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ion

Reply to Bernard Williams' 'Philosophy as a Humanistic

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 rejecting it. However, I have entertained the idea that science might describe the world "as it is in itself", that is to say, give a representation of it which is to the largest possible extent independent of the local perspectives or idiosyncrasies of enquirers, a representation of the world, as I put it, "as it is anyway".

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 elsewhere said explicitly that the notion of an 'absolute conception' IVMilliams' 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, 1992), and 'Pragmatism and Relativism: 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: University Press, 1992),

Discussion
does not 'look too pale' because we have a conception of what an adequate physics might look like'.' I did make-and will go on making, until and unless Williams' position to be that the description of the world in terms of its nonperspectival properties is a complete description of all of the world. It isn't, that is to say, that an exhaustive description of the world in terms of its or all the 'absolute' properties would only describe a part of the world, and there is another part, the 'perspectival part', which would still remain to be described. This means that if a semantical statement, for example, 'John referred to object X,' describes a 'perspectival fact'-say, the fact that in such-and-such a perspective, John referred to object X-then that whole fact, including the perspective and John and the object X and the relation between them-must somehow appear in the 'absolute conception'. And the absolute description is envisaged as being given in terms of the fund amental magnitudes of physics!

Thus, it seemed to me that Williams does need to somehow reduce semantical facts to purely physical facts if he is not to become an outright denier of the reality of the semantical (an 'eliminationist', in the jargon of contemporary analytic philosophy4). And in his book Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry he did suggest, if I do not misread him, that elimination insm with respect to the semantical is probably the right line to take. For he wrote (p. 300), "[I] the various sorts of considerations (Quinian and Davidsonian considerations-HP] which have been summarily sketched here are correct, then we have to give up not just dualism but the belief in the determinacy of the mental. These considerations converge on the conclusion that there are no fully determinate contents of the world which are its psychological contents. Indeterminacy of Service and Williams, Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry (Harmondoworth Penguin, 1978), p. 247.

4 In current parlance, an 'eliminationist' (Paul Churchland is the p

very different from reductionism. 606







