

Reply to Bernard Williams' 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline'

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In 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline', Bernard Williams has misunderstood my criticisms¹ 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'

¹ 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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does not 'look too pale' because we have a conception of 'what an adequate *physics* might look like'.³ I did make—and will go on making, until and unless Williams himself corrects me—one further assumption: I take 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 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 fundamental 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 eliminationism with respect to the semantical is probably the right line to take. For he wrote (p. 300), '[I]f 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

³ Bernard Williams, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 247.

⁴ In current parlance, an 'eliminationist' (Paul Churchland is the paradigm case) holds that propositional attitudes (e.g. belief) and semantic relations (e.g. reference) don't exist, and that the idea that they do is a superstition (Churchland has compared it to belief in witches, or in phlogiston). Cf. 'Activation Vectors vs. Propositional Attitudes: How the Brain Represents Reality,' in Churchland's *On the Contrary: Critical Essays, 1987–1997* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). [In my view, Quine's claim that reference is indeterminate to the extent that there is no fact of the matter as to which object 'Tabitha' refers to is just eliminationism under another name.] I criticize the cited essay of Churchland's in 'Truth, Activation Vectors, and Possession Conditions for Concepts,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (2), 431–47. Note that eliminationism is very different from reductionism.

‘psychological contents’ (in the sense of Quine and Davidson) is indeterminacy of the semantical. And that indeterminacy, if their arguments are accepted, must be far reaching indeed. (Quine says, for example, that there is no fact of the matter as to whether ‘Tabitha’ refers to his cat Tabitha or to ‘the whole cosmos minus the cat’⁵.)

It is true that Davidson, while giving full credit to Quine for the arguments that allegedly establish ‘indeterminacy’, says that the extent of indeterminacy is much reduced in his theory, by his willingness to make ‘a more far reaching application of the principle of charity’ than Quine.⁶ (Perhaps this is the reason that Williams wrote ‘no *fully* determinate contents’ and not simply ‘no determinate contents’.) But charity is a maxim of *interpretation*—that is, of translation into the interpreter’s home language—and it cannot bestow *any* additional determinacy on the home language itself. It isn’t as if one could really argue that reference is *partially*, even if not ‘fully’, determinate, except in the sense (which even Rorty could agree with) of ‘determinate relative to a translation scheme’. That the vocabulary of physics (or a perfected future physics) is rich enough to give a complete description of the world is the view I (perhaps misleadingly) described by saying that Williams views physics as giving us the ultimate metaphysical truth. Indeed, the view that *any* single vocabulary could suffice to give a complete description of the world does seem to me a metaphysical fantasy. But if the word ‘metaphysical’ is what is leading to misunderstandings, I am willing to omit it.

(2) That it *did* lead to misunderstandings is evident, I think, when Williams writes, ‘[Putnam] supposes that the idea of an absolute conception of the world must ultimately be motivated by the contradictory and incoherent aim of describing the world without describing it: as he puts it, we cannot divide language into two parts, a part that describes the world ‘as it is anyway’ and a part that describes our conceptual contribution ... My idea was not that you could conceptualize the world without concepts.’

I never thought that this *was* Williams’ idea; I have far too much respect for Williams’ intelligence to charge him with such an obvious blunder. Nor did the assertion he quotes (‘we cannot divide language into two parts, a part that describes the world “as it is anyway” and a part that describes our conceptual contribution’) accuse

⁵ W. V. Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 33.

⁶ *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 228.

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him of making *that* blunder. To think, as I said Williams thinks, that there is a *part of language* that describes the world ‘as it is anyway’ is to accuse him of thinking that there are *concepts* that do this, and not to accuse him of thinking that we can describe the world ‘as it is anyway’ *without* using concepts (whatever describing without using concepts might mean). Our disagreement is over whether it makes sense to think that the concepts of *physics* do this (assuming, as I said I will continue to assume until Williams corrects me, that the description of the world in terms of its ‘absolute’ properties is supposed to be a description of *all* of the world.)

