

Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

Culture and the Unconscious

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In a recent lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Bernard Williams characterizes philosophy as a ‘humanistic discipline’ (Williams 2000). In doing so, he argues against those who would align it more closely with the sciences, either in style, or in methodology, or in the pretence to a certain kind of intellectual authority, one that is thought to derive from a particular kind of objectivity, viz. a description of ‘reality’ that is minimally dependent on our perspective upon it. The contrast between the objectivity to which the (natural) sciences aspire and an appropriate ideal for philosophy is also defended by Charles Taylor in his discussion, already mentioned by Louise Braddock, of the claim that human beings are self-interpreting animals: ‘the claim is that our interpretation of ourselves and our experience is constitutive of what we are, and therefore cannot be considered as merely a view on reality, separable from reality, nor as an epiphenomenon, which can be by-passed in our understanding of reality’ (Taylor 1985: 47). Both philosophers contend that the attempt to understand ourselves – the reality that is human experience – must be conducted from within our perspective on ourselves, rather than being governed by a conception of knowledge under the ideal of scientific objectivity, and is none the worse for that. I want to begin my paper by considering this understanding of philosophy further, and its relation to culture. I shall then turn our attention to what psychoanalysis, and the concept of the unconscious, can further contribute to the philosophical endeavour understood in this way. Like Louise Braddock’s paper, my thoughts are ruminative rather than deductive, seeking only to develop and trace the outlines of a view of philosophical enquiry.

### **1. Philosophy, culture and the project of humanistic enquiry**

Williams defends the view that philosophy is ‘part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves’ (Williams 2000: xxx). This is what he understands as the project of humanistic enquiry. The importance of culture, and the understanding and interpretation of culture, to such an enquiry is obvious. Our intellectual activities are pursued within culture; the situation in which we find ourselves is always and irreducibly a cultural situation; and it is notable that Williams refers to making best sense of our *life* not our (individual) *lives*. The life to be made sense of in humanistic enquiry is a shared life, which is a life only made possible by culture.

An important part of this project, which both Williams and Taylor discuss in their work in greatest detail, is the delineation and understanding of the frameworks of value – in the broadest sense of that word – that cultures provide. In his *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989), Taylor connects this understanding to self-understanding. He argues that the values embodied by cultures are constitutive of our identities: ‘We are not selves in the way that we are organisms... we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions, as we seek and find an orientation to the good’ (34). It is only in relation to such an orientation to the good that we are able to *act*, to *live* a life, rather than merely behave or be alive: ‘living within such

strongly qualified horizons', Taylor notes, 'is constitutive of human agency' (27). We become the selves we are only in relation to others; I cannot become who I am without those who help my achievement of self-definition and those who reflect my continued grasp of the languages of self-understanding.

Is this to claim more than that that human beings are cultural creatures, a claim that is so anodyne as to be beyond dispute or interest? It is, and Williams and Taylor develop the implications for our understanding of ourselves. As a case in point, and one to which the contribution of psychoanalysis will be clear, I turn to the subject of emotion.

### *1.1. Emotions and self-interpretation*

A great deal of research has recently been done to find emotions that are universal to all human beings, irrespective of culture. Lists differ to some degree, but commonly found are 'amusement, anger, contempt, disgust, embarrassment, envy, fear, guilt, jealousy, joy, pity, pride, shame, and sorrow' (D'Arms & Jacobsen 2003: 138). These emotions, it is argued, have evolved to deal with 'fundamental life tasks' or 'universal human predicaments'. They are responses to 'core relational themes' in human life, important relations to other people and to the natural world. It is currently a popular theory in psychology to interpret all human emotions as variations upon or combinations of these 'natural emotion kinds'.

One key piece of evidence for universal emotion kinds comes from Paul Ekman's work on facial expression: recognition of facial expressions of different emotions is pan-cultural, hence the emotions are too. However, Peter Goldie (Goldie 2000: 86-91) comments that many such judgment tests, in which a subject is shown a picture of an emotional facial expression and asked to name the emotion expressed, are 'forced-choice' tests, i.e. the subject is not given a free choice in naming the expression, but required to choose between a limited number of options. When allowed such freedom, subjects vary greatly in their identification of the emotion, and many prefer to tell a story than name the emotion by a single word. Furthermore, Goldie notes, the test identifies the universal *expression* of emotions *not their intentional content*. We may argue, and Goldie does, that the latter, the meaning of the emotion, as well as its significance within the culture, is at least as important to our self-understanding, if not more so, as the point that our emotions, and in particular, their facial expression, have an evolutionary history. To lose sight of the specific cultural contribution to emotion is to lose a great deal.

