

Philosophy's Purpose

"Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" by Bernard Williams, in *The Threepenny Review* (Spring 2001), P.O. Box 9131, Berkeley, Calif. 94709.

Philosophy has become so recondite and airless an occupation these days that the very title of Williams's essay may seem a reproach. Williams, who teaches philosophy at Oxford University and the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of *Shame and Necessity* (1993), among many other books, regrets that students too often end up believing that philosophy is "a self-contained technical subject." He believes that philosophy should rather be "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." If it is to do that, philosophy needs to rid itself of what Williams calls "scientific illusions." It should not try to behave like a branch of the natural sciences, except in those cases where that is precisely what it is—"work in the philosophy of quantum mechanics, for instance, or in the more technical aspects of logic." Philosophy must certainly take an interest in the sciences, but without being assimilated "to the aims, or at least the manners, of the sciences."

Philosophy, for Williams, belongs to an expansive humanistic enterprise. If philosophy is to contribute successfully to that process of understanding ourselves and our activities, it must attend to all the other parts of the enterprise, especially history: "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, and if it insists on not doing so, it may seem to the student in every sense quite peculiar."

Williams acknowledges the reservations that someone, "perhaps a young philosopher," will have about the encompassing approach he proposes: "Doesn't it mean that there is too much we need to know, that one can only do philosophy by being an

amateur of altogether too much? Can't we just get on with it?" In other words, isn't small and good, the successful approach of much contemporary analytic philosophy, better than broad and bad?

Williams argues that philosophy should not abandon an approach that allows for the division of labor, but that it should reconsider the nature of the division, which "tends to be modeled too easily on that of the sciences, as dividing one field or area of theorizing from another." He proposes that the subject be divided up differently—"by thinking of one given ethical idea, for instance, and the various considerations that might help one to understand it." And as for not knowing all that you think you might need to know before undertaking philosophy, "it makes a difference," he observes, "what it is that you know you do not know. One may not see very far outside one's own house, but it can be very important which direction one is looking in."



The Menacing Muses (1916), by Giorgio de Chirico

Williams worries that the traditional humanistic enterprise of trying to understand ourselves is coming to seem odd, archaic, and unnecessary at a time when education is focused increasingly on the technical and the

commercial. He fears that reflective activity may be preserved, at best, “as part of the heritage industry.” And if that should occur, “it will not be the passionate and intelligent activity that it needs to be.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Who Killed the Woolly Mammoth?

“Mass Extinctions Pinned on Ice Age Hunters” by Leigh Dayton, “A Multispecies Overkill Simulation of the End-Pleistocene Megafaunal Mass Extinction” by John Alroy, and “New Ages for the Last Australian Megafauna: Continent-Wide Extinction about 46,000 Years Ago” by Richard G. Roberts, Timothy F. Flannery, et al., in *Science* (June 8, 2001), American Assn. for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

It’s an Ice Age mystery: What caused the sudden mass extinction of huge, exotic mammals and flightless birds in the late Pleistocene era, 11,000 to 50,000 years ago? Climate change has been suggested. But the evidence is mounting against the prime suspect in the case, *Homo sapiens*, reports Dayton, a science writer in Australia.

Dating megafauna-bearing sediments from 28 sites across Australia, scientists led by Roberts, a geochronologist at the University of Melbourne, and Flannery, a mammalogist at the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, found that a continent-wide extinction of large animals took place about 46,000 years ago—not many millenniums

EXCERPT

The Planet Speaks?

The first thing to know about global warming is this: The science is sound. . . .

But it isn’t just the scientists who are hard at work on this issue. For the past five years, it’s almost as if the planet itself has been peer-reviewing their work. We’ve had the warmest years on record—including 1998, which was warmer than any year for which records exist. And those hot years have shown what even small changes in temperature—barely a degree Fahrenheit averaged globally—can do to the Earth’s systems.

Consider hydrology, for instance. Warm air holds more water vapor than cold air, so there is an increase in evaporation in dry areas, and hence more drought—something that has been documented on every continent. Once that water is in the atmosphere, it’s going to come down somewhere—and, indeed, we have seen the most dramatic flooding ever recorded in recent years. In 1998, 300 million humans, one in 20 of us, had to leave their homes for a week, a month, a year, forever, because of rising waters.

Or look at the planet’s cryosphere, its frozen places. Every alpine glacier is in retreat; the snows of Kilimanjaro will have vanished by 2015; and the Arctic ice cap is thinning fast—data collected by U.S. and Soviet nuclear submarines show that it is almost half gone compared with just four decades ago.

In other words, human beings are changing the planet more fundamentally in the course of a couple of decades than in all the time since we climbed down from the trees and began making use of our opposable thumbs. There’s never been anything like this.

—Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* (1989), writing in *In These Times* (Apr. 10, 2001)