.

The hope that cognitive science will help us understand why we are so special, is a legacy from Locke. It derives from his suggestion that the mind should be viewed as a storehouse of simple and complex ideas. This suggestion led to Hume's deliberately provocative reference to "the reason of animals", to nineteenth-century associationist psychology, and to Ayer's updated version of Humean empiricism. Holists, however, think that Locke was misguided, and they blame Descartes for misleading him. For Descartes provided Locke with the image of the mind as an inner theater—a room equipped with a screen on which immaterial representations are displayed and in which an immaterial

spectator decides what the extra-mental world is like on the basis of the clarity or the coherence of those representations.

Holists also blame Descartes for the idea that the mind is a thing that has workings that might be better understood. To think of it this way—as what Gilbert Ryle mockingly called a non-material mechanism—is, they argue, a fundamental mistake. For the mind should be thought of not as a mysterious entity but as a cluster of capacities brought into existence by the enforcement of social norms. Holists think that cognitive science may help us understand *sentience* better, for the notion of “mechanisms of perception” does have a use. As long as you stick to sentience, and do not go on to sapience, it makes sense to connect physiological states with dispositional responses. But, holists insist, to have very complex dispositional responses, is not yet to have mentality, as long as these responses are not subject to criticism by reference to prevailing social norms. Even the chimpanzees, after all, have complex dispositional responses.

As the holists see the matter, there is nothing intermediate between the neurons and the social practices for cognitive science to

**study. To study what makes human beings special, and so very different from the chimpanzees, is to study those practices—to study culture. We neither have nor need a bridge between the neurons and the practices, any more than we need one between hardware and software. Software is just a way of putting hardware to use, and culture is just a way of putting our physiological equipment to use. To understand how hardware works is one thing, but to understand the uses to which it is put is something quite different. Understanding electrical circuits, in the brain or in the chips, does nothing to help us understand how the sophisticated software of the 1990’s evolved out of the primitive software of the 1950’s.**

**The atomists think, to quote Steven Pinker again, that “the computational theory of mind...is one of the great ideas in intellectual history, for it solves one of the puzzles that make up the mind-body problem”. This is the puzzle first posed by Descartes: the problem of how beliefs, which do not seem to be physical objects, can cause physical events. Pinker says that the computational theory resolves the paradox by saying that beliefs are**

**information, incarnated as configurations of symbols. The**

**symbols are physical states of bits of matter, like chips in computer or neurons in the brain. They symbolize things in the world because they are triggered by those things via our sense organs...Eventually the bits of matter constituting a symbol bump into bits of matter connected to the muscles and behavior happens...The computational theory of mind thus allows us to keep beliefs and desires in our explanations of behavior while planting them squarely in the physical universe. It allows meaning to cause and be caused.” (p. 25)**

**For the holists, however, there never was a mind-body problem to be solved, because there never were little mental entities called “beliefs”, or little linguistic entities called “meanings” that needed to be placed within the physical universe. Not all causal explanation, the holists say, proceeds by picking out little things that bump into other little things.**

**Atomism went largely unchallenged among analytic philosophers during the first half of the twentieth century. But the holist reaction set in about fifty years ago, with the publication of Ryle’s *The Concept of***

*Mind*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Sellars' "Empiricism and the Concept of Mind", and Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". Wittgenstein, as Michael Dummett rightly says, cast doubt on the very idea of a systematic theory of meaning. Quine thought that the idea that there were entities called "meanings" associated with linguistic expressions was a relic of Aristotle's pre-Galilean notions of scientific explanation. Ryle thought that Pinker-like projects of replacing little spooky explainers with little physical explainers resulted from taking seriously Descartes' silly idea that what couldn't be explained by a physical mechanism had to be explained by a non-physical mechanism. Sellars followed up on Wittgenstein by arguing that what makes human beings special is the ability to argue with one another, not the ability to have inner mental states that are somehow isomorphic to states of the environment. For even if there are such states, the frogs and the chimpanzees have them too.