There is a further point here, clearly important to our understanding of ourselves and again one on which psychoanalysis has much to say, about the relation between our universal, biological nature and our cultural nature. Goldie argues that, where emotions are involved, it makes no sense to attempt to disentangle the two, to strip away the cultural influence in the formation of our emotional responses to reveal the 'bare', biologically determined emotions common to us all. This is not to argue that there is no biological basis for our emotions, a claim I think it is not worth disputing. It is to argue for what Goldie terms 'developmental openness', that whatever emotional capacities and inclinations are genes bestow us, these capacities are shaped by our cultural environment. They are not *two* things here – the biological and the cultural – to be disentangled; for each of us, there is just our emotional dispositions, shaped by culture. Perhaps a comparison to language is apt: if one strips away all the cultural influence on a subject's linguistic capability, they are not left speaking a universal language, but unable to speak at all. All language is specific, and this may be true even if there is a universal grammar to all languages. Williams notes, in a similar vein, 'the platitude that it is not, in general, human cultural practices that are explained by natural selection, but rather than universal human characteristic of having cultural practices, and human beings' capacity to do

so' (Williams 2000: xxx).

How can we relate this to the remarks from Williams and Taylor with which I opened, and which contrasted two approaches to self-interpretation – that of seeking a form of objectivity associated with the natural sciences v. that which is situated within *our* perspective, and to the observation that culture provides a framework of value and identity? Taylor's article 'Self-interpreting Animals' (Taylor 1985), which Louise Braddock mentioned earlier, provides a way in.

Taylor argues that emotions embody evaluations that relate to our sense of ourselves as subjects. Shame, for example, involves a sense of not having lived up to some ideal for oneself; anger, a sense of being offended; sadness, a sense of the loss of something important. He argues that the situations to which the emotion is a response cannot be described without making reference to the subject's understanding of the situation, i.e. we cannot give an account of the situation which causes the emotion that does not refer to human experience. Emotions are responses to situations *as we experience them*; what we can be ashamed of or angered by, what is shameful or offensive, are essentially properties of subjects: 'the term "shameful"', says Taylor, 'has no sense outside of a world in which there is a subject for whom things have certain (emotional) meanings' (Taylor 1985: 55). Likewise, something counts as a 'loss', to which sadness is a response, if what is 'lost' is valued. We should note just how widely through life such subject-referring emotions extend. They include not simply the obvious examples from the 'moral' domain of dignity, guilt, obligation, remorse, and shame, and from the broader 'ethical' domain of pride, admiration, contempt, self-hatred, and integrity, as well as certain joys and anxieties, but also feelings that may be classed as aesthetic, such as the ugliness or beauty of an act, emotion, character, event, or situation, its purity, taintedness, spontaneity, artificiality, simplicity, grotesqueness, delightfulness, or repulsiveness.

These values are inextricably tied to our sense of our selves. Our understanding of the situation is an understanding of ourselves as subjects. Likewise, understanding the content of our emotion – what emotion we feel – is a matter of making sense of the situation we find ourselves in. And how we understand ourselves and our emotions is dependent on the resources and understandings provided by our culture: 'I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are through my and others' experience of these being objects for *us*, in some common space' (Taylor 1989: 35). Such an understanding is not possible by attempting to view such emotions from a perspective outside culture, e.g. as an evolved biological response to a situation described in biological language. In relation to emotions, biological responses, such as they are, are taken up by the cultural transformation of the organism into the self.

### *1.2. Frameworks of self-understanding*

I have so far argued in elucidation and support of Taylor's claim that 'our interpretation of ourselves and our experience is constitutive of what we are'. I take the case of understanding our emotions to be part of what is required to understanding our frameworks of value, and so this is an example of the importance of this to humanistic enquiry, to making sense of our intellectual activities. We should also note that these activities of making sense of ourselves are constitutive of culture and of our lives under culture; culture is itself a matter of self-interpretation. In this, humanistic enquiry differs from the approach of the natural sciences.