(3) ‘Putnam’s basic argument against the idea of the absolute conception is that semantic relations are normative; and hence could not figure in any purely scientific conception. But describing the world involves deploying terms that have semantic relations to it; hence, it seems, Putnam’s conclusion that the absolute conception is supposed to describe the world without describing it.’ I have already said that there was no such ‘Putnam’s conclusion’. Also, my basic argument was not that semantic relations are normative (although there is a sense in which they are), ‘and hence could not figure in any purely scientific conception’, but that Williams himself denies that semantic relations are determinate (I have already quoted him on this point). But if semantic relations are ‘perspectival’ in the sense of holding only relative to some scheme of interpretation or other, and if [as Quine claims] there is no fact of the matter as to whether any scheme of interpretation that correctly predicts the stimulus-meanings of whole sentences is more right than any other [or, in Davidson’s case, whether any collection of reference-assignments that comes out right on the truth-conditions of whole sentences is more right than any other], then ‘absoluteness’—a notion which Williams employs *semantical* terms to define—is also ‘perspectival’ in the sense of holding only relative to our choice of one scheme of interpretation [that satisfies the constraint] or another. I shall spell this point out in more detail in a moment. But, broadly speaking, my argument was that unless ‘the absolute conception of the world’ is more than *our* projection, it cannot do the metaphysical work (of supporting a sense in which scientific truth is less ‘perspectival’ than, say, semantical truth) that Williams wants it to do. Williams, I claimed, needs an absolute notion of ‘absoluteness’. But *his* denial that semantic relations could figure in any purely scientific conception—not *mine*—leaves Williams with only a *perspectival* notion of absoluteness, not an absolute one. As I put it in the chapter to which he refers (p. 101): ‘Is Williams saying that it is just our local perspective that there *is*

an absolute conception? Even Rorty might be able to agree with that.'

(4) A few words more on Williams' claim that 'Putnam's basic argument against the idea of the absolute conception is that semantic relations are normative; and hence could not figure in any purely scientific conception':

I myself have never affirmed or denied that there could be a 'scientific conception' of semantic relations. As I have explained elsewhere⁷, I think the terms 'science' and 'scientific' are much too vague for *that* question to make sense. But I take it that what Williams means by the phrase 'purely scientific conception' here is 'absolute conception', or, perhaps, conception which is at least a good sketch of what an absolute conception might be. (He says, and I have already quoted this, that we already have a notion of what an 'adequate physics' might be, and that this fleshes out our understanding of what an 'absolute conception' could be; he has also said that 'the world itself has only primary qualities'⁸) Thus it seems clear that Williams himself provides all the premises I needed to argue that, *on his own view*, semantic relations do not figure at all in the absolute conception. Indeed, in the lecture to which I am replying he wrote, 'I take it as obvious that any attempt to reduce semantic relations to concepts of physics is doomed.' So I do not see why references to *my* view that 'semantic relations are normative', and the expression 'Let us grant for the sake of the argument the principle, which is certainly disputable, that if semantic relations are normative, an account of them cannot figure in the absolute conception', come in to Williams discussion at all. Given what Williams says about the absolute conception (e.g., that it contains only primary qualities—and, presumably, what is definable in terms of primary qualities using the apparatus of mathematical physics), and what he says about semantic relations, it follows from *Williams'* premises—not just from mine—that 'an account of them cannot figure in the absolute conception'. And given his characterization of the absolute conception, it is not hard to see that he is right. What would an account of a semantical relation in the language of mathematical physics (or in terms of 'primary qualities') *be*?

It is, of course, *true* that I believe that semantic relations are normative, not in the sense of believing that semantical statements are value judgments, which would be absurd, but in the sense (and *this*

⁷ Cf. my 'The Idea of Science' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 15 (1990), pp. 57–64; collected in my *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁸ *Descartes*, p. 247.

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far I agree with Davidson) that there is no criterion for the correctness of statements to the effect that words have either the same meaning or the same reference above and beyond reasonable interpretative practice. Judgments of reference and meaning, I have claimed, essentially involve judgments of *reasonableness*; and the idea of reducing judgments of reasonableness to exact science (in the sense in which mathematical physics is an exact science) are nothing but scientific fantasies.⁹ Certainly this is controversial, but it also is something on which, unless I misunderstand him completely, Williams and I agree.

And a word to explain my statement that Williams employs semantical terms to define ‘absoluteness’. Williams’ basic thought experiment is the following: imagine that there are various tribes of intelligent extraterrestrials who (independently of us, and without even knowing of our existence) investigate the world scientifically. What they would *converge* in believing—or better, what they would converge in believing not for accidental reasons, but *because it is the way things in fact are independently of what we think or believe*—is the absolute conception. [This is, roughly, Williams’ definition of ‘absolute conception’.¹⁰] Now ‘A and B converge in believing C’ means that, from a certain point on, A and B both believe C. But if there is a fact of the matter as to what the ‘psychological contents’ (e.g., the *beliefs*) of A and B are only relative to a scheme of interpretation, then there is a fact of the matter as to whether A and B converge in believing C (or anything else, for that matter) only relative to a scheme of interpretation. ‘*Converge*’ is a semantical term.

