The Henry Hardy Virtual Library

Some Remarks on Hardy’s Two Theses

Johnny Lyons

This quasi-review of Henry Hardy’s two Oxford postgraduate philosophy theses, ***Subjective Experiences*** (BPhil, 1974) and ***Subjective Experience*** (DPhil, 1976) was written by Johnny Lyons in 2021.

Some Remarks on Hardy's Two Theses

Johnny Lyons

THERE ARE, broadly speaking, two types among contemporary Anglophone philosophers: those who take the subject's centre of gravity to be what their peers happen to be preoccupied with, and those who take the road less travelled. Most philosophers belong to the first type. The ones who fall into the more individualistic category are not necessarily oblivious of what others are doing, but are more interested in pursuing their own intellectual agenda, and perhaps even finding their own philosophical voice.

Henry Hardy's BPhil and DPhil theses, which he completed as a graduate student at Oxford in 1974 and 1976 respectively, show him to be a philosopher of the second type. Being independent-minded doesn't require or entail originality or brilliance of thought. But it does tend to mean that a theme or question is treated in a manner that is more directly accessible than one typically finds in conventional academic philosophical discourse. This quality is certainly evident in Hardy's theses. Anyone of reasonable wit and with an interest in the topic which Hardy examines – subjective experience – should be able to follow his argument. Those who do read his theses will find their contents distinctively intelligent, interesting and instructive. At the very least, they will have gained a deeper understanding of why the subjectivity of human experience is a rich and serious subject and what philosophy can bring to the table to help us appreciate this.

Hardy's BPhil thesis begins with a marvellously apt quote from Saul Kripke, an undeniably original and important philosopher:

> Some philosophers think that something's having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favour of it. I think it is very heavy evidence

in favour of anything, myself. I really don't know in a way what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking.[1]

The quote makes the seemingly unphilosophical remark that our intuitions are among the most reliable sources of evidence we have about anything. I allege that the remark is unphilosophical because, as Kripke intimates, much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy has been suspicious, if not dismissive, of various forms of intuitionism, seeing them as evasions rather than examples of clear, reasoned and rigorous thought. The inclusion of Kripke's quote is a harbinger of what's to follow, not just in Hardy's two theses but in his much later philosophical writings.[2]

Hardy introduces the goal of his first thesis in mainly negative terms: the task he sets himself is to question a prevailing philosophical view which rejects the coherence of our common sense, intuitive view of subjective experience. He wishes to preserve a particular intuitive model of how we talk about and make sense of our subjective experiences, not so much by proving the falsity of the conflicting, non-intuitive view but by raising enough doubt about its validity to suggest that it shouldn't prompt us to abandon our ordinary, everyday picture of subjectivity. The fluent subtlety and intrinsic plausibility of Hardy's discussion derives as much from not treating the philosophically mainstream, non-intuitive view as a straw man as it does from not overstating the case for the intuitive account of subjective experience. In short, he restores philosophical faith in what we unphilosophically take for granted in our everyday lives.

How does Hardy go about achieving this? He shows that it is possible to be philosophically serious about the phenomenon of subjective thought and experience that most philosophers at the

[1] Saul Kripke, 'Naming and Necessity', in Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (eds), *Semantics of Natural Language*, (Dordrecht, 1972: Reidel), 253–355 at 265–6.

[2] I am thinking, in particular, of the second half of his book, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure* (London, 2018: I.B.Tauris), in which he critically examines core facets of Berlin's thought.

time (like many since) dismissed as illusory but which the overwhelmingly majority of us regard as indispensable to making sense of ourselves and others. This applies as much to his second thesis as his first: the subject matter of his DPhil thesis overlaps heavily with his earlier dissertation but it is primarily focused on the topic of the nature, scope and possibility of interpersonal communication as well as interpersonal comparisons of subjective sensations. His method in both works is two-pronged: it involves repudiating an approach to a phenomenon that is so widespread in current philosophical thinking as to appear unavoidable, while at the same time offering an alternative interpretation of a more familiar, common understanding of the same phenomenon. The success of Hardy's method may be measured by the fact that he doesn't diminish philosophy. On the contrary, he provides a more compelling philosophical account of subjective experience, albeit one that is fundamentally in conflict with the then ruling positivist doctrines of standard professional philosophy, where the underlying assumption was that if something isn't demonstrable it doesn't exist.