Williams, however, has something else in mind when he opposes the humanistic conception of philosophy with scientism about philosophy. His position is that philosophy is not seeking a view of 'reality' that is minimally dependent on our

perspective. He argues (in Williams 2000 and Williams 2002) for the importance of history and a historical form of understanding for philosophy. '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... in seeking to understand ourselves – we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history' (Williams 2000: xxx). This understanding of ourselves based in history and culture is not therefore somehow 'second-best' to one that is 'maximally independent of perspective'. This historical or 'parochial' approach to self-understanding follows from what has been argued by Taylor, that the selves we seek to understand are formed within culture, if we add to that idea that cultures are formed by history. And in *Sources of the Self*, this is what Taylor adds. Our frameworks of value have histories. Our articulation of these frameworks, of our sense of what is important and why (which is an articulation of our emotional lives as well), must therefore be historical. Each development in evaluative thought has defined itself in terms of its past and the situation it presently faces. So we must examine how these developments came to be assimilated or rejected.

Both Taylor and Williams point out that those philosophers who seek to eschew frameworks, who appeal perhaps to 'reason alone', to articulate their values, are in fact still working within a framework, a particular commitment to certain, and not universal, ideals of rationality and benevolence. But it is not just our values that have histories, Williams notes, our frameworks of argument and reason-giving itself do too. He argues that we cannot validate the particular 'liberal' conception of reason, which finds equality, liberty and universality as its starting points, by contrasting it favourably with the *ancien regime*, because the story of the rise of liberalism, and a liberal understanding of reason and equality, is the story of the history of this kind of argument. That we see the arguments as compelling is part of the framework which we inhabit, but the past did not: 'If we consider how these forms of argument came to prevail, we can indeed see them as having won, but not necessarily has having won an argument' (Williams 2000: xxx). If we wish to understand our values, their basis and implications, to think that somehow liberalism rationally engaged with a defence of hierarchy and won the debate, is to fall prey to confusion. To understand why our values take the form they do requires history, not simply an appeal to unadulterated reason.

He concludes the piece by reflecting on how philosophy is taught, and remarks that 'if we believe that philosophy might play an important part in making people think about what they are doing, then philosophy should acknowledge its connections with other ways of understanding ourselves' (Williams 2000: xxx). In this connection, we may note a distinction Richard Wollheim makes between 'pure' and 'applied' philosophy, a difference reflected in methodology, aim, and subject-matter (Wollheim 1999: xi). Pure philosophy uses only conceptual analysis, aims at conceptual necessity, and discusses 'things as they must be anywhere'; applied philosophy 'employs conceptual analysis and whatever else can serve its needs', aims at theoretical necessity (the laws of nature), and discusses features of this world. Most of what is involved in understanding ourselves requires applied philosophy, and what can 'serve its needs' in philosophical enquiry may differ from one question or approach to another. On which note, I turn to the contribution of psychoanalysis, and the concept of the unconscious, in this conception of philosophy and its place in the project of humanistic enquiry.

## **2. Humanistic enquiry and psychoanalysis**

As the discussion has unfolded, I have noted a number of points at which the

contribution of psychoanalysis may be easily guessed. It has things to say on our emotions, in particular their unconscious roots and the influence that unconscious emotions have on our self-understanding. Equally, it has things to say on the relation between our biological nature, our selves, and culture. However, rather than attempt a catalogue of specific points on which the concept of the unconscious may be usefully invoked to illuminate some issue of self-understanding, I shall briefly remark upon two ways in which philosophy may pick up on the resources psychoanalysis has to offer, and then comment on both in relation to truthfulness.

### *2.1. The resource of psychoanalysis*

Many fields within philosophy begin with reflection on some aspect of human experience. Psychoanalysis can be considered continuous with everyday experiences of understanding, insight, and the difficulty of self-understanding. We may say, then, that psychoanalysis offers up, if not an entirely new, then an under-examined, set of experiences. The clinical data of the psychoanalytic 'encounter' or relationship are significant not only in psychoanalytic theorization, but as human experiences that call for understanding and explanation in a broader context. They need to be integrated into our conception of what it is to be human, and in particular, into our account of the dynamics of the human mind.

As a result, in the construction of theories about ourselves, we face the need to pay attention to, draw upon, and account for the data that psychoanalysis provides. Our understanding of our 'living under culture' is enriched by looking beyond the 'everyday' experiences and 'commonsense' accounts of how the human mind is formed within, informed by, and expresses itself in culture. If we do not attend additionally to those aspects of human experiences shown up by psychoanalysis, no less 'everyday', but certainly less 'commonsense', our theories may be inadequate in some way.