(5) I now turn to a different issue—quite possibly the real issue between us. Williams writes,

‘So why does Putnam assume, as he obviously does, that if there were to be an absolute conception of the world, philosophy would have to be part of it? I doubt that he was simply thrown by the Hegelian implications of the word “absolute”, with their implication that if there is absolute knowledge, then philosophy possesses it. What perhaps he does think is the conjunction of two things: first that philosophy is as good as it gets, and is in no

⁹ I have argued this in a number of places, most recently in the *Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 119–25, and in ‘Aristotle’s Mind and the Contemporary Mind’ in D. Sfondoni-Mentzou, J. Hattiangadi and David Johnston (eds), *Aristotle and Contemporary Science* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

¹⁰ Cf. Williams’ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 136.

way inferior to science, and, second, that if there were an absolute conception of the world, a representation of it which was maximally independent of perspective, that would be better than more perspectival or locally conditioned representations of the world. Now the first of these assumption is, as it were, half true; although philosophy is worse than natural science at some things, such as discovering the nature of the galaxies (or, if I was right about the absolute conception, representing the world as it is in itself), it is far better than natural science at other things, for instance making sense of what we are trying to do in our intellectual activities. But the second assumption I have ascribed to Putnam, that if there were an absolute conception, it would somehow be better than more perspectival representations—that is simply false. Even if it were possible to give an account of the world that was minimally perspectival, it would not be particularly serviceable to us for many of our purposes, such as making sense of our intellectual or other activities, or indeed in getting on with most of those activities. For those purposes—in particular, in seeking to understand ourselves—we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world.’¹¹

To take the second of the two assumptions that Williams ascribes to me first, I don’t think I ever assumed that ‘if there were an absolute conception of the world, a representation of it which was maximally independent of perspective, that would be *better* than more perspectival or locally conditioned representations of the world.’ And as for the supposed first assumption, ‘that philosophy is as good as it gets, and is in no way inferior to science’—that is at best misleadingly put. But let me explain.

The two sorts of judgments which were chiefly at issue in ‘Bernard Williams and the Absolute Conception of the World’ were (1) semantical judgments, and (2) ethical judgments. My claim that Williams himself needs an absolute conception of absoluteness, not a perspectival one, refers to semantical judgments (I discuss what Williams says about ethics in ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic

¹¹ Williams continues: ‘The slippery word “we” here means not the inclusive “we” which brings together as a purely abstract gathering any beings with whom human beings might conceivably communicate about the nature of the world. It means a contrastive “we”, that is to say, humans as contrasted with other possible beings; and in the case of many human practices, it may of course mean groupings smaller than humanity as a whole.’

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Discipline' in my forthcoming Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam¹²). I take it that when he speaks of 'philosophy' in the long passage that I quoted, he is counting both sorts of judgments as part of 'philosophy'. Confining attention here to the former sort, the question becomes: why, if I was not making the two assumptions attributed to me, did I assume semantical statements must be 'absolute' if Williams' view is to work?

I think I already answered this above, but it may make matters clearer if I now discuss the assumption that I am supposed to make 'that philosophy is as good as it gets, and is in no way inferior to science'. Consider a statement that might be part of the absolute conception, namely, that the sun is approximately 93 million miles from the earth. (Of course, it couldn't be referred to as 'the sun' and 'the earth' in the absolute conception; but the same problem arises with *any* example I might give—and it is a problem for Williams, not for me, I believe.¹³) And consider the semantical statement (which I take to be part of what Williams here calls 'philosophy') that when I just asked you to consider that statement, I was using 'the earth' and 'the sun' to *refer* to a planet and the star around which it revolves, respectively. What I believe is that the semantical statement states a fact—the fact that the words 'sun' and 'the earth' bear a semantical relation to two things which are not marks and noises and do not consist of marks and noises—which is just as much an objective fact as the fact that the sun is approximately 93 million miles from the earth.

I am unable to make coherent sense of Williams' notion of a 'perspectival' truth, but since he seems to depend on Quine and Davidson for his view that 'psychological contents' (and hence meaning and reference) are not 'absolute', let us see how this statement fares on their respective philosophical views. On Quine's view to say that 'the earth' refers to a certain planet is 'parochial' in the sense that (1) the term 'the earth' can be mapped on infinitely many different things via what Quine calls 'proxy functions', and (2) each of the resulting mappings is as entitled to be regarded as 'the' relation of reference as any other. Of course, each of the infinitely many resulting models of my language is such that (in the corresponding model of my metalanguage) the sentence "the earth" refers to the

¹² Given in April and June 2001. Koninklijke van Gorcum will publish these in 2002 under the title *Enlightenment and Pragmatism*.