The holists of the present day include such philosophers of language as Donald Davidson, who follows up on Quine, and Brandom, who follows up on Sellars, as well as a host of philosophers of mind who are following up on Ryle and Wittgenstein—notably Vincent

**Descombes, Jennifer Hornsby, Helen Steward, Arthur Collins, and Lynn Baker. These holists are locked in battle with atomists such as Noam Chomsky and his student Pinker, Jerry Fodor, and with all the other philosophers and cognitive scientists who are trying to develop what Fodor calls “a semantic theory for mental representations”. Holists think that there is neither a need for such a theory nor any chance of getting it.**

### **3. Analytic clarity and conversational clarity**

**So much for my sketch of the battle lines within contemporary analytic philosophy of mind and language. I hope that what I have said helps to explain why many atomists suspect that holism puts the very idea of analytic philosophy in danger, why philosophers like Thomas Nagel see Wittgenstein and Davidson as opening the gates to bad philosophy of the sort practiced by Hegel and Heidegger, and why Brandom describes himself as a neo-Hegelian. As the battle between the holists and the analysts has worn on, it has come to look more and more like a disagreement about what sort of thing philosophers should take themselves to be doing, about the self-image of the discipline.**

**This is because, if philosophy is to be analytic, there must be some little things to analyze bigger things into. Philosophical analysis of the sort Russell envisaged requires that there be such things as concepts or meanings that can be isolated and treated as elements of beliefs. But if, as Wittgenstein suggested, a concept is just the use of a word, and if the proper use of the words that interest philosophers is always going to be a matter of controversy, it is not clear how philosophical analysis could possibly help. For a philosopher's claim to have discovered the contours of a concept will always be just a persuasive redefinition of a word. Philosophers' diagnoses of "conceptual confusion" look, from a Wittgensteinian point of view, as ways of transforming language and culture, rather than ways of making clearer what has previously been going on.**

**Atomist philosophy of mind requires that minds be aggregates of mental representations. If, as Davidson claims, the notion of "representation" is of no use in figuring out what beliefs someone has or what her assertions mean, then the claim that cognitive science will help us better understand what makes human beings special seems dubious.**

For truth, on Davidson's view, is not the sort of thing that beliefs and assertions can be bumped into having by their encounters with bits of non-linguistic reality. If there are no interesting isomorphisms to be discovered between true beliefs and what those beliefs are about--- isomorphisms that Russell and his followers took for granted—then we shall have to give up the idea that philosophy can reconcile our common-sensical intuitions with one another. We may just have to pick and choose among those intuitions. In particular, we may have to treat “correspondence with reality” as a metaphor which should not be pressed. That would permit us to set aside the questions that Russell invented the notion of logical form to answer.

The thought that Russell and his followers put our discipline on the secure path of a science a path is very dear to most analytic philosophers, as is the claim that training in analytic philosophy makes for increased clarity of mind. So one of the reasons they resist holism is the fear that if they walk away from the natural sciences they will open the gates to obscurantism. Philosophy, they suggest will revert to being what it was in the pre-Russellian days of Jowett and T. H. Green, or what they fear it became in twentieth century France—a species of

**edifying belles-lettres. This is why many analytic philosophers dislike the idea that philosophy is one of the humanities, and insist that it is one of the sciences.**

**Holists see no more promise in inquiry into how mind and language work than inquiry into how conversation works. So they think that that the best we can do in the way of understanding how mind and language work is to tell stories, of the sort told by Sellars and Brandom, about how metalinguistic and mentalistic vocabularies came into existence in the course of time, as well as stories about how cultural took over from biological evolution. The latter stories recount how we got out of the woods and into the caves, out of the caves and into the villages, and then out of the villages into the law courts and the temples.**

**The kind of understanding that narratives of this sort gives us is not the sort that we get from seeing many disparate things as manifestations of the same underlying thing, but rather the sort that comes from expanding our imagination by comparing the social practices of our day with those of past times and possible future times. The sort of increased clarity about ourselves that narratives provide**

**makes things appear more complicated, not more simple. Things get clearer as conversation proceeds, not because the many have been reduced to the fewer but because our webs of belief expand and assume unexpected, but striking, new shapes.**