It's worth highlighting that, while Hardy's approach accommodates a conception of philosophical understanding that permits us to make sense of our subjective sensations, he doesn't leave the landscape as we pre-theoretically found it. He is not engaged in massaging our habitual assumptions and biases.[3] Crucially, he affirms the opaqueness of our own and others' subjective experiences and denies the possibility of comparing our subjective sensations with those of others by establishing whether they are qualitatively the same or similar. In other words, he argues that we can continue to believe in the reality of subjective experience without postulating that we can discover *per impossibile* what it's like to experience someone else's subjective experiences. Yet, equally crucially, Hardy doesn't share the verificationist theory of meaning

[3] Hardy acknowledges one of Gilbert Ryle's central points, that 'we cannot necessarily talk sense about our concepts simply in virtue of being able to talk sense with them'. DPhil thesis, 2.

which stipulates that unless we can produce some empirically observable and objectively measurable evidence for the existence of subjective experience then it is ultimately illusory. He claims that such a verificationist theory does not just give an incomplete account of human experience, but fails utterly to do justice to the nature and meaning of subjectivity.

Hardy's approach to our understanding of subjective experience opens up a range of rich and exciting vistas that the then reigning and opposing philosophical school of thought had cut off on the grounds that they were misconceived. One of the more intriguing is adumbrated in the concluding section of his DPhil thesis. There Hardy argues that our intuitive sense that our subjective feelings are comparable with those of others is so fundamental to our sense of what it is to be human that it is virtually built into our conceptual scheme. This is a rather profound suggestion and one that seems compelling in the light of the various arguments about the intelligibility and indispensability of intersubjective communication regarding our irreducibly subjective human feelings. Moreover, the fact that such a suggestion is being made at all reflects Hardy's much broader and deeper perspective that redefines what philosophical enquiry into subjective experience might be and what it could achieve. One thought that occurred to me as I read Hardy's richly provocative conclusion is the question of the extent to which psychology is so wrapped up in philosophy, or at least the philosophy of human nature, that the very idea that we could somehow dislodge one from the other may not only be psychologically unfeasible but philosophically incoherent. There is an implicit commitment in Hardy's conception of philosophy to reconceive the subject as an essentially humanistic, though by no means anti-scientific, discipline. This is no doubt a radical and even subversive idea from the standpoint of orthodox analytic philosophy. But Hardy succeeds in making it seem both natural and necessary. One of the more destabilising consequences for philosophy of Hardy's insistence on the need for a more promiscuous conception of philosophical enquiry and its associated insights centres on the

suspicion, if not conviction, that the quest for a totalistic and unified understanding of ourselves and the world is misconceived.

I should like to end by indulging in two speculative reflections. The first of these relates to Isaiah Berlin, a thinker who has been at the heart of Hardy's professional and personal life. Hardy had become familiar with Berlin's published writings during the period when he was engaged in his graduate work at Wolfson College (of which Berlin was the founding President, 1966–75). As we have noted, in the conclusion of his DPhil thesis Hardy states that one of the important insights arising from his discussion is the sheer depth of certain intuitive beliefs in our conceptual scheme. He claims that our belief that our subjective experiences are communicable is as fundamental and intelligible as our belief in our own and others' free will. He acknowledges that these seemingly inescapable beliefs may not be true but he emphasises that the absence of their demonstrable veracity should not be considered a reason to abandon them. This sentiment echoes and may even have been prompted by something Berlin states near the end of his introduction to *Four Essays on Liberty*:

> I have, in the essays that follow, attempted to examine some of the fallacies that rest on misunderstanding of certain human needs and purposes – central, that is, to our normal notion of what it is to be a human being; a being endowed with a nucleus of needs and goals, a nucleus common to all men, which may have a shifting pattern, but one whose limits are determined by the basic need to communicate with other similar beings. The notion of such a nucleus and such limits enters into our conception of the central attributes and functions in terms of which we think of men and societies.[4]

What is this sentiment that both thinkers have in common? It strikes me as consisting of three basic ingredients: a deep scepticism about the power of philosophy to provide uniquely right and unchanging solutions to life's central questions, an

[4] Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford, 2002: Oxford University Press), 54.

equally profound philosophical scepticism about the power of science or any other form of human enquiry to explain the human condition reliably and exhaustively, and, finally, an affirmation of the centrality and preciousness of human experience. Moreover, like Berlin, Hardy believes that a defining and pervasive feature of our modern situation is the existence of a diverse range of human ideals and values which not only resist being harmonised with each other but which prove their objectivity and worth by remaining in ineliminable conflict. Both thinkers see the recognition of value pluralism as the key to understanding the significance and appeal of an open, tolerant and decent society. And one of the consequences of this perspective is to undermine the foundational and enduring philosophical belief that all objective values and ways of life are ultimately compatible, at least in principle if not in practice.

My second reflection is far more speculative but I hope not entirely fanciful. In the final scene of Tom Stoppard's play *The Hard Problem*, the heroine, Hilary, declares that she is leaving England for America, and 'There's someone teaching philosophy there whose ideas are […] undemonstrable.'[5] I think it's safe enough to infer that the philosopher Hilary is referring to is Thomas Nagel.[6] Hilary is keen to escape the clever yet claustrophobic company of her think-tank colleagues, who believe that there is nothing but matter and claim that evolutionary science holds all the answers to human life. Hilary's colleagues at the Krohl Institute may have all the best lines, but she can't help believing that they are wrong about the meaning and possibility of human goodness.

[5] Tom Stoppard, *The Hard Problem* (2015: Faber, London), 74.

[6] Hilary mentions in Scene 11 that she is going to NYU, where Nagel was, at the time, Professor of Philosophy. In the Author's Note, Stoppard gratefully acknowledges exchanges he has had with Thomas Nagel. Finally, Nagel is famous for arguing that the so-called hard problem, namely, why any physical state is conscious rather than non-conscious, resists a materialist or physicalist explanation since conscious states are inherently subjective.

What has this to do with Hardy's two theses? Well, my thought is that, if things had worked out differently, then Hilary might not have had to leave England to study under a philosopher who is sympathetic to her perspective. More specifically, I am suggesting that if Hardy's theses had received the attention they merit then he might well have embarked on a distinguished career as an Oxford philosophy don who had independently explored several of the insights for which Nagel has become (justly) famous. Instead, he ended up dedicating most of the rest of his life to sedulously editing and tirelessly publishing the writings of a genuinely wise and humane philosopher, a thinker who reminds us that many of the most real and cherished features of our lives are unsusceptible to narrowly scientific and reductive forms of analysis. That is surely a life worth living.[7]

April 2021

© Johnny Lyons 2021

First posted in the Henry Hardy Virtual Library 4 April 2021

[7] Hardy manages to exemplify the meaning and communicability of subjective feelings in the closing paragraph of his book *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*:

> For much of the period since Berlin died I have struggled with debilitating depression. I believe that this would have affected me in any case, since depression runs in my family; but the timing of its onset makes it possible, or even likely, that it was exacerbated, at any rate initially, by the experience of bereavement that followed his death. He was not a father to me – my own wonderful father, who outlived him by two years, needed no substitute – but he was an intellectual and personal lodestar, an inspirational model of truly humane scholarship, an unmatched exemplar of one peculiarly attractive life-affirming form of human excellence and fullness of being. (268)