¹³ Having gone Davidsonian, Williams cannot avail himself of the solution that 'the earth' and 'the sun' are rigid designators and not descriptions in these judgments!

earth' is true; but that doesn't mean that there is a fact of the matter as to *which* object the term 'the earth' in the above statement refers to (just as there is no fact of the matter as to which object 'Tabitha' refers to, even though "'Tabitha'" refers to 'Tabitha' remains true no matter what proxy function we choose. It is only relative to a 'translation scheme' that I am talking about the earth at all. And on Davidson's account of reference, the same thing happens, as I have already noted, notwithstanding his claim that his greater willingness to appeal to charity 'reduces' indeterminacy.¹⁴

There *is* an important difference between Quine and Davidson (but I do not see how Williams will be able to take advantage of it). Davidson does think that whole sentences have determinate *truth conditions*, and truth, for Davidson is not simply disquotational (as it is for Quine). It is not that Davidson *defines* 'true'; famously, he holds that it is a simple and clear idea that needs no definition. But on his view there *is* a connection between my sentence 'The earth is 93 million miles from the sun' and the world external to language, one which is captured precisely by the truth condition for my sentence. And to be a thinker at all, according to Davidson, I have to have such notions as 'holds true' and 'is true'; otherwise I cannot even form concepts. So Davidson's view implies that all those extraterrestrial investigators that Williams hypothesizes in his thought experiment must have the notion of *truth*; that there is a difference between a false sentence and a true one is something they must recognize from the word 'go'. So 'true' would seem to belong to the absolute conception—unless the reason they converge on this belief *isn't* that there *is* 'anyway' a difference between a false sentence and a true one. But I hope that will not be Williams' way out (the seas of language would be too high for me to sail, in that case).

In sum, it isn't a question of 'philosophy' (semantics, in this case) being *better* or *worse* than physics; it is simply the case, I am arguing, that if physics is to be 'absolute' in Williams' sense, then our talk *about* physical entities had better refer—had better *objectively* refer. And so at least one semantical notion—'refer', or if you believe Davidson, 'true'—had better be 'absolute'. For Quine's version of perspectivalism with respect to the semantical utterly guts Quine's so-called 'robust realism' of any content that Richard Rorty would have any reason to object to.¹⁵

Isn't this an objection to Davidson as much as to Williams? In a

¹⁴ Davidson, *Essays on Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 221–40.

¹⁵ I argue this in detail in 'A Comparison of Something with Something Else', collected in *Realism with a Human Face*.

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way it is. For, given Davidson's insistence that experience has only a *causal* and no *justificatory* role with respect to our beliefs, I do not think Davidson really *does* have a satisfactory answer to McDowell's¹⁶ charge that it is unintelligible, on Davidson's picture, how sentences do have determinate truth conditions. But here I have only been concerned to argue that *if* Davidson has an answer, that answer depends on a kind of realism with respect to the semantical concept of *truth* that seems incompatible with Williams' identification of the 'absolute' with the physics of 'primary qualities'.

I said that I discuss Williams on ethics in another place. But just to avoid misunderstandings, let me say this much here: of course there could be beings whose lives were such that our ethics was simply *inapplicable* to them. Very likely, they couldn't even find our ethical notions intelligible. But I don't believe (1) that ethical notions are, in general, *descriptions* (so the dichotomy that seems to be implicit in Williams discussions—'absolute' description of objects in terms of their primary qualities or just a 'perspective' on such objects—seems to me to leave out of account a huge range of judgments which are objective but not descriptions (not even 'perspectival' ones), including all purely mathematical judgments); and (2) the fact that not every creature might *need* a certain concept doesn't, I would argue, imply that judgments involving that concept are only true *in* the 'social world' of the creatures who *do* need that concept. But these are views that (Williams knows) I have defended elsewhere.¹⁷

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¹⁶ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 1996), pp. 129–61.

¹⁷ Although I disagree with some of Wittgenstein's views about mathematics, that mathematics is not a *description* (e.g., of intangible and necessarily existing 'mathematical objects') is something I have long agreed with. See my 'Mathematics without Foundations,' collected in my *Mathematics, Matter and Method: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1979), and my 'On Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary volume LXX, (1996), pp. 243–64. I criticize the inference from the fact that a particular ethical concept is peculiar to a certain society and reflects that society's needs and interests to the conclusion that what is said with the aid of that concept is only true 'in that social world' in 'Pragmatism and Relativism: Universal Values and Traditional Ways of Life,' *Words and Life*, 189ff.