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Reply to Bernard Williams'
'Philosophy as a Humanistic
Discipline'
HILARY PUTNAM
In 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', Bernard Williams has
misunderstood my criticisms' of his position, and thus ends up
'talking past me'. Because I hope we can soon have an interchange
of views that is not marred by misunderstandings and mutual
misinterpretations, I want to say where I think I have been
misunderstood and what my criticism actually was.
I shall quote and discuss several passages in William's lecture.
(1) Williams writes, '...in the course of Putnam's book2 (which
contains a chapter called "Bernard Williams and the Absolute
Conception of the World"), I myself am identified as someone who
'views physics as giving us the ultimate metaphysical truth'. Now
I have never held any such views, and I agree with Putnam in reject-
ing it. However, I have entertained the idea that science might
describe the world "as it is in itself", that is to say, give a represen-
tation of it which is to the largest possible extent independent of the
local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of enquirers, a representation of
the world, as I put it, "as it is anyway".'
Since I did not mean by 'the ultimate metaphysical truth' any
more than 'a description of the world as it is anyway', there is
already a misunderstanding at work here. The reason I spoke of
physics in the passage Williams quotes, and not more vaguely of
'science' as Williams does here, is that Williams himself has else-
where said explicitly that the notion of an 'absolute conception'
[Williams' Annual Lecture to the Royal Institute was published in
Philosophy 75 (2000), pp. 477-96. My criticisms of Williams, to some of
which he replies in this lecture, were contained in 'Objectivity and the
Science/Ethics Dichotomy,' collected in my Realism with a Human Face
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 'Bernard Williams
and the Absolute Conception of the World,' a chapter in my Renewing
Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), and
'Pragmatism and Relativism: Universal Values and Traditional Ways of
Life,' collected in my Words and Life (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1994).
2 Williams is referring to Renewing Philosophy.
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