#### **4. Determinate and indeterminate being**

**It will have by now become that my own sympathies are with the holists, and with philosophers who tell stories rather than offering analyses. I think that philosophers should give up on the question “What is the place of mental representations, or meanings, or values, in a world of physical particles?” They should think of talk about particles, talk about beliefs, and talk about what ought to be done, as cultural activities that fulfill distinct purposes. These activities do not need to be fitted together in a systematic way, any more than basketball and cricket need to be fitted together with bridge and chess. As I was saying last week, the many purposes that are served by our various discourses should not be viewed as subordinate to an overarching project called “discovering the truth”, or “getting things right” or**

**“putting all the pieces together”. If we have a plausible narrative of how we became what we are, and why we use the words we do as we do, we have all we need in the way of an account of how everything hangs together.**

**One way to epitomize this view is to say that philosophers should follow Castoriadis’ advice to give up what he called “the assumption that only determinate being is authentic being”. Determinate being is the kind that can be gotten right, once and for all. The relations between mathematical objects are like that. So are the names of the English sovereigns since the Conquest,, those of three Karamazov brothers, and those of nine orders of angels, as well as the approximate number of soldiers who died in World War I, and the mean annual rainfall in Oxford during the twentieth century. Examples of indeterminate being are the meaning of *Hamlet*, the moral character of Winston Churchill, and the point of human existence.**

**The distinction between determinate and indeterminate being, as I am drawing it, is sociological. Determinacy is a matter of degree—degree of controversiality for the inhabitants of a particular time and place. To think of only determinate being as authentic is to replace a**

**sociological distinction of degree with a metaphysical distinction of kind.**

**It is to think that there is a “matter of fact” about some topics but not about others. Treating the contrast metaphysically engenders the debates about realism and anti-realism that analytic philosophers, but no one else, find profitable. These philosophers are also the only people who are interested in the question of how to situate values, or minds, in a world of elementary particles, how to make room for the inauthentic in the authentic world. You will enter into these debates only if you believe that all beings fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and that beings that cannot be made to fit are inauthentic, not really pieces of the puzzle at all.**

**The analogy with fitting together pieces of a puzzle is entirely appropriate for research in paleontology, in particle physics, in philology and in all those other areas of culture in which it is plausible to think that we shall eventually get things right. The idea that philosophy can become such an area by being put on the secure path of a science, the idea that motivated Russell and the other founders of the analytic movement in philosophy, remained plausible only as long as concepts and meanings were taken out of history, as long as there were thought to be atoms of thought or of languages whose relations with one**

another remain constant no matter what use is made of them. That idea is given up in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which is why Russell was appaled by the suggestion that we stop asking about meaning and start asking about use. For that suggestion of Wittgenstein's put analytic philosophy on the road to holism and historicism.

Once one gives up on atomism, one will cease to use metaphors of getting down to the hard facts as well as metaphors of looking up toward grand overarching structures. One will start treating hardness as just non-controversiality. One will begin to wonder, as Wittgenstein did, why logic was once thought to be something sublime, and start thinking of logic as Brandom does-as a device for making our social norms explicit. This will leads to taking history. And in particular changes in social norms, seriously. It will lead to substituting horizontal metaphors for vertical ones.

As I suggested last week, most philosophers who take Hegel seriously substitute questions about what makes us, in our time and place, special for questions about what makes human beings in general special. They substitute questions about how we differ from our ancestors and how our descendants might differ from us from questions

about what we share with everyone everywhere. Another way to put the point is to say that historicism makes us think indeterminate being more interesting than determinate being. It leads us to think of the most important human activity not as fitting together pieces of a puzzle but as reinterpreting and recontextualizing the past.

This difference of opinion about what it is important to think about explains why what I have been calling “narrative philosophy” is often called “hermeneutic philosophy”. The term “hermeneutic” signals a shift of interest from what can be gotten right once and for all to what can only be reinterpreted and recontextualized over and over again. That is why Brandom’s model of inquiry is the common law rather than the discovery of physical microstructure. An alternative model would be literary criticism, whose necessary inconclusiveness is nicely explained in a remark that Brandom quotes from T. S. Eliot: “what happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it”.

