



DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES, IISER BHOPAL

HSS LECTURE SERIES

THERE IS MORE TO A HUMANISTIC INQUIRY THAN GENEALOGY

In this paper I will present a certain view of analytic philosophy which will show that the charge that it is not a properly humanistic inquiry as it should be is misplaced. Bernard Williams (2000) had argued that analytic philosophy – especially moral and political philosophy – was too imbued with scientism and discussed moral and political concepts as if they had no past. The charge is that the practice of analytic philosophy is *ahistorical*.

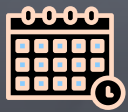
Williams preferred a genealogical approach, where one looks at the way in which a particular concept – say, *truthfulness* – came to be considered valuable in our social interactions today by studying the trajectory of its fortunes through history, where the history to be considered is both counterfactual and actual. Williams takes philosophy to be a humanistic enterprise where “humanistic” means dealing with the history of the concepts involved. The dive into history will make sense of our intellectual lives and how we came to be who we are today. History should be the model for Philosophy and not Physics.

I don't disagree with Williams on this broad programme, but I do disagree that analytic philosophy is not humanistic if not dealing with the history of concepts that are important to our lives. I think there are more ways of being humanistic than just being mindful of the past. I think a classic sign of being a humanistic subject is that it tends to rely on analogies and models that are available in other areas of inquiry that fall under the same subject, i.e. philosophy or other domains of inquiry altogether. This feature is quite common in analytic philosophy across the discipline. The reason why I think this sort of free use of other domains of inquiry is humanistic is that science does not prefer this free use of other disciplines. Science is indifferent to historical fact, literary flourishes or a new tract on the possibility of equality. Philosophy, as practiced today freely uses material, as and when necessary, from its own domain or from other domains of inquiry, to bring out the nature of concepts that it is studying. This latter characteristic is a hallmark of a humanistic subject. I maintain that it is possible to borrow from the wrong sources and hence get the nature of our concepts wrong but it is not always necessary to borrow from history. Having a sense of the passing present is as important to philosophy as having a sense of the past. Relying on genealogy is one way of doing philosophy; there are other ways of being a humanistic inquiry.



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