

Rowan Williams

BEING HUMAN

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By

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“If there is one great intellectual challenge for our day,” writes Rowan Williams, “it is the pervasive sense that we are in danger of losing our sense of the human”. Part of the reason for this is the prevalent “reductionist” view that human beings are nothing but machines, or mere collections of molecules. Williams regards this “reductionist consensus” in the contemporary intellectual debate about humanity as false, even pernicious, and one of his aims in this short book (originally delivered as lectures or sermons) is to criticise it. Another aim is to give a positive sketch of some distinctive features of the human. Williams does better with the second aim than with the first.

Williams’s disdain for scientific reductionism is typical of many scholars in the humanities. Reductionism is not just incorrect — “as a systematic, global principle it is simply intellectually incoherent” — but it is also “morally deeply dangerous”.

Reductionists fail to recognise (to use one of Williams’s examples) that the science of acoustics gives us no way to evaluate the different performances of Bach’s Cello Suites by Yo Yo Ma and Paul Tortelier. As described by Williams, it is a feeble and misguided view indeed.

And yet few reductionists will recognise themselves in the picture Williams draws. At its heart, reductionism is an attempt at explanation: to explain the more complex in terms of the simpler; the larger in terms of the smaller, the whole in terms of the part, and so on. It follows that to give a reductive explanation of some phenomenon is not thereby

to deny its existence or demean it in some way. Daniel Dennett's reductionist *tour de force*, *Consciousness Explained* (1991), aimed to do precisely what its title says: explain consciousness. But in order for consciousness to be explained, it had better be there.

Perhaps the term "reduction" itself misleads: reduction here is not like reducing a sauce, where you start off with a lot of stuff and end up with an intense, sticky *jus*. On the contrary: at their best, reductive explanations (e.g. of the chemical bond in terms of quantum mechanics, of thermodynamics in terms of statistical mechanics, of inheritance in terms of genetics etc.) leave the phenomena just as they were, only better understood. Reductive explanation may not be appropriate to all kinds of phenomena; but since any genuine explanation is an advance in our understanding, no-one can sensibly object to the very idea of reductive explanation.

So why does Williams think that reductionism is so misconceived? In his first chapter, on consciousness, he gives two examples of "popular but deeply fallacious" reductionist views about the human mind: one is that consciousness (or the mind as a whole) is a machine; the other is that consciousness is a mistake or an illusion. Both ideas are quickly dismissed. The idea that consciousness is a machine is claimed to be incompatible with the mind's representation of the world: "if consciousness is machine-like, then of course it is a mistake to think that consciousness is, of its nature, something that registers what is the case". This is a strange thing to say, not only because many machines do literally register what is the case (e.g. a thermometer registers the ambient temperature), but also because reductionists have used precisely such analogies with machines like these in their attempts to explain the mind.

Williams raises the further objection that machines are designed to solve problems, but the mind (or the brain) does not exist to solve problems "extraneous to itself". The point is interesting, but whether true or not, it is irrelevant — since it is not an essential part of the idea that the mind is a machine that the mind is designed. Taken literally —

which is how it is intended, *contra* Williams, who says it is a metaphor — the claim that the mind is a machine is just that is a causal mechanism whose activity is determined by laws or regularities, just as in the rest of nature (“mechanistically” conceived, of course). The idea that the mind is a machine is just that — it does not presuppose design, problem-solving or even the idea of computation. The mind could be a machine without being a computing machine.

The second reductionist idea — that consciousness is an illusion or a mistake — is dispatched equally quickly. Williams argues that the idea is self-refuting — a mistake, after all, is an act of thinking, something that occurs within consciousness. So since mistakes presuppose consciousness, consciousness itself cannot be a mistake. In itself the point is correct; but again it misses its mark. Those thinkers — like Dennett, Nicholas Humphrey or Keith Frankish — who claim that consciousness is an “illusion” are not saying that we mistakenly think there is such a thing as consciousness. That would indeed be an absurd thing to say. Rather they think that we — philosophers, scientists, everyone else — are prone to certain illusions in our thinking about consciousness.