In his discussion of emotions and self-interpretation, Taylor notes that we should not accept the idea that we 'just have', with no particular meaning, certain desires or emotions. Feelings that we may experience initially as simpler reactions, such as sexual desire or the attractiveness of a landscape, Taylor says, 'when we examine them more closely, it appears more than plausible that these feelings are related to, or shaped by, a host of [subjective meanings], of which we are only partially aware' (Taylor 1985: 59) and insight here means coming to see what these are 'with time and greater self-understanding'.

In its 'thinnest' form, this first co-option of psychoanalysis by philosophy does not yet attempt to assimilate and build upon psychoanalytic theory, either theoretical concepts or theorized mental structures, just the data it provides. However, it is difficult to go far in the use of clinical data without also understanding and using the psychoanalytic concepts that developed of it, and in particular those theorized processes of defence most closely based upon clinical observation. As a second way in which philosophy may take something from psychoanalysis, we find here two further resources: a set of concepts regarding the structure and dynamics of the mind and a theory of unconscious motivation. As examples of philosophers who have sought to do this, John Cottingham (1998: Ch. 4) draws upon both regarding arguments over the nature and possibility of rational self-direction, and the place of that ideal in moral philosophy, while Richard Wollheim (1984) and Sebastian Gardner (1993) argue for broader conclusions in philosophy of mind regarding the nature of mental functioning, with implications for questions about the nature of phenomenology, the causal powers of mental states, representation, and the place and scope of belief-desire psychology. In all of this, the concept of the unconscious has a special place. Topics within other areas of philosophical enquiry may equally draw upon psychoanalytic ideas, and while the application of these ideas requires

caution, issues in aesthetics (e.g. expressivism, reading fiction), political philosophy (the role of emotion, the projection of the superego in group thinking), philosophy of social science and of history (the nature of human motivation and the explanation of action), philosophy of language (meaning, metaphor), philosophy of religion (the role and function of belief in God, the nature of spiritual maturity), and epistemology (epistemic virtues, self-knowledge, the relation of truth and truthfulness) may all be illuminated in this way.

## *2.2. Philosophy, psychoanalysis and truthfulness*

If the arguments of this paper are right, then the two disciplines of philosophy and psychoanalysis are united, with others, in the common aim of self-understanding, and the pursuit of that aim from within the particular perspective(s) we may have on ourselves (in contrast to a non-perspectival approach). The nature of self-understanding, in either the singular or plural first-person, is itself a topic for discussion and debate in both disciplines, and it is noteworthy that elements of these debates parallel each other. On Taylor's picture, truth about ourselves is only possible as a consequence of truthfulness; in the context of understanding one's emotions, he remarks that 'our articulations are open to challenge from our inarticulate sense of what is important, that is, we recognize that they ought to be faithful articulations of something of which we have as yet only fragmentary intimations' (Taylor 1985: 75). However, as remarked above, psychoanalysis is not restricted to providing a means to personal self-understanding of this kind. Its construction of a general theory of the dynamics of the human mind can be taken up within other, broader enquiries into the nature of the human situation.

With this recognition of the shared goal of self-understanding comes a recognition of shared virtues, such as a fundamental commitment to truthfulness, as Louise Braddock noted, to a form of courage in the face of mental pain of one variety or another, to refusing to foreclose the options in an awareness of the complexity of one's experience, subject, or question, and to a consequent humility about what and how much can be known. (Williams remarks on his conception of philosophy, that 'while it is certainly true that we all need to know more than we can hope to know...it makes a difference what it is that you know you do not know' (Williams 2000: xxx).) From the importance of psychic pain to truthfulness, we can conclude that in pursuit of truthfulness, the articulation of a faithful conception of ourselves, more than philosophy will be needed, and psychoanalysis may be seen as a complementary exercise towards the same end.

Why, though, articulate? Taylor's conception of articulation is 'broad', he claims; it is not restricted to linguistic description or formulation. As I understand it, however, the attempt to create sense for ourselves out of what is inchoate. With that proviso, there are any number of reasons we may provide to answer why we articulate: that self-interpretation tautologically requires interpretation, and this is unformed until articulated; that we cannot bring the unconscious into consciousness without the attempt to articulate what is unconscious; that articulation brings us closer to what it is that truly moves us – in this, Taylor notes, we may judge an articulation by other words, acts, and speaker align together to reveal the full force of that source of motivation; and we articulate to uncover the past and its continuing influence, within ourselves and within our cultural frameworks.

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