Brandom generalizes Eliot’s point by saying that Hegel taught us how to think of a concept on the model of a person—as the kind of thing that is understood only when one understands its history. The best

answer to a question about who a person really is a story about her past that provides a context in which to place her recent conduct. The most useful response to questions about a concept is to tell a story about the ways in which the uses of a certain cluster of words have changed in the past, as a prelude to a description of the different ways in which these words are being used now. The clarity that is achieved when these different ways are distinguished from one another, and when each is rendered intelligible by being placed within a narrative of past usage, is analogous to the increased sympathy we bring to the situation of a person whose life-history we have learned. For such narratives decrease the temptation to use such epithets as “nonsense”, “unintelligible” and “confused.”

Most of the philosophers whose books read more like narratives than like analyses have no doubts about the physicalist claim that the behavior of physicists and poets is supervenient upon that of electrons and protons. But they think that explaining the relations of the more complex entities to simpler entities, though eminently useful in the natural sciences, have not done much for philosophy. Breaking down organs into cells, cells into molecules, and molecules into particles, permits very useful interventions in causal processes. But philosophical

**analyses of concepts used to describe higher level entities in terms of those used to describe lower level entities do not facilitate any such interventions. Whereas technology keeps scientific analyses honest. But nothing exercises a similar control over philosophical analyses.**

**The marginalization of philosophy in contemporary intellectual life means that the only people who try to keep philosophy professors honest are other philosophy professors. This is, of course, a fairly common state of affairs in the academic world. Classical philologists, for example, are kept honest only by other classical philologists. But the philologists rarely claim to be doing something that everybody should be interested in, whereas philosophers do so frequently. When explaining to budget-cutters why it would be better to abolish the classics department than the philosophy department, they frequently claim that their discipline looks into basic, fundamental issues—questions that deserve the attention of anyone who pretends to intellectual sophistication.**

**The question that I said was common to Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche and Russell—what makes human beings special?—has a good claim to be such attention. If one accepts Plato's rather than Nietzsche's answer**

to it, then the study of the nature of mind, or of language, can easily seem necessary and urgent. So there is a prima facie plausibility to the idea that the sort of thing analytic philosophers of mind and language are doing is worth the attention of the educated public as a whole. This claim can be made to sound even more plausible by pointing out that the importance of Locke and Kant to the cultural history of the West, and noting that contemporary analytic philosophers are asking the same questions Locke and Kant did.

Hegel, however, thought that both Locke and Kant, though they were of invaluable service to the cause of human freedom, had nevertheless asked bad questions because they did not grasp that self-conscious beings have histories rather than natures. If one follows Brandom in thinking of a mentalistic vocabulary as a way of making explicit certain social norms rather than, as Locke did, a description of entities located between the ears, then one can also follow Hegel in saying that human beings are in themselves what they are for themselves. For Hegel and Brandom, as for Sartre and Heidegger, human beings are indeterminate beings. Like the laws and the poems that make us what we are, we require endless reinterpretation. We can never be gotten right once and for all.

## **5. Conclusion**

**These lectures have been an example of narrative philosophy, and I shall end them by summarizing my story about the place of philosophy in modern Western culture. It begins, in the seventeenth century, with the explicit formulation of what became the textbook problems about mind and body, the scope of human knowledge, and the freedom of the will. These problems were created by the difficulty of reconciling the ways in which we human beings in the West had become accustomed to describing ourselves with the realization that Democritus and Lucretius had been right all the time about how things work. Discussion of these problems by such figures as Locke, Spinoza, Hume and Kant played an important part in the secularization of culture that was encouraged by this realization.**

**But these problems had been milked dry by the time that two events diverted the attention of the now thoroughly secularized intellectuals. These two events were the French Revolution and the Romantic Movement. Hegel was the first of the canonically great philosophers to spot their significance and grasp the change that was occurring. By the time of Nietzsche and Dewey, however, most**

**intellectuals were pretty much persuaded that it was history rather than nature than set the intellectual agenda.**

**Nevertheless, in some countries the philosophy professors tried to hang on to the pre-Hegelian problematic. They revived it by linguistifying it—a move that resulted in both greater professionalism and further marginalization. The linguistic turn, however, eventually produced its own rejection of the seventeenth century problematic in the work of the later Wittgenstein, and its own version of historicism in that of Sellars and Brandom. Hegel turned out to have been right that philosophy’s task is to hold its time in thought. But, as I said last week, that task is the task of intellectuals in general, not that of members of one particular academic discipline.**

**Richard Rorty**

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