Given the elementary confusions which Williams thinks reductionism falls into, it should be surprising from his point of view that any sophisticated thinkers have adopted reductionist views at all. What then is the appeal of reductionism? Williams suggests a number of answers. One is that there is a temptation to look for “the” basic structure of reality, but in fact there is no one basic structure. Williams quotes Stephen Hawking’s remark that human beings are “chemical scum on an average-sized planet, orbiting round a very average-size star, in the outer suburb or one of a million galaxies”. Williams, like Raymond Tallis, takes exception to this remark, seeing it as epitomising something of the reductionist mentality. But a reductionist should not side with Hawking, most of whose remarks on these philosophical questions are barely worth considering. Any complex phenomenon can be described and explained in many ways for different purposes, and

human consciousness is no exception. No serious debate is advanced by saying that human beings are “chemical scum” — presumably the only point of saying this is to emphasise the cosmic insignificance, or even the utter worthlessness (“scum”) of human life. But human life might be significant without being cosmically significant, and those like Williams who want to investigate its significance (cosmic or otherwise) need not take issue with sophomoric attempts to deny the phenomenon.

Williams sees that part of the force of reductionist thinking is its ability to single out the phenomena it wants to explain, and isolate it from others. In doing so the reductionist description must “ignore certain levels or aspects of what we in fact perceive”. This is, of course, an aspect of the way that scientific thinking works in general. But he follows this observation by saying that “any intellectual strategy that gives you permission to ignore some level of legitimate description is morally deeply dangerous”. It’s hard to know what Williams has in mind here. Science explains by modelling or idealising, by abstracting away from features which are real and which it acknowledges are real. Williams’s view seems to be that for this reason alone, science is morally dangerous. This cannot be right.

Williams also speculates that the appeal of reductionism might derive from a loss of the sense of the sacred (which he describes, in a nice phrase, as “a loss of the sense of being answerable to an intelligible gift”). He suggests that this loss “may entail the loss of the distinctively human”. Williams does tread carefully to avoid the implication that the human *must* be understood in theological terms, and his more ambitious claims to this effect are tempered by an appearance of caution: note the “may” in the sentence above, and the “possibly” in this one: “when it comes to personal reality, the language of theology is possibly the *only* way to speak well of who we are and what our humanity is like”. However, the Preface makes it clear where his underlying convictions lie: “to understand properly what our humanity really is, we need to look to Jesus”. Fair enough,

you might think, coming from a former Archbishop; but why then the caution (“may” and “possibly”) later in the book?

Williams never explains precisely why theology is the only way to think properly about the human. And there is a good reason for this: it’s not true, and I suspect he knows that really. He himself is keen to emphasise that many critics of reductionism (e.g. Tallis and John Gray) do not think it necessary to adopt a theistic alternative in accounting for the human. And Williams’s own positive story about the human (which is much more interesting than his critique of reductionism) bears this out. The main elements of this story have nothing to do with theology, as a brief summary will show.

Williams’s story is a pattern of claims about consciousness, the mind and the person, inspired partly by 20th century Phenomenology (notably Edith Stein). At the core is the idea of relatedness: we are located in a world of meaningful things, and our experience implies the possibility of, and the actual relation to, other points of view, or other subjects of experience (“I can’t think without thinking of the other”). Williams goes on to claim, following Stein, that this is why consciousness in itself implies empathy.

We build a narrative of our conscious life, which in some way is partly constitutive of consciousness itself; and because of this consciousness is always “bound up with” language (“speaking changes things”). Williams’s view of consciousness is very different from the simple sensory models prevalent in much contemporary philosophy: “it’s impossible to think consistently about being conscious without reference to our locality in a material world, without a sense of narrative, the story of a self, and without factoring in our relationships and our language”. Human consciousness, for these reasons, is essentially different from animal consciousness.

But what of the subject of consciousness itself — what is it that stands in all these relations? For Williams, it is the person. The person is “the point at which relationships intersect”. Purely materialist views of the person are rejected, as are purely spiritual ones:

“somewhere in between is an understanding of human identity, human personality, as fascinatingly and inescapably a hybrid reality: material, embedded in the material world, subject to the passage of time, and yet mysteriously able to respond to its environment”.

Williams follows John Locke (implicitly rather than explicitly) in treating the category of the person as partly an ethical category: a person is something to whom a certain respect or consideration is due. He argues for the plausible view that being deserving of respect is not a matter of ticking boxes — having this or that characteristic rather than others. So what does underwrite respect? Williams’s answer is plausible, but in the context of this book surprising: “Any physical, organically real member of the human race deserves that respect, never mind how many boxes are ticked”. This is the only suggestion in the whole of *Being Human* that being human, or being a person, has something to do with being a member of a certain species. It would have been good to see this suggestion followed through; but on the face of it, it is hard to see how it or Williams’s other claims about consciousness and the person imply anything theological at all.